

INDIGENISING LANGUAGE FOR UNIVERSAL USE IN NIGERIA

By

Franca Attoh, PhD

Department of Sociology

University of Lagos, Akoka-Yaba, Lagos

Email: franca.attoh.92@gmail.com, fattoh@unilag.edu.ng

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Language is made up of several symbols to which humans attach meanings often shared by members of the society. The verbalized symbols among humans are very essential for smooth social relationship among people. Social relations enhance political, economic and other activities carried out for the progress of the society. This paper aims at analyzing the need for a universal national language configured out of the major languages in the country often referred to as 'WAZOBIA' and its effects on the Nigerian society as a whole. This paper is based on ethnomethodological perspective with the assumption that social order is embedded in the conversational process. The conversational process involves the use of words which have different meanings in different contexts of social relations. A hybrid of the differing language structure helps the conversational process. The paper is based on the use of secondary data involving desk review of literature, books and internet resources. The paper surmised that language diversity without a universal language derived from the indigenous languages affects the social health of the country. Also, Social harmony would be fostered by an indigenized universal language which is capable of reducing misunderstanding of issues which often lead to conflicts in the country. Moreover, the paper reveals that an indigenized universal language gives a social identity that is capable of unifying the populace in contrast with the high rate of disunity currently being witnessed in the country. Keywords: Indigenous, Language, Social Relation, Universal, WAZOBIA

Introduction

One of the pervasive problems in many African countries including Nigeria, is the language question. Language, is a veritable tool to transmit culture and it is also a tool for identity. Nigeria, is a heterogenous society with diverse culture, ethnic groups and numerous languages.

Nigeria, comprising of 36 states and a central government in Abuja, is said to have an estimated population of 207, 082,359 as at September 10, 2020, (see www.worldometers.info/world-population/nigeria). It is ethnically diverse, having about 250 ethnic groups and over 500 languages. However, amidst this diversity some languages are widely spoken across some populations such as Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. Hausa, is spoken by over 63 million people, Yoruba by over 42 million people and Igbo by over 35 million people. The other languages which are widely spoken include Fulfude, Ijaw, Edo, Ibibio, Kanuri, Tiv and Nupe. Since the amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates in 1914 by the British colonial masters, the official language of business has remained English and its corrupt variant known as pidgin English which is widely spoken by both the literate and not so literate. The English language was not only a tool of colonial domination but rather a social practice employed as a means either of inclusion or exclusion depending on one's competence or lack of competence in the language. Ideally, Nigeria, at independence in 1960, should have started on a clean slate with a unifying indigenous language to coalesce the various nationalities into a nation state but unfortunately the country was fractured at independence because of the several fault-lines especially ethnic and political.

Pundits have argued that one major challenge militating against achieving nationhood and social cohesion has been the lack of a unifying indigenous language. The belief is that English language which is the lingua franca and official language of business is the language of the colonial master. Most Nigerians see themselves first as members of their ethnic groups before becoming Nigerians. For this reason, there are various fault-lines across the ethnicities making it impossible to achieve social cohesion. These fault-lines have permeated the political, economic, social and cultural spaces with the result that people would rather relate with those they share a common language with than someone who speaks a different language. This is the bane of ethnic politics in Nigeria as people would rather vote for someone from their ethnic group. The result has been the various fault-lines which affects all other sectors of the Nigerian state.

The absence of a unifying indigenous language and the need to get across to the grass-root made the military to adopt the languages of the three major ethnic groups namely Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo as tools for communication. Thus, information and news broadcasts are usually broadcast in English, Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo hence the concept **WAZOBIA**. WAZOBIA means “Wa” (come) in Yoruba language, “Zo” (come) in Hausa language and “Bia” (come) in Igbo language. This was the genesis of the development of WAZOBIA as an indigenous language by Alex Igbineweka borrowing words from different Nigerian languages to create a new and distinct indigenous language he called WAZOBIA or the Guosa language, Igbineweka, (2009). The objective being to have one indigenous unifying language which does not belong to any ethnic group in Nigeria. As laudable as Mr. Igbineweka’s project is, it has not received much support from the government to enable him develop and expand the vocabulary including its grammar. This paper raises two fundamental questions in a bid to justify the necessity for a universal indigenous language. a) Is language an enabler? and b) Can WAZOBIA be a language for business in Nigeria?

This paper is divided into the following sections: section one comprises the abstract and this introduction. Section two discusses the theoretical underpinning for the paper while section three discusses the necessity for a universal language. Section four interrogates the possibility of WAZOBIA being a language for business while section five concludes the paper and proffered some recommendations. The paper is a desk review using information from books, journals and online resources.

Theoretical underpinning

Harold Garfinkel, a sociologist, was the founder of ethnomethodology. The ethnomethodological perspective describes the methods members of a social group deploy to maintain social order and give meaning to their everyday life. For ethnomethodology, the fundamental sociological phenomenon is the social fact. The social fact is the members understanding of the everyday world. Language is a powerful tool deployed in giving meaning to everyday social interactions. Language comprises words which are used to facilitate communication, words are therefore indexical, Garfinkel, (1984). Members of any society have shared methods they use to construct meaningful orderliness of social situations, Rawls, (2000). Theoretically speaking, the object of ethnomethodological research is social order practiced by real people in real settings. The social fact is how members of society

deploy language to negotiate their everyday social interactions. Language could be used to negotiate business, politics, religion and love. Our thesis is that in a heterogenous society such as Nigeria, language becomes a fundamental tool in the negotiation of social existence. Those from the same language group would fare better in the negotiation of public good such as political positions, jobs and other social privileges where the allocator of values is from the same language group. Thus, disadvantaging outsiders with similar quest for such public good hence the existence of ethnicity and its attendant conflict in such societies. In Nigeria, language is a very powerful tool which confers identity and a sense of belonging to those who share a common language. The implication is that a universal indigenous language spoken across the various ethnic groups would enhance social cohesion and bring about social order through enhanced social interaction devoid of suspicion. Evidence from countries in East Africa, where Swahili is spoken as a lingua franca tends to buttress this assertion. Members of the society can relate with each other as brothers and sisters and not as strangers. It will help fix the mutual suspicion that characterizes social relations in the country.

Language as an enabler and a game -changer

Language is a tool for communication and social control in human societies. And in multilingual societies language is a rallying point for the negotiation of local, national and international interests. A universal language is a melting pot in which people from diverse cultures and multiple languages can forge a common identity. Odugu (2011) asserted that in linguistically heterogenous societies, that language planning constitutes core institutional practice for maintaining social cohesion and cultural identities. For Nigerians to coexist and develop economically requires mutual understanding and cooperation. Communication through a universal indigenous language will enhance understanding and cooperation across the various ethnic groups. A universal language will also improve the understanding of economic, political, social and cultural areas. The development and adoption of a universal indigenous language will enhance the establishment of the needed strategies to catalyse development. The different ethnic groups can now coexist peacefully and interact without seeing each other as competitors but rather cooperators with a common identity and destiny. The development and adoption of a universal indigenous language does not imply the rejection of the other existing languages but rather having a common language developed from the existing ones which becomes a symbol of shared national identity just like the

national flag. This is imperative because language enables intercultural communication, enhances social interaction, allows for tolerance and a better understanding of the other person. A universal indigenous language in Nigeria, will reduce the tensions and conflicts associated with politics and help eliminate ethnic politics. Such a language will help the ethnic groups accept cultural norms of other ethnicities, see each other in a positive light and eliminate perceived prejudices and misconceptions about the other. A good example as earlier mentioned is Kiswahili which is widely spoken in East Africa and has fostered integration both at the national and regional levels. The unifying effect of a universal indigenous language will be a game changer and enabler for many Nigerian citizens to participate in the governance of the country and contribute towards the improvement of the political process. Hitherto, the elites and educated people have an edge over those not educated because English language is the lingua franca and the language of business. Often, the people in the rural areas have to rely solely on the opinions of the elites and politicians because they are handicapped in the use of English language to convey their contributions to the political process. This reliance on the elites exposes them to manipulation as elites and politicians play the ethnic and religious card thus, deepening the existing fault-lines in order to capture political power or acquire privileges. A universal indigenous language will provide a level playing field for all and sundry and reduce the acrimony associated with politics and governance. It is equally imperative that such a language be developed and adopted to aid education both at the primary and secondary school levels. Currently, secondary school students are made to study one of the three major languages in the junior secondary level (three years). This is expensive and cumbersome as many students never take it serious but rather wait till, they get to the senior level to drop the language. They would rather choose French instead of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Those that do, would choose the language of their ethnic group thus, negating the reason for the policy. If all students are made to study a universal indigenous language from the primary school level up to the senior secondary school level and if possible be compelled to offer it as a subject at the school certificate level. Over time there will emerge new generations of Nigerians, who would see themselves as Nigerians and not members of their ethnic groups. There will be a new mind set which will catalyse social cohesion and propel the development process. Significantly, using a universal indigenous language will connect all the ethnic groups in Nigeria, irrespective of cultural differences and provide them a common national identity. Language will thus, become an enabler and engender new social processes in the country.

WAZOBIA as a language of business?

Nigeria, comprises of over 250 ethnic groups with over 500 languages. Currently, English language is the official language of business. Among the elites, there is no compelling reason to adopt a universal indigenous language. However, there are numerous reasons why this position should be revisited.

First, there is every reason to have a universal indigenous language to achieve social cohesion because in spite of 60 years of independence, Nigeria, remains divided as a country. The country has not been able to achieve nationhood as ethnic nationalities claim dominance and allegiance over their members. Nigerians, see themselves first and foremost as members of their ethnic nationalities before claiming allegiance to the nation state. Second, a universal indigenous language is a national language which allows its speakers participate in the national space -education, politics, administration, commerce etc. But its not a language of global communication and therefore cannot become an official language. At present, Nigeria, has elevated three indigenous languages namely, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba to the status of national languages. This arrangement seems untidy as all other ethnic groups have been excluded from participation in the national domains such as education, politics, governance and administration. Even though, some people may argue that pidgin English is used to fill the existing gap. But the fact is that pidgin English is not widely spoken in Nigeria. It is restricted to some states in the federation where it is used as a second language among the not so educated. Besides, pidgin English which is a corruption of the English Language can only be spoken by those who have passed through some form of formal education such as primary school education or secondary school education. Those with no formal schooling cannot speak pidgin English and thus, remain excluded. It should be noted that other ethnic groups outside the three major ethnic groups perceive the adoption of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as national languages as another form of colonisation. They make every attempt to resist the usage of those languages and consider it as a form of injustice to be compelled to speak the language of another ethnic group.

Back to the adoption of WAZOBIA, as a language of business. In as much as it is expedient and compelling to adopt a universal indigenous language as a national language, the fact remains that WAZOBIA, has not been developed to have the necessary vocabularies and grammar to aid seamless communication in Nigeria. However, most Nigerians, will prefer the

development and adoption of a neutral indigenous language that derived its vocabulary and grammar from all the existing languages in Nigeria. Such a language will provide the desired social bond to achieve social cohesion in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This paper has shown the difficulty in adopting an existing language as a national language in a heterogenous and multi-lingual state such as Nigeria. While not advocating for the replacement of English language as the official language, there is a compelling reason to develop and adopt a universal indigenous language as a national language. It is imperative that Nigeria, considers the need for a homogenous language which will foster national unity, enhance social cohesion and engender development. We must recognise the fact that the current arrangement of adopting the three major languages as national languages smacks of insensitivity to the other ethnic groups and more over the policy is costly and cumbersome. Any wonder that the policy has not fostered national unity but rather the fault-lines seem to be more fractured. To solve the language question and commence the road map towards nationhood, we advocate the development and adoption of WAZOBIA as a national language while English language remains the official language.

Recommendations

The paper has shown that language is a tool for identification, communication and social interaction. We therefore make the following policy recommendations that will facilitate the development and adoption of WAZOBIA as a national language.

- Nigeria should set up a national language commission to commence the process of WAZOBIA development through data gathering from all the languages in Nigeria.
- The Federal Ministry of Education should identify and establish a data base of language experts in Nigeria.
- A national sensitization campaign to educate Nigerians on the imperative for a national language.

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