

Promoting Language Identity in Africa

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Abstract

Language plays an important role in creating coercion which has led to national development in Nigeria and Africa in general. Languages are a vehicle that can be used to promote and preserve cultural identities in a multicultural setting. Languages can also be used to preserve the mother tongue which leads to self-identification in a particular setting. English language has been at the forefront in bringing together intellectuals from different cultural background. These nationalistic tribes in the Nigerian context come together to share ideas and discuss national issues which are geared towards national development; the only language that is spoken when people come together to discuss national issues or at the federal level is the English language which is the official language used in the nation and internationally. This is paper therefore recommends among others that the national linguistic policy that promotes the use of mother tongue at some level of education as well as the promotion of English language should be put in place in order to promote language identities in Africa as a whole.

Keywords: cultural identities; language policy, mother tongue and language identity.

Introduction

Language has been widely studied and acclaimed as the most invaluable human endowment which is indispensable in all spheres of life. Crystal (2012) conceptualized it as having, perhaps, “magical and mystical” and “unique role in capturing the breath of human thought and endeavours”. In view of this, certain functions have been identified, among others, through a progressive expansion and application of such works as Edward Sapir, Benjamin Wharf and others on the relationship between

language and thought. The famous Sapir-Wharf hypothesis of “linguistic determinism” and “linguistic relativity”, which give significant insights into the nature of and the relationship between language and thought, is a living development. Such relationship clearly shows that language is the vehicle for thought.

When the African countries gained independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s, they were confronted with three challenges, namely: to bring unity to the many and diverse semi-autonomous ethnic groups in the new nations, to forge sovereignty and national identity, and to build developed and modern states. The most crucial challenge was how to forge national identity and nationhood in a state of multilingual and multicultural diversity in each of the new states. Using the Optimal Language Policy Model, this study examines, in particular, the challenge of forging a national identity in a state of multilingualism or linguistic diversity.

The African continent is characterised by the abundance of languages and cultures. According to Heine and Nurse (2000), Africa is a continent with not only the highest number of languages, but also the most complex ethno cultural diversity in the world. Africa harbours over 2,200 languages and has an average of 40 languages per country. Thus, almost one-third of the world's languages are found in the continent. Each of these languages constitutes a semi-autonomous cultural group, with its own ethnic identity. Although multilingualism is seen as a resource, it is a formidable challenge if it is not well managed.

When most African countries gained their independence from colonial rule in the late 1950's and early 1960's, they were driven by a strong sense of nationalism. The aspirations of the new states included three important needs that Fishman (2000, 2013) has referred to as unification, authenticity, and modernity. Each of the new states needed to unify the many diverse ethnic groups, which constituted semi-autonomous ethno linguistic entities within its boundary; an identity of that distinguished it from other sovereign nations; and to develop and become part of the modern world in both the socio-economic and technological spheres.

It is clear from the foregoing that one of the major tasks that the newly independent states faced was how to forge national identities, as sovereign states, from inappropriate colonial legacies. As it is well known, British colonial rule was based on the principle of divide and rule, so as to weaken any resistance tendencies. Conversely, French and Portuguese rule was based on metropolitan assimilation, in which the colonised subjects became part of the ruler's culture and way of life, at expense of their own identities (Bamgbose, 1991).

National Identity in the Newly Independent States

Given the aspirations which the newly independent states craved for, namely, uniting the many and diverse semi-autonomous ethnic groups, dismantling colonial legacies and forging socio-economic development, the states realized that the challenges that they faced would be difficult to surmount. In view of this, they sought different strategies of creating their national identities, such as using ex-colonial languages, which were considered neutral, as national languages or popularising majority language in order to make them national languages.

National identity has been defined as a feeling of togetherness in a nation and as a possession of shared common and distinctive features that distinguish a nation from others (Bhugra, 2014). The most distinctive features, which may bring a nation together, include common ancestry and history, common heritage and traditions, common language and culture, identical names and personal traits and shared ethnicity (Bhugra, 2014). Unfortunately, most of these features were not present in the newly independent states, due to their multilingual and multicultural nature. As a result, they were obligated to determine new features of national identity.

Identity

African countries also found language to be an important feature in forging national identity (Bamgbose, 1991; Janson & Tsonope, 2021; Whiteley, 1969). In fact, in recent years, the African Union, through its linguistic arm, the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN), has paid more attention to the question of language as an instrument of integration, communication, and development (ACALAN, 2002). This

is because of the following reasons:

Language is one of the most sensitive features in any society, as it is a conspicuous social entity;

A common language allows participation of all citizens in national affairs without excluding anyone. Hence, it promotes democracy and equality;

The use of a common language forges national identity by bringing all citizens together, through communication, interaction and solidarity.

Obviously, most African countries endeavored to choose either an implicit or explicit language policy method. Some countries, such as Zimbabwe, South Africa and Namibia went as far as enshrining these policies in their constitutions, but most countries were contented with official decrees or government statements (Batibo, 2015).

African languages and development

According to Ethnologue, 1/3 of the world languages are spoken in Africa (2199). Most of these languages are spoken by less than 10,000 and lack documentation. Todorov and Smith (2003), hold that development is focused on the economy, which is the ability to generate and provide successful gross national product of about 5%-7%. According to Mountjay (2021), development is “the path towards the maximization of goods and service per head.

Language and culture are very useful aspects of development. Chebanne, et al (2017) see development as an “enhancement of personality where the crucial issues are distinct identity, self-confidence, creative ability, an ability to face the world with purpose, poise and pride. The South Commission 1990, in Robinson (1990) sees development as “*a process which enables potential, builds self-confidence and realizes lives in dignity and fulfillment*» There are four pillars to a nation's development as indicated by Nforbi (2012). They include Politico-judicial, economic, intellectual and educational.

The role of language in the development process is crucial. In Cameroon,

Chumbow, Tadadjeu, Mba, and Nforbi (2019) amongst others have expanded on these. Elsewhere, Nforbi, (2012), have indicated the indispensable role of language in the development process in Africa. Chimhundu (2003) confirms that language is at the heart of a people's culture and hence decisive in cultural socio-cultural development.

The correlation between the use of foreign languages as the official language and underdevelopment in Africa is highlighted by Kishes (2003). In confirming this view, Mazuri posed this question “*can any country approximate first rank economic development if it relies overwhelmingly on foreign languages for its discourse on development and transformation?*” China has emerged powerfully and its language is invading the world through the institute Confucius which is now in about 480 countries of the world.

Language Policies in Africa as a Reflection of National Identity Strategies

African countries have used national language policies as a tool in forging national identities. Unfortunately, the types of choices they made have not always been based on the optimal national language policy model, but, rather, on the prevailing linguistic ecology, socio-political orientation and the impact of colonial legacies. This study has identified six language policies that have been used by African countries. They are as follows:

Adoption of the status quo language policy: These are countries that chose to maintain the colonial legacy by maintaining the ex-colonial language as both official and national language. They are mostly Francophone and Lusophone countries, which are the result of colonial assimilation system. Such countries have tended to identify themselves with the metropolitan countries;

Exclusive language policy: These are countries that chose a dominant lingua franca and made it the sole national language, at the expense of other local languages. This policy tends to marginalize minority languages. Therefore, true democracy, equality, and human rights (Bamgbose, 2000; Skutnab-Kangas & Phillipson, 2015) are

compromised;

Partially exclusive language policy: These are countries that selected a few major languages and made them national languages, at the expense of minority languages. Again, the excluded languages are marginalized;

Inclusive language policy: These are countries that decided to promote all languages and make them languages of administration and education. Although this process is costly, countries that have adopted this policy have ensured that all people participate and have equal access to national affairs, including education and local administration;

Hierarchical language policy: These are countries that have chosen a hierarchical system of language use, depending on the status and importance of each language. This has also ensured that each language is used in public to meet the speakers' needs;

Isolation language policy: These are countries that chose to promote only one or several indigenous language at the expense of the ex-colonial language, which was considered a remnant of colonialism.

Countries that took this line of action were usually led by the socialist ideology of considering ex-colonial languages as tools of imperialism. All these countries have now reversed their policies. The preferred national language policies, among African countries, have usually been those that would involve least costs, such as adopting the *status quo* or promoting one dominant language, in an *exclusive language* policy, even where this would exclude the minority languages.

The Identity Crisis in Language Education in Africa

According to SIL (2015), when language and cultural identities are not well handled, they manifest in strange forms and manifestations which could be political, social, economic or philosophical. Whatever the case, they end up in crisis. When people focus on studying their languages especially through language committees, the following examples can be seen.

1-The society finds a reason to identify with each other, invest energy, time, and researches on development, read, understand, translate and enjoy their language and environment. If each of the 280 language communities employs just 10 people a year, we have 2800 employments which will be useful to the population. When people discover themselves and see what riches they have in their communities and start exploiting them, the following advantages are present.

- 1- They will not look up to national governments for jobs creation.
- 2- The rural urban exodus will reduce. Active youths who get involved in the language industry in their villages will soon discover the riches of the village. The rich soil and its products, the fruits, crops and the rich natural resources will be exploited. They will learn their cultures and participate in national development.
- 3- This will reduce the forced migrations we know in the world. If each language committee recruits the number of people proposed, then within twenty years, millions of African youths will be recruited by its communities in the language and cultural industries alone.
- 4- Political tensions at the national level will be reduced as many people get to focus on the local communities.
- 5- This will give meaning to the traditional and decentralized authorities. The functions of the traditional authorities are gradually disappearing. If traditional authorities remain the main custodians of our languages and cultures, each traditional palace is supposed to host a language and cultural centre where the community contributes to its development. The councils already have a budget for languages in their communities. The cultural development associations and the elitist village movements are supposed to sponsor language and cultural activities in their villages.

Conclusion

Although national identity is shaped by many features, language is the most central feature of identity because of its sensitivity and conspicuous nature. African countries have used different language policies in order to forge their national identities. The degree of success of these policies has depended on how successful they have brought unity, cohesion and

democracy, and enabled citizens to participate in their country's affairs. The most ideal language policies have proved to be the inclusive and hierarchical since they involve all or part of the crucial public domains of the countries' languages. These are helping to ensure democracy, equality and, once again, the participation of all citizens in their countries' affairs (Bamgbose, 2000). In fact, if the (southern) African countries can succeed in forging their national identities, it would be easier for the African continent to form a solid and sustainable African identity (ACALAN, 2002).

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions drawn by the paper the following recommendations have been towards promoting language identity in Africa:

- i. African countries should develop very friendly national identity language policies and programmes as this will enhance balance development in countries concerned.
- ii. Education policies that will promote mother tongue at some level of education as well as the promotion of English language identities in all countries in Africa should be implemented throughout Africa.

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