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# LANGUAGE STUDIES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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**Okpongette Alexander Sam**

*Department of General Studies,  
Akwa Ibom State College of Education, Afaha Nsit,  
Akwa Ibom State.*

## **Abstract**

*This paper focuses on language studies and societal development. It adopts descriptive and comparative approaches in analysing the nature of language studies and the policy situation in Nigeria, considering in clear terms the complex ethno linguistics setting. Sequel to the look warm altitudes of governments over the years, the paper therefore evaluates the value of an effective language studies, policy and implementation to the development of nations across the globe. On the foregoing, the work identifies the low level of technology and science development in Nigeria as a product of purposelessness approaches in language policy making and implementation. The paper observes that, little or no functional language policy exists in Nigeria even at the age of 55 years of independence. Recourse to this, Nigerian languages ought to be central to societal development and should occupy an important place in the development discourse. In line with these and many more, the study recommends that urgent attention and responsibilities ought to be given to language experts (Linguists) in making language policies and possible implementation strategies for the country. This paper further advocates for a national language system, however calls for the adoption of respective indigenous languages for vocational training at their given speech communities. The Nigerian pidgin English has the likely majority of speakers and need to be developed to the status of a national language alongside English. These positions can only be achieved if our central policy maker (government) is sincere with the reality on ground and avoid mere political interest and propaganda.*

A language study in the world today is an issue of growing social importance because a majority of all living languages are threatened in their continued existence. How they can be sustained is a matter of study and debate. Inadequate level of attention that has often been given to the language situation in Nigeria tends to reflect on the level of general development. Nigeria is one of the countries with the largest number of indigenous languages. This situation should be seen as blessings rather curse. Contrary these

expectations, countries of this nature are rather turned into ethnic and religious struggles. Considering the multilingual and cultural differences, the issue of adopting an indigenous national language in Nigeria is described as complex. In reality, the relevance of language to development of any society cannot be overemphasized. Development cannot be achieved in any society unless the linguistics reality of such a society is put into play. It is evident that different languages in Nigeria coexisted in peace before the advent of the colonial masters which brought together the diverse socio-cultural backgrounds into one fold through the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914. This act resulted into the imposition of English language as an official language in Nigeria (Adenipekun, 2010, p. 18).

In reality, there are two possible reasons that neglect language issues. The first reason is that development is often conceived of in a rather narrow turn to the calculation of the Gross domestic product and gross national product and other economics metrics of income. The consequences of this quantitative approach to development are that economic indicators are often erroneously equated with national development and societal well-being. In this narrow sense, the role of language in societal development may rather be seen as a bit too marginal to be taken in reality. The second challenge is why the language issue has not featured well in Nigerian's development discourse. This is as a result of the nature and role of language in society which is often completely misunderstood. Probably, it may be from the irresponsible declarations of some Nigerian writers and intellectuals. However, Nigerian languages can be used for effective expressions, irrespective of the diverse cultural situation. The purpose of the position paper is to focus on language as a cultural asset and to establish the relationship between language studies and human welfare from a linguistic perspective.

Contesting all these positions and challenges, the paper is divided into five sections. The first section is the introduction, under the section two, the paper shall treat the conceptual approaches to language and development; multilingualism nature of Nigeria, the relevance of language studies in societal development, language and the structure of Nigeria education system, the third section treat language policy and national development, that the benefit of an effective national language planning the development of Nigeria. In the last section, the paper shall point out the likely ways forward and conclusion.

### **The Language Situation in Nigeria**

According to Agbedo (2000:196), "the notion of linguistic heterogeneity refers to the existence of diverse languages within a society, most often, nation states. In such nation states, the choice and adoption of language or languages and role assignments either at the national, regional or state level becomes crucial". Most times whatever choice made is dependent on three key factors- the total number of different language within the state, the ratio of users of each language to the total population, and the geographical and socio-economic situation of each language. The logic of Nigeria language situation seems to suggest an effective language policy. In Nigeria, there exist some advances in an attempt to take record of the repertoire of the language situation in Nigeria. Since Nigeria is a multilingual nation with over 500 nationalities, the question of language choice poses a problem. The term multilingualism can be seen as the phenomena regarding an individual speaker

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who uses two or more languages, or a community of speakers of different languages. (Agbedo, 2007, p. 13) notes that, a rigid definition of the term would see as "being native-like in two or more languages", while the loose definition would see it as "being less than native-like but still able to communicate in two or more languages". Nigeria's indigenous languages can then be categorized into three major language groups or, more precisely, language subgroups but these groups do not conform to a one-to-one matching with the states of the country. Some of these contain very large numbers of mother-tongue speakers.

### **The Relevance of Language Studies in Societal Development**

Development is seen as the sustainable socio-cultural, economic and technological transformation of the society. The position of language becomes an important variable in the development process. The Nigerian languages becomes the focus because is casually related to its development derives. What is it that makes language such an interesting factor of development or discourse? The answer must be found in the nature of language and the roles it perform in the society.

There exists a considerable amount of literature on the subject of the role and functions of languages studies in the society. Each language is systematically different from others in the sense that it has a particular way of arranging the sign that encode meaning, and communicating the world to its speaker. In that sense, every language is an efficient tool for encoding the peculiarities of the particular environment in which a people lives.

In a broader perspective, the language factor weighs in heavily on the issues of development thinking in every society. If development involves the desired transformation of the socio-cultural, political and economic systems of the society and language is seen as a repository and a tool for the expression and communication of the these very socio-cultural, political and economic belief systems of the society, then it goes without saying that a successful conceptualization and implementation of the societal transformation can only be achieved through the use of the mother-tongues or the languages indigenous to the society.

Hurskainen (1993:23) point that, language question is even more compelling when we examine the new paradigms of development studies with community initiatives, indigenous knowledge and popular participation. The level through which Nigerian development approached the interrelation between language and development as noted early is a matter of concern. As such, the Nigerian slow space of development is a major clue on how language studies can be a vital tool for the transformation of society in general and Nigeria in particular. It is obvious that language in societal development is normally centres on the people's personality (Kujul999:14)

### **Language and the Structure of Nigeria Education System**

The place of language in educational system is very essential. It is a means through which knowledge is shared for the development of the society. Ferguson (2006:99) contends the fact that there is a widespread academic agreement that the mother tongue or a local language well known hi the community is, in principle, the most suitable medium for education in the initial years of education. Put briefly, the educational argument is that cognitive development and subject learning is best fostered through teaching in a

language the child knows well. Instruction in a language familiar to pupils improves immeasurably the quality of interaction between teacher and pupil. It also narrows the psychological gulf between home and school, integrates the school better into the local community and gives recognition to the language and culture the child brings to school with positive effects on the self-esteem of individuals and local communities. The work of Cummins (1979, 1984) and others suggests, moreover, that consolidation of the child's facilitates subsequent acquisition of a second language. In spite of equivocal early research findings, these arguments are increasingly bolstered by empirical evidence. For example, in a recent study Williams (2014) shows that fifth-year primary pupils in Malawi, where the medium until grade 4 is Chichewa, have no worse reading abilities in English than primary five pupils in Zambia, where the official medium is English from grade 1.

In Nigeria, there is a hierarchical structure of primary, secondary and tertiary educational systems of Nigeria, with very minor different internal subdivisions. In Nigeria, the educational system recognizes 6 years of primary education, 6 years of secondary education, divided into junior and senior secondary schools and finally leading to a tertiary level of education. At each of these levels we have different participants, interest groups, administrators, teachers, educational resources and goals of education. It seems to us then that each of the levels constitutes an important level at which communication takes place, at which participation and decision-making by the citizenry takes or ought to take place. The local, the state and national levels constitute discrete and important development cells of Nigeria. They are ingredients for a model of localized trilingual's. What important lessons does this observation of the society present us in the language debate? It is clear to us that it is desirable for multilingual countries to formulate language policies which would seek to exploit this natural model of social organization to achieve optimal communication among the citizenry at each level. We believe that the best language policy is one that can promote communication between discourse participants at each of these levels and between each immediate level in multilingual set-ups. According to Ferguson (2006), Development communication is seen as any communication between participants for the purpose of sustainable socio-cultural transformation. By most appropriate language, we mean the language in which the majority of participants in any discourse entity have communicative competence. One possibility, proposed by Cooper (1989: 33), is 'acquisition planning', which refers to planning directed at increasing the numbers of users/speakers of particular languages. Another, perhaps preferable for being more encompassing, is 'language planning in education' within the scope of which would fall the following policy issues, many of which are as follows:

1. The choice of medium of instruction for various levels of the education system primary, secondary, tertiary.
2. The role of the home language (or 'mother tongue') in the educational process
3. The choice of second/foreign languages as curricular subjects of instruction, along with associated decisions on language Planning and Education when these languages will be introduced into the curriculum whether foreign language study will be made compulsory, for whom and for how long what proportions of the school population will be exposed to second/foreign language instruction

4. In the case of English and a few other pluricentric languages, what variety of the language will serve as a model (or norm) for teaching purposes? Worth noting immediately is that, few of the issues above can be considered exclusively educational, they clearly have much wider social and political ramifications..

### **Language Policy and Functional Societal Development**

The role of language in national development remains the most controversial issue in language planning (Ndukwe 1988:114). There is little doubt though that a consensus has to be reached on the matter in formulating a language policy for the nation. One profitable manner in which the issue of language studies and national development may be discussed is through focusing on the main point of disagreement among language planning theories. This relates to the provision of a definite and comprehensive outline of national beyond language planning.

A viable national language policy would be one, which should seek to maximize the participation of the people with regards to various sectors of development. "The essential strands of argument point somewhat gloomily to the fact that Nigeria's timid language policy and the blind glorification of English language by the ruling class have conspired to undermine the local language and rob them of their utilitarian values in the important societal development drive" (Agbedo 2000: 196). In this connection for instance, Agbedo (2000:56) posit the concept of exclusion and shows how the efficacy of language as an instrument of exclusion has been used by the milieu diligent to exclude the vast majority of Nigerians from participating in the overall societal development process.

An effective national language policy in Nigeria has the tendency to assist the country in diplomacy, cohesion, conflict resolution, and interaction among and between our neighbours. It will also assist us to increase learning in schools because if we have a national language policy, we can decide which one to do and use to teach or convey knowledge in schools. In saying that knowledge acquisition and creation is cultural. It is better in the language one speaks most as a first language. You can see the striving force to translate ones thoughts into English.

Adenipekun (2010:67) notes Fufunwa who identifies a wonderful idea in the early 1970s through an experiment in which some primary school pupils were taught in Yoruba and their counterparts were taught in English. It was found that those who were taught in Yoruba had an edge over their counterparts taught in English when a comparative analysis of their achievement was carried out. So, if you are taught in a particular language which is cultural to you, you are likely going to excel beyond translating your thoughts from your native language to a foreign language. Yes, English is our official language.

However, is it possible to form a policy in which to promote our languages for instructional, transactional, diplomatic, and commercial purposes. If you go to Indonesia, they speak English but everybody speaks Bahasa-Indonesia. Why can we do the same in Nigeria?. China is ruling the world today because everything is done in Chinese language. Malaysia and Singapore are thriving because they create ideas in their languages. The same thing goes for Japan and Russia. The paper is not saying that we should translate to one language in Nigeria. What we are saying is that we must create a platform in which we say these are the languages we want to promote. How the existing policy supports the national language

policy. The existing policy says pupils should be taught in their mother tongue in the first three years at primary schools. This policy supports and gives life to what we are doing. For the first three years they should be taught in native language and then introduce English gradually. The significance of Language planning and teaching in societal development can not be over emphasized, since Nigeria is a complete multilingual and secular in nature (Abekah2010:14).

### **The Ways Forward**

In regards to the dynamic nature and role of language studies to societal development., we must be conscious of the fact that putting a reasonable effort into language planning, language teaching and language engineering takes time to yield desired results. Therefore, language experts must be involved in national language policy. We should base our focus on benefits even if it takes long time. A nation lives longer than nationals.

The government policy on language should devoid of political manipulations. Rather Stringent steps towards the sensitization of citizenry on the need to accept a genuine policy on language and look at it as a vital tool for functional societal development should be encouraged, Another step is to ensure corpus planning of Nigerian languages in order to give them a functional status in the society. In doing this, language teachers must be well mobilized to develop pedagogical materials for language teaching and development.

If we accept that language is the most effective tool for cultural transmission, our national image can be better enhanced through production of home films couched in our indigenous languages. In early 70s - late 80s, Indians films scripted in their language flourished in Nigeria. Showcasing Indian values, especially the potency of Indian medicine. Today, India is celebrated as one of the leading names in Medicare. Perhaps, the appointments of Chief Pete Edochie and Hilda Dokubo (who are veteran Nigerian film styles) as members of rebranding committee by then minister of information and Communication, Prof. Mrs Akunyili should serve as a point of reference in assigning responsibilities on sensitive issues to rightful patriots. We therefore need to showcase our values and technological prowess through films scripted in our indigenous languages.

Finally, the paper strongly recommends adoption of respective unit indigenous languages for training students at primary and post primary levels. The real native speakers of Swahili language from East Africa are not much but the language has attained international recognition.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

This paper discussed the issue of language studies in the societal development of Nigeria. Nigeria seems to have had more than its fair share of the global political, economic and social instability as the result of her complex nature. The fact that Nigeria society is really multilingual, Nigerians are rather polyglot, making use of their mother - tongue in their immediate localities and any other inter-ethnic languages and lingua franca (English Language) once they leave their indigenous environments .On a general note, Nigerian languages are naturally vibrant and widely used by reasonable number of the population. Unfortunately, the indigenous languages are not adequately put to use in educational systems

of the country. These same languages are not considered as languages of national or government and languages of mass communication, it is pertinent to note that 90% of national stations broadcast in English language, leaving just almost 10% for indigenous languages. This situation then confirms our contention that there is a linguistic and communicative discrepancy on Nigeria and Africa as a continent. This behaviour has trivial consequences on the development of Nigeria.

In conclusion, we need to involve language experts (Linguists) in language policy in order to put in place an objective and effective policy. Our country will be better structured by upgrading the status of the indigenous languages for nation building.

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