AN OVER-VIEW OF MULTILINGUALISM AS AN INDIVIDUAL OR SOCIAL PHENOMENON IN A SOCIETY WITH A MULTIPLICITY OF LANGUAGES

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Abstract

Multilingualism is the ability of an individual to speak multiple languages. It is a result or a form of language contact, and it arises in societies where different languages co-exist in specific patterns. It is the current linguistic phenomenon in almost all the regions of the world. Nigeria is a good example of a multilingual nation. Cernoz and Gorter (2011) describe multilingualism as a social phenomenon with aspects to its study: (i) Individual versus social dimensions, (ii) the number of languages involved, and (iii) the level of proficiency in the different languages. According to Clyne (2007), the term "Multilingualism" can refer to either the use or the competence of an individual in different languages or to the language situations in an entire nation or society. It means using more than one language or having "Competence in more than one language". This allows for further refinement in the actual description to cover different levels of use of the various languages. Sociologists have often viewed multilingualism from three perspectives namely; (i) the social (ii) the individual/personal perspectives, and (iii) the interactional. Clyne (2007), proposes a distinction between "official" and "de facto" multilingualism. For instance, Switzerland is an officially multilingual nation in that it has been declared such, but there, multilingualism is based on a territorial principal. Public documents are written in German, French and Italian. Multilingualism, according to Romanine (2003:), "exists within the cognitive systems of individuals, as well as in families, communities, and countries---". However, the paper is focused on "An over-view of multilingualism as an individual or social phenomenon in a society with a multiplicity of languages (such as Nigeria) at various stages of development.

For pedagogical reasons, the writer attempts a morphemic analysis of the word "Multilingualism". "**Multi** a prefix, which means, to combine, form or have many, and **lingual** (which means related to language) Multilingualism, therefore, is the ability of an individual to speak multiple (or many) languages". This predominantly is as a result or form of language contact and it arises in societies, where different languages co-exist in specific patterns. It is the current linguistics phenomenon globally. In other words many nations for some fundamental factors now fit into multilingual classification. Nigeria is a good example of a multilingual nation because, according to Ethnologue, she has more than 500 languages.

However, Baker (2006:) opines that several overlapping and interacting variables have made the definition less specific, "elusive and ultimately impossible".

It is important to make a distinction between "de jure" and "de facto". Multilingualism, for instance, Switzerland is a de facto multilingual nation because it has been officially declared as such. However, Switzerland is a de jure multilingual nation, because there is no legal document or formal certification to establish this specific concept. Public documents are presented in German, French and Italian.

However, the writer focuses his paper presentation on An Over-View of Multilingualism as an individual or social phenomenon in a society with a multiplicity of

languages (such as Nigeria) at various stages of development.
He highlights the following subheadings:
- Definition of the concept
- Historical antecedents or patterns
- Factors that contribute to multilingualism
- Differentiating between bilingualism and multilingualism
- Levels of multilingualism
- Advantages and challenges of multilingualism

Definition of the Concept
Multilingualism can be defined in different ways. But simply put, it refers to the ability to use more than two languages. Kachru (1985:) describes multilingualism as the "linguistic behaviour of the members of a speech community which alternately uses two, three or more languages depending on the situation and function. "It can refer to either the language use, the competence of an individual to use multiple languages or the language situation in an entire nation or society (Clyne P.2003).
Bilingualism means the ability to use two or more languages effectively. For instance in the South African context, until 1994, bilingualism meant being able to speak English and Afrikaans fluently. Generally, two types of bilingualism are distinguished:- societal and individual bilingualism. Societal bilingualism occurs when in a given society, two or more languages are spoken. In this sense, nearly all societal are bilingual, but they can be different with regards to the degree or the form of bilingualism.
A basic distinction between bilingualism and multilingualism is at the individual and society levels. At the individual level, bilingualism and multilingualism or proficiency in the use of two languages, (bilingualism) and multiple languages, (multilingual). Multilingualism is generally subsumed under "bilingualism". At the societal level, the terms bilingualism and multilingualism refer to the use of two or numerous languages in a speech community. It does not imply that all the speakers in that community are competent in more than one language (Durk et al, 2005)

Historical Antecedents or Patterns
It is impossible to understand societal multilingualism fully without sufficient understanding of the historical patterns that led to its existence, acknowledging the premise that a particular multilingual society usually presents, and consists of several historical patterns at the same time. Fasold (1984) opines that four of these patterns are desirable, although they are not mutually exclusive. They are:
*Migration
*Imperialism
*Federation
*Border area multilingualism
Adegbijia (2004:) cites certain events in the Nigerian history that are particularly central to charting the nations sociolinguistic image. These events also have connections to language policies, functions and uses. They are: (i) European contacts: The Portuguese who came to trade; (ii) Christian missionary activities the Missionaries that came to spread the gospel and they also introduced western education in the form of reading, writing, arithmetic, and gardening. They contributed a lot to the multilingual phenomenon, especially through their studies on indigenous languages and the devising of orthographies for them. (iii) The 19th century Fulani Jihad and it's impact on Islamic fundamentalism and on the entrenchment of Arabic, especially in the northern parts of Nigeria; (iv) The administrative and educational policies of different governments over the years: this is more pronounced particularly when government discard policies and implementations initiated by previous governments; (v) The establishment of

educational institutions and language related professional bodies and agencies, such as CESAC, NINLAN. (vi) The 1966 Jacobs Report on English language teaching in Nigeria. (vii) The making of language related legal and constitutional provisions. (viii) The 1960 independence. (ix) The diachronic political fluidity and instances of the adjustments.

Factors that Contribute to Multilingualism

To Canox and Gorter (2011); the birth and growth of multilingualism can be the result of different factors. These factors could be colonialism, imperialism, migration, increasing communication among countries around the world and the need to be competent in the language of wider communication. Others are social and cultural interests for the maintenance and revival of minority languages, the inclusion of foreign languages as part of the curricula in many countries, and religious movements or pilgrimages, as well as itinerancy, which allow people to move from one country to another.

Durk et al (2005) also enumerates the following as other factors.

* **Historical or political movements such as imperialism or colonialism**. In this case, the use of a language is spread to other countries and this results in the coexistence of different languages.

* **Economic interests which result in migration**- The weak economic of some nations result in the movement of the population to other countries thus, giving birth to the development of multilingual and multi cultural communities in host countries.

* **Increasing communications among different parts of the world and the need to be competent in languages of wider communication-** This is the case with the development of new technologies and science. English is the main language of wider communication and millions of people who use other languages as well use it.

* **Social and cultural identity and the desire for the maintenance and revival of minority languages**. This interest creates situations in which two or more languages co-exist and are essential in everyday communication.

* **Education:** Second and foreign languages are part of the curricula in many countries.

* **Religious movements:** As a result of this, people move from their formal locations to new locations.

So, in addition to the above factors, English is eventually found as the major medium of communication in Nigeria, and it is particularly a medium of interethnic communication. Nigeria, is a multiethnic nation characterized by acute/dense multilingualism. It therefore has to grapple with the challenges of multi-ethnicity and multilingualism.

English is the official language of the nation for it's national cohesion, the language of education, a school subject, and a core subject of every level, from the primary school to the tertiary, as stipulated in the National Policy on Education (NPE 1977,1981, and 2004). It is a language of creative writing including the Nigerian film industry, administration, science and Technology, commerce, international trade and foreign relations and so on. However, Bamgbose (1985) writes that despite the functions of English in Nigeria it is a minority language considering its numerical strength that is the population of its speakers. This is as a result of the high level of illiteracy in the English language.

Differentiating between Bilingualism and Multilingualism

A basic distinction between bilingualism and multilingualism is recognizable at the individual and societal level. At the individual level, bilingualism and multilingualism refers to the speaker's competence to use two or more languages. At

the societal level, the terms "bilingualism "and "multilingualism" refer to the use of two or more languages in a speech community and it does not necessarily imply that all the language users in that community are competent in more than two languages. Bilingualism can be additive (in case where speakers learn more languages) or subtractive in case where a speaker no longer uses one or more languages.

Multilingualism can be described in two ways as societal/ national and individual multilingualism. Clyne (2007) asserts that societal/national multilingualism is created by contextual factors such as international migration (as in Argentina or the U.S), colonialism, (for example, in Nigeria or Kenya) and international border between Federal Republic of Nigeria and Republic of Benin). Fishman (1978) posits that "societal multilingualism is in many respects the foundation field out of which all of the sociology of language grows and ramifies" because it provides easiest access to the idea of inter-work as variation in language usage and in behavior directed toward language". Fishman's definition establishes diversity as a core notion of the society of language.

Levels of Multilingualism

The levels of multilingualism are basically divided into individual multilingualism and societal multilingualism. The existence of several languages shows that Africa is a multilingual continent. Most countries in Africa are multilingual and their citizens are at least bilingual. However while some countries could be multilingual, its citizens may not be bilingual. An example is Morocco, which tried to be a monolingual nation despite its multilingual nature. Individual multilingualism is subsumed under bilingualism because it is perceived that not many people in the world are habitually multilingual or use more than two languages. Ethnologue (Gordon.2005) claims that there are 6,912 languages in the word today and some of

these languages are varieties or dialects of certain languages.

Continent	Language	Count Percent
Africa	2,092	30.3
America	1,002	14.5
Asia	2,269	32.8
Europe	239	3.5
Pacific	1,310	19.0
Total	**6,912**	**100.0**

Advantages and Challenges of Multilingualism

There are varying opinions about multilingualism as asset or liability in a nation. For example, Ngubane (2003) argues ''multilingualism is not a problem. It is a resource'' He states with optimism, ''multilingualism-----in South Africa will afford individuals great opportunities; to make choices, opportunities to be empowered and opportunities to be educated ''. It is believed that the implementation of well –managed multilingualism in South Africa would influence the economic, social, educational, political and personal growth of Individuals.

Official multilingualism aims to foster respect for language rights and linguistic diversity, and to promote national unity. National unity cannot be forged through dominance of one language by another such dominance could lead to social tension and even violence, as history has indeed shown. Respecting, accepting, and accommodating the language preference of individuals will contribute more to national unity than official monolingualism (Ngubane, 2003).

Webb (in Ngubane, 2003) has identified four language –based problems that would be solved by multilingualism. These are restricted access to knowledge and skills, low productivity and ineffective performance in the workplace, inadequate political participation by the public resulting in manipulation, discrimination, and exploitation by ruling

powers which contribute to national division and conflict, and linguistic and cultural alienation. Thus, multilingualism is advantageous in the following ways:

* It gives status to ethnic and local community languages.

* It enables children to maintain links with their cultural backgrounds and develop a close relationship with their past.

* It increase people's employment opportunities in the modern world

* It facilitates access to the curriculum and to learning in school.

* It is a unifying factor. For example, in Nigeria, English unifies the multilingual and multicultural groups in the country because it is the official medium of instruction which ensures communication which between different linguistic and cultural groups.

* It provides children and adults with the opportunity to share in a wide range of intercultural experiences such as literature, entertainment, religion and interests.

The Challenges of Multilingualism

(i) It is divisive in the sense that people who do not speak the same language harbor suspicion about others.

(ii) Arriving at a mutually acceptable language policy, particularly with reference to allocation of functions will likely create disaffection.

(iii) There are usually problems of logistics, survey and implementation of language policies.

(iv) How to classify and handle minority language so that they do not suffer language death requires a lot of resources, foresight maturity and sacrifice.

(v) It can easily be manipulated for political or religious purposes.

Conclusion

This work has helped to give out in brief, what multilingualism as a concept means. The paper concentrated on "An over - view of multilingualism as an individual or society with a multiplicity of languages. The writer lucidly out lined his discuss with the subheadings as thus:

✓ Definition of the concept.

✓ Historical antecedents or patterns.

✓ Factors that contributes to multilingualism.

✓ Differentiating between bilingualism and multilingualism.

✓ Level of multilingualism and finally advantages and challenges of multilingualism.

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