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PATH TO NIGERIAN POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

LANGUAGE AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

BY

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INTRODUCTION

Language is one of the natural phenomena that have made man in society more meaningful, functional and dynamic. The nation that would not have been grossly miserable if language had not been a part of its natural endowment to man which has enabled him to communicate, co-operate and take firm control of his environment. Therefore, the place of language in the life of man cannot in any way be faulted.

National development, be it social, economic, educational or political has language as its cornerstone. It is really misleading to talk of national development without reference to language. It is for this reason, understanding that this chapter is designed to dwell on the place of language in national development. Among other things, we shall be looking at the origin and nature of language and its characteristics in the first instance. We shall also discuss language situation in Nigeria and the place of language in national development.

THE ORIGIN AND NATURE OF LANGUAGE

Hitherto, there has not been any concrete evidence showing the origin of language. However, there have been a number of speculations regarding origin of language. For instance, the various suspected sources of language as the divine source, the natural sound source, gesture source etc. These sources, when critically examined, are found wanting in one aspect or the other. For instance, "the natural sound source" speculates "that primitive words could have been imitation of the natural sounds which early man and woman heard around them (Yule, 1985:2). Although this speculation relates to the onomatopoeic

usages as could be found in the present-day languages, the percentage of such onomatopoeic words in some languages is insignificant and therefore inadequate to be considered the source of language.

Based on this circumstance, the suitable answer to the question of the origin of language is in the words of Yule (1985:1) which state:

*We simply do not know how language originated.
We do know that spoken language developed well
before written language. Yet, when we uncover traces
of human life on earth dating back half a million years,
we never find any direct evidence relating to the speech
of distant ancestors.*

Language is an embodiment of organized vocal sounds employed conventionally for communicative purposes. Language is conventional because the association of the organized vocal sounds with the external world is largely by convention. In addition, it is appropriate to say that language is systematic because the different units of language are arranged in such a systematic manner that one gives rise to a higher unit. In English Language, for instance, morpheme begets word, words give rise to phrase, with phrases clause is formed and clauses culminate into sentences. Although every language is organised and systematic, no two languages share exactly the same system or organisational pattern.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF HUMAN LANGUAGE.

Given the purpose language serves (communication), it should not be restricted to human beings because other creatures such as animals and bees have their peculiar way of communication which could also be regarded as language. However, human language differs from animal or bee language because of its inherent features. The features include:

1. **Speech:** For anything to be considered a human language, it must be spoken. Although writing is a component of language, it is not given primary consideration as speech. The reason is that writing is a mark of literacy and there are several primitive communities whose languages have not been committed into writing.

2. **Arbitrary:** In human language there is no logical relationship between an object and the name ascribed to it. In English, for instance, if the word "book" had been used to refer to "house", the native speakers of English would have accepted it.
3. **Specie-specific:** Although we have earlier stated that other creatures have their peculiar way of communication, theirs cannot be regarded as absolute language. It is so because evidence available shows that only human beings are capable of using language. All attempts to teach animals human language have proved abortive.
4. **Systematic:** Another characteristic of language is that it is systematic. The systematic feature of language could be seen from the hierarchical arrangements of the various units that make it up. In English, for instance, the vocal sounds are arranged into morphemes, morphemes into words, words into groups/phrases, groups/phrases into clauses and clauses into sentences.
5. **Displacement:** By displacement as a characteristic of language, we mean that human language can be used to refer to an object or event in the past, present or even future. It is possible to talk about anything even when that thing or event is not currently in progress or present.
6. **Medium of Social Interaction:** Language is the primary medium of social interaction. What this simply means is that human beings interact mainly by means of the spoken word or its symbolic representation. This feature of language has made human existence more meaningful and dynamic.

LANGUAGE SITUATION IN NIGERIA

A survey of the language situation in Nigeria shows that Nigeria is a multilingual speech community. By this we mean that several languages exist side by side in Nigeria. Going by the available records, about 400 indigenous languages exist in Nigeria (Elugbe, 1990:11, Jovitt, 1991:9). Three of the languages, Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba are outstanding. They represent the three major tribes in Nigeria.

The complex linguistic set up in Nigeria was made worse by the advent of colonialism which added yet another language to the existing ones – this time, the English Language. For obvious reasons, the English Language became the official language of Nigeria, the existence of the indigenous languages notwithstanding. This development was received with mixed feelings. From one angle it is a blessing in that it is an instrument of unification of the divergent ethnic groups in Nigeria. Also, the acquisition of western education, which is the bedrock for national development, is made possible through the use of the English Language. In view of these developments, the English Language assumed a leadership role and as a result attracted more attention and patronage by Nigerians. The consequence is that today, the indigenous languages are not only relegated to the background but also looked upon as being inferior to the English Language.

The negative implications of this development are far reaching. For one thing, it places a very big question mark on Nigerian independence and nationhood. Secondly, it makes the issue of national language, which is a symbol of identity and oneness to continue to be elusive.

The discussion on the language situation in Nigeria cannot be exhausted without mentioning the existence of some foreign languages. Such foreign languages include French, German, Spanish, Portuguese etc. Although these languages do not enjoy official backing and patronage by the government, they are taught and learnt in some of our educational institutions, at secondary and tertiary levels. In some universities in Nigeria today, there is department of Modern European Languages where some of these foreign languages are taught. The beneficiaries of the foreign language programmes have found themselves being relevant in some international gathering. Some serve as interpreters when the need arises.

THE PLACE OF LANGUAGE IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

According to Ayo Bamgbose, (1981)

National development is usually described in terms of economic growth, attainment of economic targets, growth rate, increases in Gross

National Product (GNP) or Gross Domestic Product (GDP), rise in per capita income, etc.

Elugbe (1990:14) in his own opinion states that:

national development refers to the growth of the nation in terms of unity, education, economic well being, mass participation in government, etc.

Based on their individual opinions, Bamgbose and Elugbe seem to have agreed that national development could be seen in terms of economic growth, educational advancement, political awareness and national unity. For the purpose of our discussion here, we shall adopt Bamgbose and Elugbe's views as our working definition of national development.

With regard to the place of language in national development, it is not an overstatement to state that language is an indispensable tool in national development. It is based on this understanding that J.F Wallwork (1969:6) argued that:

No language no history. Technology and science may control environment, but they too rest upon language and the passing of information and commend whether the language takes the form of complex mathematical symbols, or abbreviated jargon, or highly complex sentences.

The acquisition of education, whether formal, informal or traditional, is made possible by language. It is in recognition of this fact that the federal government in the National Policy on Education published in 1977 stated categorically the role of language in education. The document among other things states:

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 best interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother tongue.

The document goes further to state that "the language of instruction in the

primary school should be initially the child's mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community and at a later stage English".

Literacy, which is one of the end products of education that is made manifest in the use of language, has been found to promote development. The UNESCO'S findings have revealed that there is correlation between illiteracy and poverty. For instance, in developing countries where per capita income is low, illiteracy rate is usually high. When people are literate, it becomes easier to mobilize them towards national development. A literate farmer, for instance, will no doubt appreciate the use of modern technology (including the use of fertilizer) in farming. Literate people are usually alive to their civic responsibilities – observance of the law of the land, payment of taxes, effective participation in political activities, etc. They would also be in better position to appreciate the government and its activities since they can have access to the media-both print and electronic.

Natioanal integration is very much significant to national development. In Nigerian situation where there are several ethnic groups with their different languages, national development would have been elusive if the heterogenous ethnic groups are not integrated both at the ethnic level and national level. This is so because

differences between indigenous languages keep the people apart, perpetuate ethnic hostilities, weaken national loyalties and increase the danger of seperatist sentiment (Schwarz, 1965:39).

There is no gain-saying the fact that it is the English Language that has neutralized the consequences of the existence of several distinct indigenous languages as stated above. Today, it is possible for an Igbo man to interact and transact business with his Yoruba counterpart. It is based on this positive contribution of the English language that Afolayan (1984) stated that:

It is unrealistic for anybody in Nigeria today to think that national unity can be forged in the country without recourse to the utilization of the English Language.... It has been the language of its politico-economic unification and administration....

It is grossly inadequate to talk of national development without a corresponding political development. In Nigerian context, language has gone a very long way in enhancing the attainment and sustenance of democracy. When we talk of democracy and mass participation in governance, language, both indigenous and non-indigenous is very crucial.

It is through language that the government reaches the governed. Also, the business of law making in a democratic dispensation is made possible by language. The government recognizes the role of language in this direction and made provision for it in the 1979 Federal Republic of Nigeria Constitution. Section 51 of the constitution states:

The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, Ibo, Hausa and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made

For the State Houses of Assembly, Section 91 of the same constitution states:

The House of Assembly shall be conducted in English but the house may in addition to English conduct the business of the house in one or more other language spoken in the state as the House may by resolution approve.

Mass media, both print and electronic are essential ingredient in national development. This is why the government at all times and at all levels invest much on mass media. It is through the mass media that the governments create awareness and publicise their activities and programmes to the masses. On the other hand, the masses reach the government through the mass media. From all indications, mass media is a function of language. No language no mass media.

CONCLUSION

In view of our discussions above, it is pertinent to conclude that meaningful national development in terms of education, economy, politics and culture cannot be attained in the absence of language. Therefore, if language must play this

role expected of it in the area of national development, the government should embark on meaningful development of the indigenous languages. In the words of Ehugbe (1990:14) "Democracy, which is our goal, cannot truly exist where only an elitist few (in this case speakers of English) can participate".

Machinery should be set in motion for the realization of the hitherto elusive national language. The existence of national language in Nigeria would integrate the country the more and foster national unity.

Granted, the English Language has helped a great deal in propagating western education as well as achieving national integration, the Nigerian political independence and nationhood would stand to be questioned if the English Language is adopted the national language of Nigeria.

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