

ENGLISH LANGUAGE, POWER AND DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA: THE WAY FORWARD



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Abstract

This paper surveys the development of English Language in Nigeria it takes a cursory look at the relationship between language and power in a democratic setting. The paper further examines the role of English language in a democratic society. It proffers suggestions and makes recommendations. It also draws conclusions by pointing the way forward for the nation.

Language generally is believed to be an organized system of speech used as a means of human communication. While Bloomfield (1976) contends ‘that language is a tool through which information concepts, skills and values of the society are transmitted,’ Lado (1964) states that ‘language is intimately tied to man’s feelings and activities and that it is bound up with nationality, religion and the feeling of self’. Language, power and democracy are three concepts that can never be divorced from one another in any political setting. Although power and democracy can only work through language, the use of language to achieve and exercise political power is apparently problematic because of the multilingual structure of the Nigerian society.

Though English language is the official language of the nation, it is also the language of education, commerce and justice and a second language to many Nigerians yet it is not spoken or understood by millions. The problem is further compounded by the fact that there are over four hundred indigenous languages in existence in the country. In spite of these problems, Okafor and Ogude (2004) observes that English language is adopted as the official language of the nation in spite of fear of domination, tribal sentiments and the protracted debates on adopting an indigenous language as lingua-franca because English is seen as a vehicle of cohesion. They believe that it is the second language (L2) after the mother tongue (L1) and that it is the language of governance education, administration, laws, mass media, commerce and industry.

Language and Power

Crystal (1971) is of the view that ‘language is the more frequently used and most highly developed form of human communication we possess. Gimson (1962), states that ‘language is a system of conventional signals used for communication by a whole community. He sees language as operating with two kinds of materials, sound

and ideas, social situations and meaning'. While, Wareing (1999) observes that language is a system or rather a set of systems of sounds, grammar and meaning within which exists a scope for creativity and invention. She believes that how individuals use the systems available to them varies according to who the speakers are, how they perceive themselves and what identity they want to project. She further asserts that language use varies according to the situation, whether it is public or private, formal or as informal who is being addressed and who might be able to overhear. Thus, the important choice we make about our use of language determines our dimension of power.

On the other hand, Moore and Hendry (1982), contends that power is the force in society that gets things done and by studying it, we can identify who controls what and for whose benefit. Thus, an important aspect of power could be seen through politics.

Orwell (1946) contends that all issues are political issues and politics is concerned with power, the power to make decisions, to control resources, other people's behaviours and their values'. In a democratic setting, through franchise politicians are entrusted with the powers to make law and take decisions on behalf of the society. Thus they are empowered to acquit or find guilty, to restrict or incarcerate any individual when such laws are violated.

Entrenched in the Nigerian constitution are categories of objectives of the government.

(i) Political Objectives

- a) The purpose of government is the security and welfare of the people.
- b) Promoting national integration. It shall be the duty of the state to provide adequate facilities for and encourage free mobility of people goods and services through out the federation, and secure full residence rights for every citizen in all parts of the federation.
- c) The state shall foster a feeling of belonging and involvement among the various peoples of the federation, to the end that, loyalty to the nation shall override sectional loyalties.
- d) The state shall abolish all corrupt practices and abuse of power.

(ii) Economic Objectives

- a) The state shall harness the resources of the nation and promote national prosperity and an efficient dynamic and self-reliant economy.
- b) Control the national economy in such a manner as to secure the maximum welfare, freedom and happiness of every citizen on the basis of social justice and equality of status and opportunity.

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- c) Without prejudice to its right to operate or participate in areas of the economy, other than the major sectors of the economy, manage and operate the major sectors of the economy.
- d) Without prejudice to the right of any person to participate in areas of the economy within the major sectors, protect the right of every citizen to engage in any economic activities outside the major sectors of the economy.
- e) Ensure the promotion of a planned and balanced economic development.
- f) Ensure that the material resources of the nation are harnessed and distributed as best as possible to serve the common good.
- g) Ensure that the economic system is not operated in such a manner as to permit the concentration of wealth or the means of production and exchange in the hands of few individuals or of a group.
- h) Ensure that suitable and adequate shelter, suitable and adequate food, reasonable national minimum wage, old age care, pension employment and sick benefits and welfare of the disabled are provided for all citizens.

(iii) Social Objectives

The government shall ensure that:-

- (a) all citizens without discrimination on any group, whatsoever have the opportunity for securing adequate means of livelihood as well as adequate opportunity to secure suitable employment;
- (b) conditions of work are just and human and that there are adequate facilities for leisure and for social, religious and cultural life;
- (c) the health safety and welfare of all persons in employment are safeguarded and not endangered or abused;
- (d) there are adequate medical and healthcare facilities for all persons.
- (e) There is equal pay for all persons without discrimination on account of sex or on any other ground whatsoever;
- (f) children, young persons and the aged are protected against any exploitation whatsoever and against moral and material neglect;
- (g) provision is made for public assistance in deserving cases or other conditions of need and
- (h) the evolution and promotion of family life is encouraged.

(iv) Educational Objectives

Government shall ensure that:-

- (1) there are equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels.
- (2) Government shall promote science.
- (3) Government shall strive to eradicate illiteracy and to this end, government shall as and when practicable provide;
 - a) free compulsory and universal primary education.
 - b) free secondary education.
 - c) free university education and

d) free adult literacy programme

(v) **Foreign Policy Objectives**

The foreign policy objectives shall be:

- a) Promotion and protection of the national interest.
- b) Promotion of African integration and support for African unity.
- c) Promotion of international co-operation for the consolidation of universal peace and mutual respect among all nations and elimination of decimation in all its ramifications.
- d) Respect for international laws and treaty obligations as well as the seeking of settlement of international disputes by negotiation, Mediation, conciliation, arbitration and adjudication and
- e) Promotion of a just world economic order.

(vi) **Cultural Objectives**

The state shall:

- a) protect, preserve and promote the Nigeria Cultures which enhance human dignity and are consistent with the information d fundamental objectives and
- b) Encourage development of technological and scientific studies which enhance cultural values.

(vii) **Environmental Objectives**

- (a) The state shall protect and improve the environment and safeguard the water, air, land, forest and wild life of Nigeria.

English Language and Democracy

Aboribo (2000), states that “democracy is derived from two Greek words ‘demos’ which means the ‘people’ and ‘Krateiri’ meaning ‘rule of’ or ‘by’. Therefore one can say that democracy is government of the people, for the people and by the people. He further asserts that persuasive strategies and audience analysis are very in communication and politics in particular. It is essential to understand that language plays important role in a democratic setting. To rule people effectively especially under a democratic dispensation, the ruler’s choice of words and persuasive language must appeal to the interest of the people. It is important to note that democracy is by far the most preferred and popular form of government in the world today. The developed world sees it as the best alternative to any other form of government. It has a very strong appeal for developing countries especially in Africa.

Challenges of English in a Democratic Society

Okafor and Ogude (2004) notes that English is the language of unity, education, commerce, justice, international trade, industry, politics, administration, and key to preserving our national and cultural values. In spite of the above mentioned roles of English the language is still faced with numerous challenges.

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Bdliya (2003), States that political and emotional controversies very often engulf the national assemblies during deliberations which poses serious threat to national unity. We recall the debate and controversies generated by the issue of the adoption of Hausa as a *langue Franca* for the nation. A national daily quoted a member of parliament thus, ‘parliament should be more careful about involving itself in the language tangle into which it is now being drawn. English is the adopted official language, the outward expression of all that unite the various people in the country. To seek to replace English with some Vernacular at a particular date line is asking for more than the greatest nationalist of them all can handle’. This brings to fore the problem of multilingualism in a democratic society.

The inarticulate use of English language by political office holders which sometimes degenerate to the use of the mother tongue and pidgin calls for concern. Though the statement by some politicians ‘English is not our language’ is not new, what is of great worry here is that such statement from politicians held in high esteem by the youths tend to have negative effect on the teaching and learning of English language.

Democracy and the desire of Political office holders to have their friends and relatives in positions of authority and lucrative jobs have succeeded in lowering standards in all facets of our national activities especially, in the teaching and learning of English language. Thus, standard is sacrificed at the alter of democracy and political affiliation in the admission of qualified students and recruitment of teachers and lecturers in secondary and tertiary institutions.

Conclusion

Although language is a unifying force, a rallying point for national and cultural integration, a vehicle for patriotism and solidarity, it could build or demolish a nation if not properly and carefully handled. Therefore the way forward for this nation in its quest for the sustenance of democracy and power is through language and efficient communication.

Recommendation

- (i) Political office holders should be mindful of standards in all our national activities especially in their choice of words and the use of English language.
- (ii) The question of orthography for most of our indigenous language and the production of more books in this area should be of immediate concern to the government.
- (iii) The Nigerian constitution should be simplified and translated into most of the existing indigenous languages. A document which is expected to guide the actions of the society and the government should be able to convey meaningful message to the grass-root in a simple language.

- (iv) Government can only achieve very little in a situation where it can not communicate effectively with the people because of the high level of illiteracy in the country. Therefore government should strive towards the attainment of the constitutional provision of free education at all levels for all Nigerians as this will boost national unity, patriotism and confidence in the government.

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