

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL STABILITY

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ABSTRACT

It is the desire of Nigerian Government to build a nation that is free and democratic, just and equalitarian, united, strong and self-reliant with a great and dynamic economy and bright opportunities for all citizens. This dream has not been easy to realise since independence in spite of efforts of different administrations. In this paper, attempt is made to explore the contributions that language can make to ensure sustainable democracy and political stability. Language affects the thought processes of man therefore, permeates every aspect of his life. Only rationally thinking human beings can make reasonable contributions to the building of the nation. Education, cultural identity, national unity, economy, etc. are areas where language makes significant contributions in their development.

INTRODUCTION

The nation Nigeria, has since independence been trying to find her feet among committee of nations. Efforts have been made at different times to fashion out a type of government that would take the interests of the citizenry into consideration at all times. Since the first republic fell, several experiments had been set up to bring about the type of democracy that could stand the test of time. Hence, "transition programme", became a household word in Nigeria. Now that another democratic government has been put in place that will usher us into the 21st Century, concerted effort should be made to ensure that it does not suffer pre-mature death as others did. It is therefore, the focus of this paper to consider the role of language in achieving sustainable democracy and political stability in Nigeria.

WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

It is necessary in this paper to consider what language means. Language is a means of communication among human beings in a society. Obanya, et al (1987), citing Block and Trager see language as "a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group co-operates. Language is a system for the expression of thoughts, feelings and social togetherness through the use of spoken sounds or conventional symbols (Obanya, et al, 1987). While Halliday (1964), cited by Awonusi (1993), sees language as a patterned social activity of human beings displaying patterns of substance (phonic and graphic), form (grammar and lexis) and context. This view of language sees it as a behaviour of man. Since man engages in activities involving language, he develops linguistic habit to be displayed in his interaction with other persons. So language is transmitted; it is patterned, and it is embedded in the human social experience.

As a result, linguists claim that it is the tool which makes human culture possible, which is a significant criterion for distinguishing man from other animals. The nature of human societies also motivates the description of language as being socially realised. Hence Barber (1972) sums up views on language as:

a signaling system which operates with symbolic vocal sounds, and which is used by some group of people for purposes of communication and social co-operation.

It could be seen from the definitions of language that it is very important in the life of any nation.

WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

Democracy is a type of government where the citizens of a country are free to participate in the affairs of the nature. It is popularly seen as the government of the people, by the people and

for the people. In this form of government, the interests of the majority of the citizens are taken into consideration in the formulation and execution of policies. Democracy is further defined in Chambers English Dictionary as:

a form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people collectively, and is administered by them or officers appointed by them: the common people; a state of society characterised by recognition of equality of rights and privileges: political, social or legal equality.

It is believed that when this type of government is operating in a country, peace and stability will be achieved.

LANGUAGE AND SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL STABILITY

At this stage of our discussion, the role of functions of language will be briefly mentioned. It is generally agreed that communication is the most important function of language. However, Halliday (1973), cited by Obanya, et al says that communication can be set out in seven different functions of language. These are instrumental, regulatory, representational, interactional, personal, heuristic and imaginative functions. It should be noted that the language behaviours of man emanate from the seven functions mentioned above, such as greeting, inviting, accepting, congratulating, complimenting, flattering, interrupting, probing, sympathising, apologising, etc.

It is probably in realisation of the importance of language that the government made some pronouncements on it. In the National Policy on Education (1981), it is stated:

In addition to appreciating the importance of language in the educational process, and 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. In this connection, the government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba.

The policy also states that the language of instruction at the early primary school should be mother tongue and later English. The language to be used in the business of both national and state assemblies should be in English and indigenous language decided by the House. All these show that the government of Nigeria is conscious of the role that language can play in the affairs of the nation.

There is no appropriate national policy that can be formulated without first identifying the overall philosophy and objectives of the nation. In the National Policy on Education (1981), the following are the five main national objectives of Nigeria:

1. A free and democratic society;
2. A just and egalitarian society;
3. A united, strong and self-reliant nation;

4. A great and dynamic economy; and
5. A land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens.

Looking at the first objective, especially it could be seen that language will contribute greatly to its realisation in the country. Contributing, Fafunwa (1991), says that the importance of language in the achievement of these objectives cannot be over-emphasised, and this has implications for our Colleges of Education and Universities. We shall now focus our attention on how language can play important part in the sustainable democracy and political stability.

In the first place, we shall consider language and thought. Language is very important in the thinking process of man. Since language is used by human beings to communicate thoughts and feelings and the abstract nature of thought involves the mind which no one can reach to

know what happens there, the only outlet therefore, is through language (oral or written). Language is primarily used to "dress up" and "send out thoughts on their way"(Obadipe, 1993). Since language helps man to be a thinking being, its effective use will contribute greatly to personal and national development; Crystal (1988) emphasised this way:

It is impossible to conceive of a rational being, or of a society, without implying the existence of a language. Language and thinking are so closely related that any study of the former is bound to be a contribution to our understanding of the human mind.

Truly, it is the mind that perceives effectively that will contribute meaningfully to the society. Hence, Moody (1979), says that thought is the principal means by which men recognise, classify and organise their experience, and make plans for further action. He further adds that though the precise connections between language and thought is still a matter of absorbing experiment and speculation by psychologists and philosophers, but we are all aware of how our ability to "think things out" depends on our command of language. Conversely, we often become aware of how the processes of thought can miscarry if language is inadequately controlled. So, if the citizens can perceive with the aid of language, the environment and events correctly, they will be able to interpret things correctly and respond accordingly. The idea of language and thought will lead us to the point, using language for instruction.

Language is very useful for instruction or teaching. In most educational institutions, language is the most important tool used for instruction. Teachers teach their pupils using the language of instruction. It is believed that all things being equal, if teachers teach effectively, effective learning will take place in the learners. And the learners are able to learn if they can reason well, and reasoning which comes as a result of thought processes is through language as noted earlier.

In Nigeria, the language of instruction is mainly the English language though mother-tongues are also in use. Osaji (1979), says that although English is spoken by a minority of the educated, one can rightly say that English being the language of administration, commerce and education is our national lingua franca because it serves as official medium of linguistic communication between a people with about 368 languages. The government, however, intends that the medium of instruction in primary school is initially the mother tongue or language of immediate community and at a later stage, English (NPE, 1981)

From the above, it could be seen that language is very important in education. And it is education that the government considers "the greatest force that can be used to bring about redress, it is also the greatest investment that the nation can make for the quick development of its economic, political, sociological and human resources" (NPE, 1981). So, education which is enhanced through language has a lot to contribute towards realising our national objectives; and ensuring sustainable democracy and political stability. One of the most serious problems facing the democracy in Nigeria is that of illiteracy and ignorance. As more people are educated and enlightened, the functioning of democratic principles will be easier.

Another role that language can play is that of national and international communication. Nigeria is a country where about 400 languages are spoken. The people who speak the same language understand one another. But when it comes to communicating with persons outside one's linguistic community, the need for national lingua franca arises. Though efforts have been made to ensure that indigenous language plays this role, it has not come to fruition. So, English language is playing the role of lingua franca and official language. Through this medium people from different ethnic groups interact foster the progress of the nation.

Another aspect of communication is the international level. As a nation, we need to interact with people from other countries. The language which we use mainly is the English language. In interactional organisations like the UNO, OAU, ECOWAS, etc. we are able to interact effectively and present our views and problems using English language - which is an

international language. It should also be noted that the use of the language also helps us to carry out research studies outside Nigeria where most of the literature are in English. Our quest for advancement in science and technology is also enhanced through the effective use of the language.

Language is very useful for nationalism. The language of the people makes them to be nationally conscious and brings about national pride. In Nigeria, as more people use their mother - tongues especially in official matters they are likely to become more nationally conscious.

Language is also used for cultural identity. It is "a means of preserving the peoples culture" (NPE, 1981). Language is a part of the people's culture and it helps in itself transmission. As culture is effectively transmitted from generation to generation through language the culture of the people is preserved.

Language brings about unity for the people of a nation. As people speak the same language there is the sense of affinity amongst them. They tend to see themselves as one. The diversities of languages in Nigeria would have brought about disunity, but the place of English language has helped to ameliorate the situation. As we speak English in the political circle, we understand one another.

Language is also useful in the business of governance. According to Moody (1979), "No matter what techniques, technologies and 'Powers' are available, there is no doubt that language is an essential element in the control and regulation of communities, especially in furthering the aims of government". Language if effectively used is very powerful in administration of industries and other commercial activities.

Language is also useful to mass communication practitioners. The mass communicators with print or electronic media, need to use language effectively. They inform, entertain and educate the people.

Related to the above is the entertainment world. The theatre experts, the literary writers express themselves in language. They also help to ensure political stability in the nation.

CONCLUSION

Efforts have been made to ex-ray the role language can play in the political, economic, social, cultural, etc. life of a nation. It is believed that language is powerful in bringing about sustainable democracy and political stability.

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