

FUNCTIONAL FRENCH AS AN ENTREPRENEURIAL BRIDGE TOWARDS ACHIEVING THE NATIONAL OBJECTIVE OF VISION 2020 IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Commerce is more lucrative when communication exist for business negotiations. One can not speak of entrepreneurship without reference to a functional language as a link between potential partners. This paper focuses on the bounties that come from rendering Nigerians more communicable in the French language. It looks at the national objectives of vision 2020 in Nigeria vis-à-vis the status of the French language in Nigeria in relation to her environs. It chronographs the Nigerian attitude cum policies from inception towards the language and recommends steps to remedying the ailing quarters.

Introduction

It is an observable fact that trade in the Republic of Benin, Togo and the Ivory Coast is dominated by Yoruba merchants. In Niger, Chad and Mali, Hausa traders hold sway while Igbo businessmen are at the centre of commerce in Cameroun, Central African Republic and Gabon among others. These businessmen are from regions in Nigeria in proximity to the Countries they trade in and dominate. This is a factor for consideration as Nigeria is entirely surrounded by francophone countries.

This prestigious economic position occupied by Nigerian businessmen is facilitated through acquired commendable proficiency in the French language. Many Nigerians sought for entrepreneurial golden fleece abroad especially in francophone countries as they are more in number and possess an economy directly connected to France, thereby the Euro- a major player currency in world economy.

No nation can solely exist as an island unto itself; therefore Nigeria by 2020 will be better importing and exporting whole businesses specifically in the French and the francophone market, thereby creating a wider and larger market for better job opportunities and more qualitative products which will inadvertently be the result of more competitive market. Nigerians will be better off as co-contributors rather than merely earning abroad as expatriates. All that is needed is the creation of a more linguistically friendly society, that embraces foreign investors and opens them up to the beauty of the Nigerian diversities where business do more than thrive but excel.

Nigeria as a nation could rake in tons of Foreign exchange via tourism alone, if the country is more open and sensitive in reeling-in French and Francophone nationals. Countless businesses in francophone countries in Africa depend already on Nigerian patronage what is needed is to take the advantage and the initiative.

The national objectives of vision 2020 in Nigeria are not in nature like the enigmatic statue of The Sphinx in Egypt- immovable and unfathomable as the average Nigerian is wont to think as he grins from ear to ear like the allegorical Cheshire cat in Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland". They are not riddles or puzzles whose implications must be demystified, rather these objectives are clearly spelt out in the declaration of the late Umaru Musa Yar'adua as "By 2020 Nigeria will be one of the

20 largest economies in the world able to consolidate its leadership role in Africa and establish itself as a significant player in the global economic and political arena.”

French Language vis-à-vis the Objectives of Vision 2020

All hands are needed on deck; both local and foreign expertise would be necessary towards achieving these objectives. In this wise, the late president on the 3rd of April 2009 solicited the support of the media in a four-day conference of all Nigerian editors in Kaduna, so as to ensure the achievements of the said objectives.

As much as one would like to agree with Mr. Moses Olubunmi Ajayi the erstwhile president of the Association of Professional Bodies of Nigeria (APBN) in his assertions in This Day of 23rd November, 2008 that “ No nation can develop effectively without the input of its local professionals. Unless the government resolves to use the services of highly qualified professionals, we are not going to make any headway.”

However, in a project of this magnitude and duration, the synergy of both foreign and local stakeholders is needed to bring about immeasurable success. There is a place and task for everyone and every vocation, French inclusive, if not for anything at least for consultations.

Realising the need for such synergy, Niger state government hosted the French ambassador to Nigeria and sought the support and collaboration of the French government in the development of the economy. Governor Mu’azu Babangida Aliyu went on to recognize the advantage that Niger state could have by neighbouring Francophone countries aside the bilateral considerations with France. According to him in This Day of 22nd April 2009 “Some schools in Niger state will be selected to study French language and culture...”

As a follow up to cashing in on this synergy, the governor has embarked on a major road project from Borgu Local Government Area in Niger state, into the Republic of Benin so as to establish major trade relations.

It’s all about globalisation, being a progressive indigene of the global village which the world has become. This is one of the factors that informed vision 2020- Nigeria does not want to be the retard or the never-do-well of the global community. Such gestures as that of the Governor should be a nationwide attitude towards achieving the national objectives of vision 2020 and not unproductive hostility and panic measures as the year 2020 approaches.

The overall target of vision 2020 is the Nigerian economy in which every sector and discipline are composites, French language study inclusive. Attaining the aforementioned objectives of vision 2020 in Nigeria through the entrepreneurial capacity of the French language is not like taking candies from a child, as there are exigencies in the attitude of an average Nigerian towards the acquisition of the language as well as in policy implementation among others.

Yet, there is a requisition for the French language to be given an important priority for the objectives of 2020 to be realised. Vanguard Newspaper of 25th September 2009, on the Federal Government’s unveiling of the draft document of the vision 2020 to stakeholders in Abuja, reported that the Federal Government declares that the document “represents the articulation of the nation’s collective aspirations as a nation...”

If this be so, then the collective aspirations of every Nigerian, sector and vocation is composed in the general national objectives of vision 2020, all that is required to see one’s relevance and benefits from the declaration. Even now, to access the francophone market, the Nigerian entertainment industry aka Nollywood experiences a new surge of French subtitles of its movies and

therefore collaborates with francophone speaking countries to attract a wider and more lucrative entertainment market.

How does a world class, one-to-twenty-ranking economic nation successfully do world class business and establish itself as a significant player in the global economic arena if it cannot communicate in the second most widely spoken language in the world? Again, how can Nigeria with a world class leadership role in Africa become a significant player in the global political arena, when most African countries are francophone and Nigeria is only francophone theoretically and not functionally? We must at this juncture recall history and bring to mind the great loss to the nation when Ex- President Olusegun Obasanjo in 1991 lost the prestigious United Nations' secretary-general position to the Egyptian diplomat Boutros Boutros Ghali, despite that the Ex-President met most criteria for the office, but inability to speak the French language was an obvious technical knock-out.

The on-going is food for thought; Nigeria would do better as a boy scout- being always prepared, than employing last minutes panic measures. Salaam (2006) submitted that "Today, France is one of the four biggest trading partners of Nigeria with not less than 150 French companies operating in Nigeria and almost every facet of the country's economy." Indeed, the need for proficiency in the French language of an average Nigerian cannot be over-emphasized.

Functionality and the French Language

According to Boulton (1960) "Man is the only creature that uses words intentionally and habitually." In business negotiations, words and whole sentences are used in languages common to both parties in order to arrive at a business understanding. The French language like any other requires certain levels of mastery so as to be useful in business. This is where the functionality of a language comes to play. It is easy to misinterpret the intentions and desires of a prospective business partner where there is inadequate knowledge of the language used. It's a "no brainer" that where the functionality of the language as a medium is short-changed, the business deal to be brokered, will subsequently fail.

Furthermore, Oluwale (2001) stated that "Languages differ in their functions, and the degree." He identified seven functions of languages in a country as group function, official, Language of Wider Communication (LWC), educational, religious, international, school subject. French language obviously fulfills all these functions, even religious, as many Nigerian churches and quranic schools dots the landscape of francophone neighbouring countries. Missionaries also have grown to realise the lucrateness of the language.

Is French Language a decent choice for a second official language towards achieving the national objectives of vision 2020 in Nigeria? In his book *Fore-runners of French in Nigeria*, Tunde (2004) stated four basic parameters used in the making of the choice of a foreign language. These are geographical contiguity, diplomatic advantages, technological advancements and global inter-dependence.

French as a language in Nigeria has been satisfying this requisite since the 60s, and modalities of its acquisition and entrenchment into Nigerian schools and society has been ever since.

The Attitude cum Policy Question

At this juncture, two questions come to mind:

- 1) What is the Nigerian attitude towards French language acquisition?
- 2) Has there ever been any known national policy on the French language?

French language's debut in the 60s was more of a fad amongst the enlightened; an exotic expression of civility in the elite social circle. It was also, amongst the general populace, a mere buzz that later became a short-lived craze. Aside the true visionaries and the pioneers, an average Nigerian then was not truly aware of the immense opportunities that come with the language acquisition.

In the 60s, French language struggled to feature in the secondary school curriculum for the first time. Once, it became the passion of teachers and students as a language to study. Contrarily, after the Nigerian civil war, students' interest in the language waned drastically, only for it to arise later, as a favorite amongst intellectuals, bureaucrats and politicians who continued to emphasize its advantages.

After the National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1977 and 1981, the status of the French language in the school curriculum became highly placed, especially in the 1998 NPE of the Late General Sani Abacha who declared French as the second official language in Nigeria. The blueprints for implementation had been drawn two years earlier.

Commenting on the attitude of Nigerian youths, towards the learning of the language, Oluwale (2001) wrote on Obanya (1977) as discovering that children tend to become increasingly hostile to the study of French as they progress through school, that they tend to question the utilitarian values of French. This being so because they lack adequate counseling and merely select their subjects without knowing the prospects of studying them. Unknown to them, majority of students that offer to study French realise the possibility and the predisposition to prestigious jobs like career diplomats, interpreters, personnel in multi- national companies and travel jobs like air hostesses among others.

More so, lukewarm and negative attitude towards the language truncates the implementation of the NPE in French language and causes neglect in the provision of necessary and adequate materials and teachers for the effective teaching of the language. Other attitudinal problems are unwarranted rivalries amongst professional bodies and conflicting interest between stake-holders and the Nigerian government. Nevertheless, the 4th edition of the 2004 NPE, section 1, number 10, item (b) states;

For smooth interaction with our neighbours, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria and it shall be compulsory in primary and Junior Secondary Schools, but Non- Vocational Electives at the Senior Secondary Schools.

It seems in recent times, the French language has finally sited its destination; it's elusive linguistic Holy Grail – the lofty vision since the 60s to render the average Nigerian French literate. Alas! The growing influence of the language on the Nigerian populace is more evident on the scholars. There is a significant increase in zeal with which Nigerian scholars are acquiring French Language proficiency which is comparable only to that with which they are getting computer literate. Indeed, there is a marked increase in the avidity to learn French language among literate Nigerians.

Conclusion

A people aspiring towards an enduring financial progress and world- class economic development knows better than to transgress the law of communication in global business partnership. One always gets a better bargain in business when negotiations are made in the language common to both parties. It is always relieving and refreshing to hear another speak one's language. Being a code

of a sort, language can be a barrier that poses threat to a nation's economic development especially when one is linguistically isolated from highly prospective neighbours.

Recommendations

The following exist as recommendations towards obtaining lasting solutions to the problems that bedevil the acquisition of the French language thereby the objectives of vision 2020 in Nigeria;

- A relentless nationwide awareness should be created on the importance and lucrativeness of the French language via various mass media.
- There should be a marked increase in government's positive disposition towards ensuring and monitoring of the NPE provision's implementation of the language.
- The government should sponsor a comprehensive research work on the French language education at all levels in order to have credible and reliable data on the nature of the problems facing the language and their solutions (i.e. the journey so far...)
- Joint efforts of stake-holders and individuals towards better literature and text publications for both teachers' and students' use is also recommended.
- Better inter- professional bodies collaboration towards the promotion and the propagation of the language is recommended rather than the seeming petty rivalries.
- For better teachers' training and students' learning, a more extensive funding and provision of much needed materials through the Nigerian and French Government is recommended.

Finally, if the above recommendations are adopted and fully observed, functional French as an entrepreneurial bridge towards achieving the national objectives of vision 2020 in Nigeria, becomes a sure bet.

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