

Language: An Indispensable Tool for National Development.

A Case Study of the Nigerian Situation

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ABSTRACT:

Before development can come to a people, there must be a means of communication and here; language comes to play. Considering the many indigenous languages present in Nigeria today, it may be difficult to impose a unifying indigenous language because they number to over four hundred. The language scenario in Nigeria would have been close to what happened at ‘the Tower of Babel’ had not a foreign language: English language, been introduced. Through the English language today, official transactions are carried out, the various tribes are unified because it serves as lingua franca, and the international community can be reached. Over the years, it has come to be referred to as 2nd language for many Nigerians, because through it, the educational system thrives. How is language a tool for national development? How has the English language brought development to Nigeria? Why has no indigenous language been able to replace English? Can the version of English spoken in Nigeria be compared with the international standard? What makes English language an indispensable tool for national development in Nigeria? These and many other questions are addressed in this paper. Questionnaires were administered, the responses analyzed and the results provide valid data for this paper.

KEY WORDS:

1. Language: is a method of human communication, which could be in verbal or non verbal form, and which consists of the use of words in an agreed way.
2. Development: is a comprehensive transformation of a nation’s socio-cultural, economic and technological structures.

3. Indigenous language: a native language that is originally spoken by a speech community or region.
4. 2nd language: the language learned by a person who already has acquired the first language
5. International standard of English: the version of English that is considered as the international standard
6. Nigerian English: the variety of English spoken in Nigeria
7. The ‘Tower of Babel’: in the Bible, a tower that people started to build so tall that God showed his anger by making the people speak in different languages.
8. Lingua Franca: a language or mixture of languages used for communication by people who speak different first languages.

INTRODUCTION

Nothing binds a people together like language. Language is woven round the day-to-day life, the culture, the world view and even the imaginations of the people. Indeed, language plays an important role in our everyday life. Through it we express ourselves, transact businesses, contract marriages, propagate our norms and values, and even carryout the running of the nation.

Development is sometimes conceived of in a rather narrow sense, as GDP, GNP and other economic notions such as income per capita. This quantitative approach to development, however equates economic indicators erroneously with national development and societal well-being, which apparently leads to the neglect of the language issue. Language stands out as the live wire of a community or people, and training in language cannot be undermined if national development is to be achieved. The objective of this paper is to discuss the role of language in the national development of Nigeria measuring it along the indices of development.

NIGERIA FROM INCEPTION

Nigeria has a long-standing history with human habitation in some places dating back to before 500BC. There were communities existing then, as autonomous entities with their culture and languages that were peculiar to them. Nigeria as a modern political entity was created in 1914 by the British. This came as a result of the European partitioning of Africa that began in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. “Nigeria is a big country bordering the

Atlantic, occupying 336,669 square miles. It is twice the size of California and three times the size of the United kingdom” (Falola 1999). Nigeria with its thirty-six states and a Federal capital territory at Abuja, has its population at over 140,003 542 (national population census (2006) result as reported in the Federal Republic of Nigeria’s official Gazette (2007)). Lagos was initially the Federal capital city until 1991 when the Federal government relocated to the inland city of Abuja. Lagos however remains a highly populated city where the media, commercial activities, banking activities, etc thrive.

NIGERIA’S LINGUISTIC SITUATION

Nigeria can be said to be the most populous nation in Africa and one of the fastest growing on earth (Columbia Encyclopedia 2007). Its inhabitants are divided into about 250 ethnic groups (Ibid). The largest of these groups are the Hausa and Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the Southwest, and the Igbo in the Southeast. Other peoples include the Kanuri, Nupe, Tiv, Edo, Ibibio, Efik, Ijaw, to mention a few. Of note is the fact that each ethnic group speaks its own language(s). Hence, Nigeria is a multilingual community with differing mother tongues. Nigeria’s linguistic situation is unique in the sense that three of the continent’s four major language phyla as classified by Greenberg (*Languages in Africa* (1963)) are present in it. The Afro-Asiatic family of languages has two branches namely: the Semitic and the Chadic. Hausa language and its sister languages belong to the Chadic branch. Kanuri in Borno state, arma in Sokoto state and related languages belong to the Nilo-Saharan family of languages; while most of the other Nigerian languages belong to the Niger-Kordofanian family of languages. There is however no record yet to prove that any Nigerian language belongs to the Khoisan family of languages (Iwara 2008:13). An accurate estimate of languages spoken in Nigeria is yet to be made, however, The Field linguists of the Summer Institute of Linguistic (SIL) in Hanford et al (1976, Crozier and Bench (1992), Akindele and Adegbite (1999), Farinde and Ojo (2001), Iwara (2008) etc, and we in this paper, believe that there are about 400 indigenous languages in Nigeria. These many Nigerian languages are often grouped into “major languages” and ‘minority languages’ based on demographic factors, status in education, regional spread, and availability of written materials (Igboanusi 2002). As a result of this, Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo languages are regarded as major languages while all the other languages in the country are regarded as minority languages.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Is there a group or nation that can develop without a language? Many countries of the world today lay emphasis on technology; but is it possible to replace language with technology? Or how can the technology be put in place without language use? One can therefore say that development will be far from a people who cannot communicate with each other. Language is the most important aspect in the life of all human beings. Language is defined as the human vocal noise or its arbitrary graphic representation, used systematically and conventionally by members of a speech community for the means of communication. Language is largely a matter of convention because there is a mutual agreement among the users of a language, as regards which lexical items refer to what things and that certain grammatical operations be carried out in certain definite ways. Languages in the world vary between 6000 and 7000 and each of them is mutually intelligible. Language could in two forms: verbal (i.e. spoken and written words) and non-verbal forms (i.e. gestures, symbols, pictures, body movements and signs), and these forms are very useful in our everyday life.

Language can be used to perform an informative role i.e. used to communicate some sort of content that involves information. Language can be used to express our ideas and emotions. An expressive use of language intends to vent some feeling, or to evoke some feeling from other people. Language can be used to direct the world around us. A directive use of language aims to tell others or ourselves how to act or behave in certain situations. Language can be used to incite people into taking actions they did not initially plan to carry out. The role of language in communication is to express and share ones personal feelings and ideas. Language allows us to express what we think and feel to another or group of people. It enables us to learn, teach, express our preferences, and agree on certain norms and standards within a society in order for us to co-exist.

Culture is the characteristics of a particular group of people, defined by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, fashion, music and arts. It is that complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, social behavior, practices and any other capabilities and habits which is acquired by members of the society. It changes constantly and could easily be lost because it exists only in our minds. Culture is the evolving product of people interacting with each other. The interaction among people with the same culture takes place through language: a unifying language. Hence, language plays a major

role in culture. Through language, we express our inner thoughts and emotions, make sense of complex and abstract thought, learn to communicate with others, fulfill our wants and needs, as well as establish rules and maintain our culture.

INDICES OF DEVELOPMENT

Development is a multidisciplinary concept defined in different ways in various disciplines. It is a comprehensive transformation of a nation's socio-cultural, economic and technological structures. National development refers to the ability of a country or countries to improve the social welfare of the people, for example, by providing social amenities like good education, infrastructure, medical care and social services. The Human Development Index (HDI) created by the Pakistani economist [Mahbub ul Haq](#) and the Indian economist [Amartya Sen](#) view life expectancy, education, and income as [indices](#) used to rank countries into four tiers of [human development](#). However, there is a fault, in that they failed to consider technological development and its contributions to the human civilization. They focused exclusively on national performance and ranking, hence, there could be severe misclassification in the categorization of 'low', 'medium', 'high' or 'very high' human development countries.

From the socio-economic angle, development can be measured along the following indices: agricultural and rural development, education, economic policy and external debt, health, labour and infrastructural growth. GDP is no longer the only indicator for national development, rather, indices for development should also be considered before a country can be said to be developed.

Every nation that seeks the progress of its citizens must focus on development and its indices. Language is an important ingredient in achieving this. Language is a supreme tool for development and it should be given priority in the society to help maintain its rich culture, and other essential elements which promote advancement in the country.

THE CHALLENGE OF AN OFFICIAL LANGUAGE

[English language](#) in Nigeria serves as a common means of communication for speakers of different native languages; hence the term: lingua franca. Unlike any other language the world over, past or present, English has spread to all five continents and has become a truly global language. English has gained so much prominence that it has assumed a status. Thus, it is adopted as the world's lingua franca for communication in Olympic sport, international

trade, and air-traffic control. A lingua franca is a language that you consciously learn because you need it to carry out certain functions, while a mother tongue is a language that you acquire/learn because it is part of your culture. English language became very useful when the need for an interethnic lingua franca arose in Nigeria. The increasing social and geographical mobility have continuously added to its expansion. English language is used as the official language while Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba are regarded as national languages and the other indigenous languages are used for day-to-day communication within the speech community.

There has been agitation regarding the use of English as the official language. Some make reference to Russia, Japan, China and a host of others who use their own indigenous languages as official languages. This is possible because they have indigenous languages that virtually all their citizens understand. Nigeria's case is a different one because the various languages are completely different from each other and the various ethnic groups are loyal to their communities and culture (of which language is a part). Though many Nigerians can fluently speak their indigenous languages, they would prefer that English be used as the official language in Nigeria rather than their indigenous languages. Some feel their indigenous language may not be internationally intelligible, while others feel the use of their indigenous language as official language, will make their language to be more prominent and superior to other Nigerian languages, and this may create a crisis, as every Nigerian will love his own indigenous language to be chosen. 57% of the subjects interviewed believe that the nation may not be united if any of their various indigenous languages were used as official language considering the over 400 indigenous languages that already exist in the country. Therefore they prefer the use of a foreign language so that all other languages and their speakers feel equal.

In the late 1960s, the defeated Biafran nation, planned to use Igbo as their official language. There would have been a problem had they succeeded in gaining autonomy, because not all the ethnic groups under their jurisdiction (the whole of the Southeast) spoke Igbo. The late 1980s also experienced some agitations from linguists and policy makers who favoured Hausa as lingua franca. Their reasons were that Hausa had large number of speakers (about 15 000 000) in West Africa and that the speakers cover a large part in West Africa, many

parts of North Africa and even a part of Sudan. The challenge they had however was that they had to make it a national language first, and the approval at the national level may result in language domination by the ethnic group that speaks the selected language, which may result in a political under-representation of the neglected groups in supra-regional or national matters (Zabus 2007:33).

Babs Fafunwa, the former Dean of the Faculty of Education at the Obafemi Awolowo University, was one of the promoters of the Ife project. He proposed that the indigenous language with the largest number of speakers be declared the official language of the country and that the European language (English) be relegated to the status of associate national language. By implication, the indigenous language chosen (for example, if Hausa is chosen in Nigeria), will be the language of instruction in schools, and English will be taught just as a subject. This was implemented in some Yoruba speaking states of the Federation, with the use of Yoruba as language of instruction in Government schools. It did not take long before rich parents began to opt for private schools for their children, where they were instructed in English. After all, other students that were instructed in English throughout their elementary classes still gained mastery of the Yoruba language because that was the language of their immediate community. In spite of all these efforts of the promoters of the indigenous languages in Nigeria, English continues to be used as the medium of instruction in many schools and institutions of learning. In fact, from the survey carried out in this paper, 83% of the Nigerians interviewed believe that the use of English language, as official language in Nigeria will contribute to the development of the Nation, since English has already gained a worldwide recognition and many of the modern terminologies are in English.

NIGERIAN ENGLISH

There is no historical record of the precise date the English language came into Nigeria or its first speaker, but it can be assumed that it coincides with the onset of British activities in the West African coast. These British activities ranged from mercantile activities to a quest for overseas colonies, missionary activities and a love for adventure. Today, the variety of English spoken by many educated Nigerian users of English can be seen as acceptable within and without the country. English language, which has assumed world recognition today, is unique because it adapts to the socio-cultural constraints that characterize various contexts of its use. ‘A world language *par excellence*, its propensity to adapt to the dictates of its users, whoever they are, appears to be inimitable’ (Mahfouz 2007:4). Several varieties of English

have emerged which are distinct in terms of their phonology, lexical choices, and so on. In the light of this, Lamidi (2000:111) comments that non-native speakers of English ‘adopt the language to suit the flora and fauna of their respective communities’. In this way, Nigerians can make their culture known to the outside world and learn from other countries too

The peculiar features found in the English spoken in different countries or communities have given birth to the several varieties we have today: Australian English, Jamaican English, Ghanaian English, Nigerian English, to mention a few. Broadly speaking, Nigerian English can be defined as “the variety of English spoken and used by Nigerians. There is however a controversy among scholars as regards the Nigerian English. Some belong to the deviation school which believes that Nigerian English is not a variety but a version characterized by errors; others belong to the variation school that sees Nigerian English as a variety of English. One thing that is not disputable is the fact that the use of English in Nigeria is characterized by the some colourations from the Nigerian linguistic ecology which makes us differentiate a Nigerian speaker of English from a Ghanaian Speaker of English. We cannot deny the fact that the nativization of English in Nigeria reflects the peculiarities of the Nigerian situation and its people. In fact, the nativization of English in Nigeria is not limited to the usual features of transfer of phonological, lexical, syntactic and semantic patterns of Nigerian languages into English, but it also includes the creative development of English, including the evolution of distinctively Nigerian usages, attitudes and pragmatic use of the language (Bamgbose 1995:11).

Considering the views of the variation and the deviation school, it is obvious that both have their strengths and weaknesses. One cannot admit all the errors in the English of some Nigerians as a variety; as such errors may make non-Nigerian speakers of English need an interpreter to communicate with such Nigerians in English. The “standard varieties” of English used in Nigeria should be harmonized and documented. The international intelligibility of the English spoken in Nigeria should not be sacrificed in our bid to encourage domestication and nativization of English. Of note is the fact that many educated Nigerian users of English, speak English that is internationally intelligible. That is why many Nigerians can communicate with people from other countries in English without the use of an interpreter.

METHODOLOGY:

A survey was carried to investigate on the role of language in national development. The Nigerian indigenous languages and their uses were considered, but focus was placed on the English language which doubles as official language and lingua franca. Questionnaires were administered to forty randomly selected Nigerians from various states of the federation, belonging to different age groups, different sexes and different works of life. Interviews were also carried out to sample people's opinion on the role of language in national development. The results and findings provide to a large extent, useful information for the writing of this paper.

THE INDISPENSABILITY OF LANGUAGE IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

If national development involves the appropriate transformation of the socio-cultural, political and economic systems of a nation, the language(s) which serves as a tool for the expression and communication of these socio-cultural, political and economic belief systems is very important. The indigenous languages in the nation are useful for the successful conceptualization and implementation of societal transformations and they cannot be ignored as they help us reach those at the grass root. Many rural dwellers may not be able to communicate in flawless English, but they can express themselves well in their various indigenous languages. For them to be able to benefit from the development of the nation, the government must make adequate arrangement for them. The various indigenous languages should be adequately developed to accommodate terminologies that border on development in its different facets. This will keep all the citizens abreast of the happenings in the various local government levels, state and federal levels.

This paper considers a nation to mean all people found within a geographical area tied together by a common history or experience. These people share social, cultural, linguistic and other peculiarities and have consciously agreed to some terms of unity since they share collective goals, aspirations and satisfaction by virtue of their peculiar history. When something develops, it gradually grows to become stronger and more advanced. A country with equitable distribution of income among its social groups, free health and education services, and is concerned about the effects of production and consumption on its people's

environment can be considered as developed. Quality of life is what counts here. Some recent United Nations documents emphasize “human development,” measured by life expectancy, adult literacy, access to all three levels of education, and people’s average income, which is a necessary condition of their freedom of choice. From a vantage point, one can say the notion of human development incorporates all aspects of individuals’ well-being: health status, economic and political freedom.

The indices which best indicate development in a nation include: agricultural and rural development, improved and affordable educational system, favourable economic policy and external debt control, improved health facilities that are easily accessible, and infrastructural growth. These indicators assist in determining the pace at which a society grows.

Economic policy refers to the actions that governments take in the economic field. It covers largely the systems for setting interest rates, government budget, labor market, national ownership, and many other areas of government interventions into the economy. Economic policies are often influenced by international institutions like the International Monetary Fund or World Bank as well as political beliefs and the consequent policies of parties. Issues like Policy is generally directed to achieve particular objectives, like targets for inflation, unemployment, or economic growth and so on belong here.

External debt (or foreign debt) is that part of the total debt in a country that is owed to creditors outside the country. The debtors can be the government, corporations or citizens of that particular country, while the debt includes money owed to private commercial banks, other governments, or international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank.

Infrastructure can be generally defined as the set of interconnected structural elements that provide framework supporting an entire structure of development. It refers to the basic physical and organizational structures needed for the operation of a society or enterprise, or the services and facilities necessary for an economy to function. It is an important term for judging a country or region's development. Aspects of infrastructure like roads, bridges, water supply, sewers, electrical grids, telecommunications, etc can be defined as "the

physical components of interrelated systems providing commodities and services which are essential to enable, sustain, or enhance societal living conditions." Functionally, infrastructure *facilitates* the production of goods and services, the distribution of finished products to markets, as well as basic social services like schools, hospitals, etc.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defined health in its broader sense in 1946 as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity Health is the level of functional or metabolic efficiency of a living organism. It is the general condition of a person's mind and body, when he is free from illness, injury or pain.

Agricultural and rural development will concentrate on transforming the rural areas into developed cities or farm settlements where agriculture can be carried out through mechanized means on a large scale. It will also involve the further processing of the agricultural products into finished goods, and this has a link with industrialization.

Going through the various indices of development, education is key; as it involves the process of imparting or acquiring general knowledge, developing the powers of reasoning and judgment, and generally, helping to prepare people intellectually for mature life. It embraces all the indices of development as it helps develop the man who in turn develops the nation. This kind of knowledge cannot be imparted without language. Through language, agricultural and rural growth can be achieved, economic policies are made and implemented, external aid is sort as regards loans and negotiations made. The infrastructure of a nation will only grow when people can communicate through language; that was what led to the fall of the Tower of Babel. Health is Wealth as the saying goes, but people can only be made aware of their health and health challenges only through the medium of language. Thus, language can be seen as an indispensable tool for national development, because without it, development cannot be achieved.

THE ROLE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The over 400 Nigerian languages have significant parts they play in national development too. Through them, many Nigerians perceive the world around them, communicate with people of same culture, express their beliefs and culture (through proverbs, taboos, panegyric,

etc). It is the language often used at the grass root and through them the grass root can be made aware of what takes place at the state level, or Federal level. Language is indispensable because if any significant development will pull through a nation, it has to ride on the vehicle of language. The totality of a people's identity and personality is embedded within its language. Through language, the culture is expressed, propagated and retained; hence, Language becomes the identity of the people. Communication is possible within the nation and with the outside world though the medium of language. The indigenous language of a people is indeed part of their culture and through it, they view the world. To those who are not exposed to formal education and the English language, the indigenous language is all they have to express themselves. Some others not so grounded in formal education, make use of the Pidgin English to communicate with people outside their ethnic group. The indigenous languages serve as a tool for rural and lower class development with translates to the overall national development.

THE ROLE OF ENGLISH IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In Nigeria, the English language is used as the official language of instruction in schools; as such, it becomes relevant to development. English language was introduced by the Christian missionaries that established formal schools, as many of the indigenous languages were still being reduced to writing. Hence, English language became the language of instruction in schools, the language of communication between the Europeans and Nigerians, the language of governance and administration. To further secure British political and economic influence, the colonial government introduced their African colonies to modernization (Igboanusi 2002:12). The modernizing programme in Nigeria for example, brought development in the areas of transportation, communication, extensive agricultural and industrial schemes. The educational system also went through a significant expansion as the first University College was established in Ibadan (1948) and several other secondary schools. Of note is the fact that the British policy of modernization was executed through the medium of English and it continues to be the language associated with development today.

English serves the purpose of national development for the elite, they use it in their day-to-day activities in official setting, corporate gatherings, national and international meetings, to mention a few. Little wonder, it is assigned the role of an official language in Nigeria! English language though foreign has assumed the status of a second language in Nigeria, and it serves as a unifying language, in the face of diverse ethnic languages and cultures tied to

them. It is an effective instrument for national development, as it encourages the promotion of national consciousness and unity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Language plays a vital role in the development of human race; as such its significance cannot be under-estimated. The government and its agencies should focus on language development since it is an indispensable tool for national development. Attention should be given to the teaching of spoken and written English in order to help the present generation to gain a native-like competence of English, thereby laying a better foundation for the coming generation. This is the responsibility of the government, parents and teachers. The issue of variation and/or deviation characterizing the Nigerian English should be harmonized within the Global English (GE) variety so that it can be intelligible within and outside the country. Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) should be fully incorporated and implemented in schools and homes, to improve the standard of English taught and used by Nigerians. It is better to learn a language from the original owners of such language, hence the importance to incorporate the Computer-Assisted language learning into our everyday lives: home, school, work, etc. to eliminate or reduce confusion as regards what is right or wrong in English usage.

English language teachers should be sent on refresher courses to indigenous English speaking countries to enable them gain better mastery of the language and impart same on their students and society. Listening to first speakers of English on foreign channels like the CNN, BBC, and so on will also go a long way in helping Nigerians use English better, as English continues to assume greater roles and significance nationally and internationally in the knowledge-driven twenty-first century.

CONCLUSION

The use of an international language such as English in Nigeria makes our world view known to the international world and also makes the world known to us. Thus, we are proud of our culture and our national and international audience can know aspects of our culture that make us proud! Poets and literary writers have been able to exploit the English language in writing

novels, poems, songs, drama pieces and so on talking about important aspects of our history like the slave trade, colonialism, pre-colonialism, post- colonialism, to mention a few. Indeed English language has given us a voice in the international community. The “standard varieties” of English used in Nigeria however, have to be harmonized and documented to avoid the classification of grammatical and phonological errors as Nigerian English. All Nigerians should be given the opportunity to be educated in the English language and be a part of the national development. Other indigenous languages in Nigeria should also be developed to the status of international languages.

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