

TRANSFORMATION OF NIGERIA THROUGH INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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Abstract

Transformation is a fundamental shift in the deep orientation of a person, an organization or a nation. This makes the person concerned to see the world in new ways and new actions that were impossible before the transformation become possible. The paper aimed at showing the importance of indigenous languages in the development and transformation of a nation, citing examples with developed nations such as Russia, China and Germany. These nations were able to develop because they did not neglect their indigenous languages. In order for Nigeria to be positively transformed it has to pay more attention to codifying its languages(developing orthographies, dictionaries and grammar).The indigenous speakers of the languages should change their negative attitudes and help the government to develop the languages. The educational language policy should be enforced; the learning and use of these languages should not stop at the primary level but continue up to the tertiary level. Technological and scientific terms should be translated into the various languages to make teaching and learning easier.

Keywords: Transformation, indigenous, languages, codifying

Introduction

Transformation is a fundamental shift in the deep orientation of a person, an organization or a nation. This makes the person concerned to see the world in new ways and new actions and results that were impossible before the transformation become possible (Alebiosu, 2013). National transformation implies fundamental changes of a nation, change in the social, economic infrastructural and landscape of a nation.

One of the most important steps to national transformation is the ability to create and communicate vision. A vision is a mental picture of a desired future. Vision helps to direct the change that drives our action. Therefore, it is important to communicate a vision clearly. In order to visualize a new world or country that is possible, one needs to use every vehicle possible to build people that are interested in the mission.

Education for national transformation

Education unlocks a society's potential. The energies and talents of the society is the greatest resource that is needed for national transformation. Education is a potent vehicle for national transformation. The society can realize its intellectual potential, develop its ability and follow its aspirations. Education broadens

opportunities and builds capabilities to determine the kind of future any nation wants to have. A nation's future socio-economic success will depend on the ability of its people to deal with global environment that is knowledge driven. Education is the key to sustainable transformation. The Nigeria transformation agenda needs to be pursued with full commitment. In view of the centrality to the consolidation of democracy and development in Nigeria, the Goodluck administration brought a development strategy called the transformation agenda that will last for four years (2011-2015). The policy aims at improving on the crucial aspects of the Nigerian people. Nigeria's transformation agenda is the developmental strategy of the president that aims at bringing about positive change in the life of Nigerian people. The policy plans to deal with the problem of good governance, insecurity, power, unemployment, education, health care delivery, and road the agenda is the developmental strategy of President Goodluck Jonathan that aim at bringing about a positive change in the life of Nigerian people. It is the blueprint of the Jonathan's administration for the socio-economic and political development of Nigeria. The transformation agenda is also tailored toward achieving the vision 20:2020 of the country.

Nigeria is expected by year 2020 to be among the top 20 largest economies in the world.

Events have shown that the active participation and use of indigenous languages by the people have not been considered very important in the transformation agenda. This shows that the notion of the success of the transformation agenda is not taken seriously. Nigeria has not done well to promote and use the indigenous languages for the effective transformation of the country. Advance countries such as Japan, China and Russia have achieved growth and development because they see their indigenous languages as tools for transformation and have made efforts in integrating them in their developmental strategies.

The disregard for the promotion and use of the indigenous languages came to fore when the African union made 2006 as the year of Africa's indigenous languages. Unfortunately it was the year Nigeria closed the institute for the study of Nigerian languages in Aba. All developed and developing countries make use of their indigenous languages for development.

Language is central to the sustenance of a group of people for it is the vehicle through which other constituents of cultures are communicated. It is the primary vehicle through which human culture is acquired, shared and transmitted. Without language, there is bound to be problem in the society for thoughts, ideas, information, and the society would become incommunicado. Hence, Schaefer (2000: 52) in Hanafi(2014) sees language as the foundation of every culture. Language is "an abstract system of word, meaning and symbols for all aspects of culture which includes speech, written characters, numerals, symbols, and gestures and expressions of non-verbal communication".

Language is therefore 'central to the interactive process' (Bewaji 2002) in Ademowo (2012). identified four ways by which language is used in the society, namely, as a means of expression, for the purposes of record, to set matter in motion and as an instrument of thinking. It will not be wrong for culture to be described as inconceivable outside of language. It is with language that such non-material aspects

of cultures, which give identity to a group, such as folklore, proverbs, are conceived, shared and transmitted. This explains why languages are regarded as a reservoirs of culture which controls human thought and behaviour and sets the boundaries of the worldview of its users (Alebiosu, 2013). Language is also so important to the growth and sociability of a people that it is among the very first forms of behaviours that we learn as children, and later when we learn other skills and acquire more knowledge, much of this reaches us only through the medium of language.

Indigenous languages are the tribal, native or local languages spoken. The language would be from a linguistically distinct community that has been settled in the area for many generations. Indigenous language are not necessarily national languages and the reverse is also true. There are about 400 indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria, and only few of these languages have written forms (Adeniyi and Bello, 2006).Grimes (2000) reports that there are about 500 languages in Nigeria. These languages comprise both minority and majority languages as well as some few non-Nigeria languages such as English, Arabic and French.

Among these languages, three are considered as major by the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria. The major languages are Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. It must be noted that these languages have acquired their majority status solely on the demographic strength of their speakers, and not because of any inherent qualities they possess that the other languages lack (Idem, 2002; 188). More than one third of the Nigerian population are illiterate and live in the rural areas, they neither understand nor speak English (Alyebo, 2012), the official language of Nigeria.

Despite the importance of language as a reservoir of culture, unfortunately, indigenous languages in Nigeria are often neglected as in every use i.e. in the media and educational policies to the benefit of the foreign 'colonial' languages in most African states(Amfani, 2010). It is proper here to recognize the effort of the United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), which organized an Intergovernmental Conference on Language Policies in Africa in Harare, Zimbabwe in 1997 (Mohochi, 2004 in

Ademowo, 2012). The product of that conference was a resolution tagged Harare Declaration on Language Policy in Africa which specifically challenged all African governments to review their National Language Policy in such a way that the indigenous languages will have more social, political and educational use in their polity. The Harare Declaration like so many others before it, such as the African Languages Bureau, turns out to be a mere rhetoric.

Experiences from Philippine, Mexico, Wales, Canada, Russia, Yugoslavia and Japan have, however, shown that the indigenous languages are fit for all rung and levels of education as effective media of instruction that is capable of eliminating pedagogical difficulties in learning and thereby enhancing better understanding. In fact, research results in the fields of education, linguistics, anthropology and cognitive psychology all agree that students who enter school with a primary language other than the national or dominant language perform significantly better on academic tasks when they receive consistent and cumulative academic support in the native heritage language (Mu'azu, 2014). When used as instructional purpose, as research results have shown, many scholars have contended that it is capable of enhancing cognitive understanding and removing pedagogical barrier in learning. Some of these researches are: The Native American Language Research, The University of Bradford Research, The Ife Six-Year Primary Project and the Swahili Research.

Beyond the issue of rights, it is important to note that language and literacy are very crucial for societal development. A society develops into modernity when its citizens are literate in the languages of the masses. In other words, it is not possible to reach modernity if the language/languages of literacy and education are only within the intellectual ambit of small minorities. Historically, the jump towards expanded knowledge production and reproduction in societies has only been possible when the languages of social majorities have been centrally placed. To this end, Mazrui & Mazrui (2002) feel that no nation can develop without the use of its native language(s).

Linguists like Trudell (2007), and Brock-Utne (2000) stress that 'Education For All' development initiatives held so highly by the World Bank and other bilateral donors are meaningless unless the quality of the education received is also worked upon. More literature today maintains that any truly worthwhile educative programme or curriculum at the primary level will take place in a child's mother-tongue; education that is relevant to a child's environment is far better than an estranged curriculum based on foreign cultures and values taught through a foreign language. Bunyi(1999) cites the 1951 UNESCO report on language and education in support of this. The report states the psychological benefits along with sociological ones, namely that mother tongue education will help identification among members of the community to which a child belongs. Moreover, there are educational benefits in that children are said to learn faster through a familiar linguistic medium and thus cover more topics.

Indigenous languages and Nigeria's transformation

Linguistic development is seen here partly as the attainment of proper codification by a given language. In addition, the language must also be in constant use by its speakers. Most indigenous Nigerian languages are yet to be fully codified. They lack systematic descriptions and are not documented. Speakers of indigenous Nigeria languages must strive to have their languages codified. It is pertinent for speakers of non-codified languages to note that gone are the days when government codifies languages. It is now the responsibility of ethnic communities to sponsor the codification of their languages. The codification will facilitate development on various fronts. Fully codified languages are taught in schools due to availability of orthographies. The writing facility can allow native speakers of a language to put down their thoughts on paper and such documents will facilitate faster growth and development. Linguistic development is the first step towards any other meaningful and desirable development. Scientific or technological development for example, cannot be attained by a people who had not developed linguistically. All technologically developed nations and societies must have

attained wonderful linguistic development prior to the scientific or technological developments.

Unfortunately, leaders in Nigeria view the multi-lingual make-up of the country as an obstacle, not a resource; they look to overcome it with large sweeping policies of language of the wider community (LWC) preference in political, social and economic matters. This alienates the most disenfranchised speakers of minority languages further from the decision making process. Bamgbose (1991) sees this apparent lack of will or desire to try something new with regard to language policy, as a historical hang-up from colonial times – what he terms the ‘Inheritance Situation’. By this he means that the roles of both indigenous and colonial languages have maintained their respective statuses as subservient and dominant. Colonial languages as those of the ruling white are dominating all levels of higher education and politics, while African languages remained, if not entirely excluded, as they were in the French and Portuguese colonies, then at most as the language used at the lower echelons of society, such as initial literacy or the medium of instruction at primary schools in British territories. Ending these roles has proved difficult, if not impossible to date, in spite of the half-century since independence.

The Vice Chairman of Senate Committee on Housing, Lands and Urban Development, Senator Gbenga Ashafa emphasised the significance of indigenous languages, noting that if well-harnessed, the language of each ethnic group in the country “is critical to realising the national development goals.” Ashafa, (2013) said this at a cultural day in Agege, adding that the language of each tribe should be held sacrosanct for the nation to compete with other developed countries in the world. The lawmaker urged all parents and guardians to cultivate the habit of communicating with their wards in their indigenous languages with emphasis that preservation of indigenous languages would bring about rapid development. Protecting our culture and preserving our indigenous languages are tasks before all of us that must be done. So, whether as students, teachers, parents, guardians or government, we must continue to make efforts

towards ensuring that our indigenous languages do not die.

He explained that it “is our root and heritage that we must never forget, because, as the saying goes” any one that loses his roots has a lot of hardships to ponder on later in future”.

Therefore, “we all must make this happen by cultivating the habit of speaking to our children in our mother tongue at home and facilitating the learning of indigenous languages in schools, as Eye On the Future is doing today”(Akinsanmi,2013: 1). There is obviously the need to rearrange or set our priorities straight, if the country is to be transformed. We must accept that we have a responsibility of not only preserving individual cultural and linguistic identities but that for acculturation of knowledge and genuine progress and development we must have to utilize our indigenous languages in the enterprise of education. In this regard, the Nigerian language policy must be redirected towards improvement of indigenous languages and their proper utilization for the attainment of transformation goals. We must accept the potentials of indigenous languages for domestication of knowledge and broad based grass root reach as against the English Language. If English brings unity, local dialects hold the key to development (Mu’azu, 2014).

Indigenous languages are not argued to be development's 'saving grace', rather they are seen as a tool with which to facilitate positive transformation and advancement by creating not only wider acceptance of existing diversity but also of facilitating a greater number of social opportunities to speakers of minority languages. Accepting and appreciating the cultural and social value of indigenous tongues, and incorporating them more formally into political and educational sectors is a means by which “...individuals can effectively shape their own destiny...” (Sen 2001; 11). At present, so many people find themselves subservient to a system which limits their potential through denying them the use of their mother tongue outside the informal sector.

Conclusion

The paper, thus far have been directed at justifying why and how indigenous African

languages should be employed in teaching science and technology-based subjects in our educational system through codification. This does not mean that the use of English as education medium should be discontinued; rather what the paper is advocating is that both should be officially approved, and the indigenous languages should be developed, and adopted accordingly, as classroom media with consequential provision of scientific books in both languages. If this is done possibly Nigeria's dream for transformation would become a reality.

Recommendations

As seen the importance of indigenous languages from the developed countries cited in the paper in both the transformation and development of a country. The paper therefore recommends that the codification of the various indigenous languages should be undertaken. This is a herculean task for the government alone to shoulder the responsibility of codification i.e. orthography, producing reading materials, grammar, dictionaries and so on, the linguistic groups should assist in getting at least, an orthography for their languages.

Parents should change their attitudes towards the indigenous languages, the notion that it is only through the Colonial Master's language that one can progress in life has to be discarded. Countries such as, Japan, China, Russia, Germany and others have progressed using their indigenous languages.

The Nigeria policy on Education should not be on paper alone. School inspectors and all stakeholders are to be involved in making sure that the language policy is followed to the letter. In fact, indigenous language learning should not be left at the primary school; it should be encouraged even at tertiary institutions.

The teaching and learning of indigenous languages should be made interesting with the use of new technologies and strategies. Parents should speak to their children in their various indigenous languages. They should not rely on the language of the immediate community. All languages have their uses and prestige which only the speakers of the languages can portray. Indigenous languages can be made richer, by

finding ways of including new science and technology terms in the languages. This will disabuse the minds of those who believe that it is only English that has means to explain such concepts.

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