

Language as a Tool for National Cohesion and Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Language is an important part of nationality given that it is one of the main components of national identity. Being multi-ethnic and multilingual, Nigeria needs to be effective in her use of language to help her remain united and develop as a nation. This paper looks at the role that language plays in socio-cultural life, education, and politics of Nigeria. It employs library information with focus on the use of language as a tool for national cohesion and development in Nigeria. The article posits that language can be more instrumental to Nigeria's development economically, politically, socially and culturally, with the people remaining united in diversity. It shows that governance, socio-cultural interactions, and education cannot be successfully achieved in a given nation outside language. It is thus a necessary agent for peace, harmony, unity and progress in every nation. The paper recommends English as a lingua franca that should be taught to every Nigerian for better integration within the system. It concludes that language is a major tool if cohesion and national development are to be achieved in the nation.

Keywords: *Language, tool, cohesion, nation, development*

Introduction

Over the years, linguists have attempted to define language in various ways and there is no definition that is all-inclusive. However, for the purpose of this paper, a few definitions would be presented to help provide an understanding of the discourse. According to Crystal and

Robins (2024), “Language is a system of conventional, spoken, manual (signed), or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves.” To Mu’in (2019), language as a means of communication must have the following features: it is (i) a system (ii) social (iii) spoken (iv) said to be arbitrary (v) creative or productive (vi) complete for its native speakers. Looking at language from the point of view of its functions, Akindele and Adegbite (1999) posit that it serves as a means through which individuals can organise their experiences as a strong force for promoting self-awareness and natural integration. In effect, the functions of language in any given human community are seen in administration, education, politics, legislation, in social and religious sectors and in the expression of thoughts or cognitive processing.

In all, Mu’in (2019) defines language as a system of communication which consists of words, sounds and grammar used by a particular community or nation to express thoughts, ideas, experiences and feelings. It expresses emotions, conveys information and connects people with others. Despite the fact that there could be many definitions of language as shown above, it is clear that the bottom line of these speculations is that language is a system of communication used by human beings. That means that humans cannot interact with one another without the use of language.

According to Chukwu and Eteng (2019), national cohesion is “a process of getting all segments of the country to agree on what should be done to boost the economy and enhance security”. Anyway, since Nigeria is big both in landmass and in population, it may not be feasible to get all segments of the country to agree on what should be done, but people can be persuaded to make conscious efforts to live as one. Coleman (2015) sees social cohesion simply as how individuals relate to the groups in which they find themselves. So, cohesion can be seen as what keeps people together despite their differences and the forces threatening their unity. A common language is one of such things that can help Nigerians stay together as one.

Smith (1991) defines a nation as a named human population sharing a historic territory, a common economy, common myths and historical memories, a mass public culture, common legal rights and duties for all members. With this definition, it is evident that Nigeria fits into the various aspects and so can be seen as a nation. This is why

we can talk about national cohesion and development. National development on its part involves structuring a national identity and raising the standard of living of the citizens of a country. This development happens when the nation is able to bring economic growth and foster social harmony. It is noteworthy to mention here that there is a thin line between the idea of nation building and national development. Unya and Onyemauwa (2022) describe nation building as a process of developing national consciousness and love for one's nation and accepting the commitment that comes with it in order to achieve sustainable development through unification of the people so that the nation remains politically stable. This can be achieved by creating national identity or by using mechanisms of national integration to improve social cohesion and deepen development. According to Obialor and Ozuzu (2018), nation building is a product of conscious statecraft built by citizens with a common sense of purpose and belonging. Okeke and Oboko (2021) also describe nation building as the shaping of national identity. National development is therefore an extensive term that encompasses an all-round approach in all sectors of the nation's development and that of its citizens. The aim of national development is improvement in every area, including the social, cultural, political, economic and material domains. This improvement should take place in an atmosphere of peaceful coexistence among the various groups of the nation. However, it is not an easy task to discuss national development without delving into nation building and vice versa. Therefore, it is better to incorporate national development as a constituent of nation building. Based on this premise, this paper discusses the role that language plays in national cohesion and development. To achieve this, it looks at the role of language in three major areas: social-cultural life, education, and politics.

The role of language in socio-cultural life

Language is a social phenomenon because, first and foremost, it is not biologically inherited, but socially acquired. This is because a child readily learns the language of the environment in which he/she grows up and not necessarily the language of his biological parents who may not be in the same environment with him and do not speak it to him. To Mu'in (2019), language, which is socially learned, acquired and used, is a crucial aspect of human culture and plays a key role in shaping people's experiences and perceptions of the world. As a means

of communication, language is very important in human interactions because it is language that human beings generally use to organise their social existence. Any human relationship is based on sharing ideas, and generally, ideas, thoughts, opinions, feelings and emotions are expressed via language. To keep communication alive, language must be used. It therefore helps people to establish and maintain relationships. The use of different language styles can convey the social roles and status of individuals as well as the context or setting whether formal or informal. As such, the language register can reflect the interplay between language and society. It is language that helps humans, as social beings, to articulate their needs and wants. To this end, Amberg and Vause (2009) aver that language being first and foremost a means of communication, allows communication to take place almost always within some sort of social context. As such, language becomes a social tool that helps humans build relationships, interact, and cooperate to aid societal bonds. This is why Mishina and Iskandar (2019) affirm that language helps to nurture mutual cooperation.

Again, to Edwards (2019), the language we use forms part of our identity. Cook and Seidlofer (1995) also opine that since language expresses individual identity, it is also the expression of cultural identity. Language carries a people's identity and cultural heritage – traditions, history, beliefs and values. Thus, language is a major social tool for national solidarity and cohesion. The way a nation is identified by its National Anthem, Pledge, currency or flag, as well as its language. Just as an individual family (the smaller unit of a society) cannot attain self-actualisation without having access to language, a nation (the larger unit of the society) cannot thrive without the use of language.

Culture basically depends on language for its transmission from one generation to the next. Humans depend on language to teach the greetings, dressing, norms and cultural beliefs of a people. Any change in language reflects the change in beliefs, moral values, social norms and cultural attitudes of the people. Talking about language as an expression of identity, (Edwards 2019) postulates that the essence of identity is similarity. This shows some level of association or connectedness in time and/or space. The way a language is used can be associated with some social characteristics of the speakers. Thus, language is an efficient index of the identities of the users, according

to Llamas and Watt (2010). To Shashkevich (2019), where language is the primary tool for expression and communication, writing, reading and speaking are integral parts of everyday life. In fact, one's language affects one's behaviour in society.

Language can also be a tool for national peace and unity. If someone from one ethnic group speaks to another person from a different ethnic group in a language which both understand, the two of them feel automatically connected. So, a common language facilitates peaceful coexistence and oneness. In the Bible story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9), it is evident that a united people with a common language can achieve great accomplishments, as the following verse affirms:

And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language, and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. (Genesis 11:6)

From the foregoing, it can be seen that if people speak the same language, it becomes easier for them to be more united with a common purpose and so, can achieve greater feats. The moment language becomes a barrier, the people are no longer of one mind and what should have been a common developmental goal will be thwarted. As such, language unites people communally, nationally and even internationally because it creates an atmosphere of friendliness, harmony and cooperation within the community and beyond. In this regard, it plays a vital role in the integration programmes that enhance national development. In fact, language makes one to identify with his neighbour. Therefore, if anyone wishes to identify, interact or do business with a particular person or social group, the learning of the languages which depict the culture of both individuals or groups is paramount. Alternatively, the use of one language that is common to both of them would be necessary. Communicating in a familiar language will make each of them feel loved, having a sense of belonging, and this encourages cooperation and growth. When people from different ethnic groups in Nigeria meet, there is no way they can interact and relate favourably well if there is no common language to facilitate communication. We agree with Bamisaye (2010) who affirms that, thus far, English language, being the lingua franca in Nigeria, has played this unifying role despite the ethnic or tribal

differences. Language is therefore seen as a tool for social interaction which fosters cooperation and solidarity in the nation, leading to progress and development.

Furthermore, it is obvious that when people live together, there are bound to be conflicts which could be ethnic, religious, political or socio-cultural. Irrespective of the nature of the conflicts, they can be generally resolved via the use of language. The Bible says in Proverbs 15:1 that a soft answer turns away wrath. Anyone who is angry can be pacified with soft and soothing words. When anger is abated, reconciliation is achieved making for peace and progress. Without language, motives cannot be known, thoughts and intentions cannot be expressed, there can be no understanding and misconceptions are very likely to set in. So, with language, human beings can understand one another better, settle their misunderstandings and resolve conflicts. In fact, where there is no peace, where conflicts are unresolved, there are bound to be wars, fighting, killings, quarrelling, destructions, rancor, etc., which do not make for growth nor development. Since language is a vital agent of peace and unity in any given nation, it invariably builds the nation because with unity, growth and development can easily be achieved. According to Bell (2021), Nigeria has more than 370 ethnic groups and more than 500 spoken languages, which makes her a multiethnic nation with very many language diversities. In a multilingual setting like Nigeria, the conflicts that are bound to arise could remain unresolved if language is not used in the right direction to promote unity in diversity. This can be done through dialogues, discussions, peace talks, negotiations, etc. Owino (2013) opines that the conceptions of diversity can be conflictual or cooperative. According to him, the conception that promotes understanding and cooperation is more desirable than the one that encourages conflict, rivalry and competition.

In another light, language portrays the personality of man and his culture. This is why language can help the transmission of culture and the continuity of societies. That is to say that without language, culture cannot be transmitted from one generation to another because language is one of the several aspects of culture and the main link between the components of culture is language. As a result, language helps people to bond socially, culturally and politically. According to Shashkevich (2019), linguists consider language as a social, cultural

and psychological phenomenon. Since language is the principal vehicle for social communication, it influences the human social structure. This brings about a positive change towards nation building and development for, according to Mandel (2022), conceptual change results from a deliberate change of language by social agents.

The role of language in education

The relevance of language is not only limited to socio-cultural life, it is also a primary tool for the acquisition of appropriate competences and skills that equip individuals to be able to live in the society and contribute to its development. Essien (1998) affirms that one cannot even conceive of education without language because, in every discipline, notions, concepts, theories, analyses, etc., that enhance nation building and national development all find expression in language. No nation can grow without education and education in turn can only be acquired through language, whether oral, written or by signs and codes. This makes it a two-way traffic. Whereas education is the agent through which civilisation and development are made possible, learning to read and write a language also depends on education. Before a nation can actually develop, it must have at least a language which its people speak, read and write. Basically, nation building and national development, which depend so much on education (formal and informal), cannot be achieved without using language. On the effective role of language in the context of formal education, UNICEF (2022) states that “the various ways in which languages are chosen, used and supported in African classrooms largely determine the degrees of effective learning”. This means that for effective learning to take place in a formal setting, the learners have to be taught in a chosen language that they should get familiar with. For this cause, they need to be taught the English language early enough to be able to flow better with it as the language of instruction in Nigerian schools.

It is indeed very evident that English language is not just the language of instruction at all levels in Nigerian schools, it is equally the language of administration in those institutions. Teachers depend on language to teach their subjects, relate with the learners and Management of the institution. Again, schools can teach patience, tolerance and obedience through Moral and Civic Education to inculcate moral values in the learners. This trains them to be more law-

abiding citizens and to tolerate one another, making for cohesion and development.

Furthermore, science and technology cannot develop without the use of language. In Nigeria for instance, the indigenous science and technology should be best expressed through the indigenous languages. Unfortunately, in the country, even in Africa, most indigenous languages are not yet well-developed and so, the technological potentialities are not yet fully harnessed. For instance, in Nigeria where agriculture is the mainstay of the country's economy, those who engage in it are mainly the rural dwellers whose main languages are the indigenous languages. For the nation's economy to improve through agriculture, therefore, these farmers have to be reached with a common language. Having so many language diversities, what is needed for national cohesion in Nigeria is a functional language. The National Policy on Education (8) states that "in addition to appreciating the importance of language in the educational process as a means of preserving the people's culture, the government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother tongue". The bond of unity is strengthened if every Nigerian child learns a major Nigerian language other than his own. In addition to this, a functional language is needed in Nigeria for better cohesion. On this, Ogwudile (2019) states that the English language is currently playing a unifying role in Nigeria by helping to maintain integration and oneness. Mishina and Iskandar (2019) also argue that with the English language as the common language to all the ethnic groups, the collective sentiment of belonging together is forged despite the individual or ethnic differences. Bamisaye (2010) also affirms that English language is the language of integration in Nigeria, being the only language that indexes the spirit of togetherness amidst the compounding complexities in the nation. The writers of this paper agree with these affirmations and are of the opinion that English language as an official national language should also be taught to non-literate Nigerian rural dwellers to enable them interact better and do business with those who come to buy their agricultural produce from other parts of the country. They may not be taught to read and write, but simple oral communication to help them transact business will suffice. English language will then play a better unifying role since it

will be understood and used by almost all Nigerians from all the ethnic groups.

The role of language in politics

Politics here refers to the activities that are involved in governing a people. To Cruz (2013), “language and politics shape thinking and provide a way to order and see coherence in the world.” According to Cruz, politics shapes the way a society lives each day. In essence, politics determines how humans as a society govern, organise and interact. So, politics is simply the process by which a group of people makes collective decisions and, for these decisions to be made, language is needed. There is no system of government which does not use language to deliver goods and services. Depending on the educational level of the target community, diversities of language are employed in social and political mobilisation. This is why Chomsky (2000) stresses that language is a component of nationalist policies and as such, serves as a politically symbolic tool.

Politically, language creates awareness since the expression of thoughts is achieved through the use of language. In other words, in the organisation of communities in a nation, the government can only reach the people via the use of language. In addition, since government policies are formulated using the language of the people, when these policies are eventually implemented, development is bound to take place in the nation. In the Nigerian National Assembly, for instance, the passing and interpretation of bills are done with language, which happens to be English language. When the bills are ultimately implemented, goals are achieved and there is national growth. Again, since language affects thinking, Dunn (2021) posits that language can open opportunities for fruitful dialogue between the government and the people, and also between one government establishment and the other. At present when insecurity is a challenging issue in Nigeria, appropriate and effective use of language by our political players can enhance security. If politicians use a language devoid of favouritism, tribalism and hate, people will trust them more and there will be reassurance, cooperation and cohesion. This will lead to national security and growth. Furthermore, it is language that establishes the rule of law and maintains the integrity of a nation. When the nation is peaceful and securely guarded, then people can talk of national cohesion and national development. Language is, therefore, a necessary and powerful communicative tool in politics.

In diplomatic settings, international relations and cooperations are made possible by language. These relations encourage investment, trade and industry which improve the economy of individual nations. Doganaskoy (2008) states that in this regard, language becomes a prerequisite upon which all government systems are predicated.

According to Mandel (2022), politicians owe much of their success to the skillful use of rhetoric as they attempt to persuade the audience of the validity of their political views. As such, language helps to form the charisma in a public speaker and it becomes an important tool for transmitting political beliefs and thought. For this cause, the use of language can make or mar a nation as the power of language can build or destroy. If politicians are sincere with what they say and their listeners believe in them, their language will definitely have a positive influence on the thoughts and actions of the populace. If otherwise, the people's thoughts and actions will also be affected by the insincere utterances. It is in this regard that Mandel sees language as thought control, explains that in the theory of linguistic determinism, language provides the framework for people's thought and as such, it is very difficult to think outside this framework. To Mandel, action cannot be discussed separately from language since everything exists only through language. In this vein, Mandel further states that language is welded into action and is understood as a form of "speech acts" and speech acts are a response to action. To this end, Dossoumu (2020) avers that in everyday conversation, people produce utterances which commit others to act or take action. These are speech acts. Ekoru and Gunn (2021) support this by saying that an utterance is part of an action. Nordquist (2020) also explains this by saying that speech act theory studies how words are used not only to present information, but also to carry out actions. Therefore, speaking a language does not just mean making utterances, but doing something with words, performing an action.

Talking about language and politics, we cannot play politics without making use of language. In Nigeria as a democratic nation, political campaigns are carried out with language, government plans and policies are formulated with language, the Nigerian Constitution is written in English language and, in fact, the day-to-day administration is carried out with language. All these activities foster cohesion and development. To conclude this segment, it is noteworthy to buttress the fact that without language as a tool for communication,

governance will be impossible because government cannot reach out to citizens neither can the people communicate with the government in place. When there is no communication between the leaders and the led, there can be no cohesion and development, only silence and confusion.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that a nation can be a product of its language. It has also shown that language can be used as a tool for political processes of governance, unification and maintenance of peace, unity, law and order in a nation. Therefore, language is an invaluable tool without which humans cannot achieve success in any endeavour. Governance as a human endeavour depends to a great extent on language for success. It is language that is used to establish the rule of law and to maintain the integrity of a nation. The process of nation building should necessarily begin with the mental reorientation and attitudinal change of the citizens, as language helps them learn morals and civics. It also claimed that culture is part of national identity and that language is a major factor for the identification of a people. National cohesion and development cannot be achieved without language since language is part of culture and a carrier of culture. It showed that while education plays a key role in national development, it cannot take place without language.

Since language is a prerequisite for national cohesion and development, it is hereby recommended that the teaching and learning of English language should be reviewed to include non-literate rural dwellers in Nigeria. This will make the language as a lingua franca get to the grassroots and impart on all collectively. It will definitely be a unifying factor that will bring about integration, national growth and development because learning and speaking a common language can bridge gaps and open new grounds for cohesion which help to reshape culture for further development.

From the foregoing, language is an indispensable tool for national development and cohesion, it remains a very important human heritage which gives identity to a nation and helps the latter to make remarkable progress in the right direction. We therefore conclude with the words of Cruz (2001) that language is the identity, the history and the soul of society.

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