

LANGUAGE AND GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA: A SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP

Richard C. Ihejirika

Directorate of General Studies Federal University of Technology, Owerri, Nigeria

Email: chinedumihejirika@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: *Language is one of those natural endowments bequeathed to man by nature to empower him and adequately position him to be the lord and master of his environment. Thus, it is unimaginable or even absurd to conceive of any human endeavour where language does not play a prominent role. But given the prevailing attitude in developing world, Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, it would appear much attention is not usually paid to language when the theme of discourse is governance. In fact, if the factors that enhance governance were to be highlighted, language may be the last or not even mentioned at all. In view of this erroneous attitude and impression, this paper sets out to establish that a symbiotic relationship exists between language and governance, that is to say that the two phenomena are unarguably intertwined that none can maximize its potentialities in the absence of the other. The paper further reviews the lapses noticed in the Nigerian language policies, which have retarded language development in Nigeria. The paper, therefore calls on the actors in the theatre of governance to come up with feasible language policy as well as language planning in order to create enabling environment for the development of the existing languages in Nigeria.*

KEYWORDS: language, governance, Nigeria, symbiotic relationship

INTRODUCTION

One of the natural resources with which God empowered man to adequately position him to cope with the challenges of his time and effectively control his environment is language. Thus, it is inconceivable to talk of humanity without mentioning language. It is based on this knowledge that Trask (1995) is of the opinion that language is what makes us human while Ihejirika (2006) argues that the nature of man would have been miserable if language had not existed. Therefore, language is like an instrument to man, without which he cannot achieve success in his endeavours. On the other hand, governance is a human endeavour. It is a phenomenon that is inevitable in any human society whether uncivilized or civilized. Governance is usually initiated by man for the benefit of man and his environment. It is the process of decision-making by man and the process by which decisions are implemented (or not implemented) by man.

Based on the perspectives from which language and governance have been explicated above, it goes without saying that man is the principal agent of both language and governance. He has both at his disposal and possesses the capacity to manipulate them to impact either positively or negatively on each other. It is based on this understanding that this paper argues that a symbiotic relationship exists between language and governance. But in our context, that is, Nigeria as a nation and speech community, it would appear nobody takes cognizance of the

bond between language and governance. For instance, Enitan (2004) highlighted the imperatives of good governance without giving language a place. According to him, the ingredients for good governance are:

- (i) rule of law
- (ii) protection of human right
- (iii) an acceptable constitution
- (iv) separation of power
- (v) tolerance for the opposition
- (vi) responsible leadership
- (vii) accountability and transparency.

Collaborating Enitan's view on the ingredients of good governance, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) on its discussion on "What is good Governance?" listed eight factors that promote good governance without mentioning language. According to UNESCAP, the factors are:

- (i) participation
- (ii) rule of law
- (iii) transparency
- (iv) responsiveness
- (v) consensus oriented
- (vi) equity and inclusiveness
- (vii) effectiveness and efficiency
- (viii) accountability.

In addition, from time to time, discussions on good governance have been held at different forums either in form of debates, symposia or seminars but from experience, none has given language a place in governance. The seeming non-recognition of language as a factor in good governance is a misconception that has no basis and therefore not acceptable. It is against backdrop that this paper sets out to put the records straight by proving that a symbiotic relationship exists between language and governance, "since language as a social institution influences and is influenced by the political culture of its speakers" (Emenanjo, 1990, p. 89).

Language Impacts on Governance

Given the nature of language and governance, one can argue without any fear of contradiction that language plays a prominent role in governance. In the first place, governance is not an abstract entity, it is personified in actors and actresses, who are principally men and women that make decisions and implement them within their areas of jurisdiction. For one to participate effectively as an actor or actress in the process of governance, it is obvious that one should develop intellectually, educationally, socially and of course technologically. None of these elements of human development can be fully attained in the absence of language. For instance, in the case of intellectual development, though it is a psychological process, it is measured in terms of language use. One who develops physically but cannot use language effectively could be said to be retarded mentally, which could give rise to poor intellectual development. Thus, intellectual development, which is an ingredient in governance, cannot be

devoid of language because “no stage of intellectual development can be successfully attained without language development and utilization” (Jiboku, 2002, p. 187).

Another factor in human development where language plays an outstanding role is education. Education, whether formal or informal, “is a veritable agent for development and language is the human means of communicating the subject” (Ogbodo, 2003, p. 39). This view is strongly amplified by Iheakaram (2001) as he states:

Language is like Air and Time (LAT) in the life of humans. It is invisible, more or less silent and yet indispensable. It has far reaching impacts on our lives. These are the reasons why there is no substitute for language in the education process. It is therefore the most important factor in education at all levels and in all forms since without it there can be no education (p. 17).

Man should also develop socially before he can effectively participate in governance. Social development in this context implies that man must possess ability to interact, communicate and commune with members of his society. It is obvious that man cannot achieve this level of social development in the absence of language, whether natural or artificial. This is why Buther (1990) quoted in Uguru (2007) posits that:

linguistic communication is without doubt one of the most important features of human life and as we get better at inducing computers to stimulate it, the effects on everyday living are bound to multiply (p. 104).

It is also believed that the tool of science and technology whether sophisticated or primitive plays a very crucial role in human development process. For instance, man's existence and survival depends heavily on such factors as agriculture, medicine, engineering, transportation and communication, to mention but a few. These factors are science and technologically driven. It should be pointed out that science and technology are only made real and brought to the level of man through the medium of language. It is in appreciation of this view that Wallwork (1969) argues that:

technology and science may control the environment, but they too rest upon language and the passing of information and commands, whether the language takes the form of complex mathematical symbols, or abbreviated jargon, or highly complex sentences (p. 6-7).

The place of language in governance can also be explored from the perspective of communication. Communication as a process of giving and receiving information is a very critical element in governance. The reason is that there is the need for the government to reach the governed and the governed in turn should appreciate the government by participating actively in the process of governance. This relationship between the government and governed can only be fully achieved where there is free flow of information through the mass media, which may be local, print or electronic. It is in recognition of the critical role mass communication plays in governance that Otagburuagu (2004, p. 4) asserts that “mass communication is crucial in democratic governance as it provides a speedy way for the

dissemination of information and the pulling together of public opinion.” Besides, government laws, policies and decisions are meant to be documented, preserved for future reference and for the generation yet unborn. All these aspect of communication as highlighted, which enhance governance, are practically impossible in the absence of language. This is why mass literacy is consistently advocated because according to Jiboku (2002):

One of the basic indices of development in every society is the level of literacy in that society. Literacy education can only be possible if appropriate languages are used at the right level for the intellectual development of man (p. 185).

Governance Impacts on Language

To further establish and articulate the symbiotic relationship between language and governance, it is also our opinion that governance, from all indications, impacts on the development and usage of language(s) in any speech community. Granted language is a natural gift for humanity, it is obvious that language cannot develop on its own without human intervention. This is where governance comes in through the instruments of language planning and language policy. Language planning, according to Jiboku (2007, p. 18), “is the process of choosing a language and developing it to the standard at which it can serve both national and international needs of the country.” This is one of the government’s responsibilities towards the development and usage of languages(s) especially in a multilingual speech community. Also, the government does not stop at the planning of language(s) but perfects it through the process of language policy, which “is government’s statement on the issue of language(s). This may include the role of specific language in the society, and the assignment of different functions to different languages, commitment of languages to the present with projection for the future” (Jiboku, 2002, p. 188).

Besides, government enhances the development and usage of language by creating favourable environment for the language(s) to thrive. This could be done through the process of provision of language facilities and resources at various levels of education, primary, secondary and tertiary; and in addition make adequate arrangements for the training and recruitment of enough competent language teachers in schools.

The Nigerian Situation

Nigeria is a typical example of a multilingual speech community. The reason is that it is estimated that there are about 400 languages spoken in Nigeria (Hansford, et al, 1996; Elugbe, 1990; Jowitt, 1991). Among the indigenous languages, three are designated major languages, and they are Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba, representing the three dominant ethnic groups in Nigeria. There are also minority languages representing the minority ethnic groups. In addition, we also have some foreign languages such as the English language, the Arabic language and of course the French language. But the question that must not escape the lips of an unbiased critic is: To what extent has the government of Nigeria been able to manage the multilingual nature of the nation in order to promote the development and usage of the existing languages so as to sustain the symbiotic relationship between language and governance? The answer to this question can be summed up in the words of Elugbe (1990) who states that language experts have agreed that the governments of Nigeria are not doing enough for Nigerian languages and also argues that

successive administration have ignored languages in Nigeria, at best, they have paid lip service to it.

Truly, Nigerian government has not done much to promote language development and usage in Nigeria. In the first place, there is no noticeable effective language planning in Nigerian context. Although there are Language Development Centre and National Institute of Nigerian Languages (NILAN), these government agencies have not done much in order to create effective positive impact towards the development and usage of the Nigerian languages, especially the minority languages. Secondly, what is currently referred to as language policy in Nigeria, which is the statement made in passing about language in the 1999 Nigerian Constitution and 1977 National Policy on Education (NPE), to say the least, is never a comprehensive language policy. Besides, the provisions of the documents concerning language have never been fully implemented at any level. For instance, at the pre-primary school, where the NPE states that the medium of instruction should be the mother tongue, no effort is made by the government to ensure that the policy is fully implemented at that level. In private schools, for instance, what is in vogue is teaching the nursery pupils in English as a way of enhancing the profile of the schools in order to attract more patronage from parents who are erroneously excited when their children at that level communicate in the English language.

In addition, the NPE recommended that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major Nigerian languages other than his own mother tongue. But it is regrettable to note that since 1977 the policy was made “we are yet to produce a meaningful number of secondary school leavers who can communicate in any of the three major Nigerian languages other than their mother tongue” (Ogbodo, 2003, p. 42). The reason might not be unconnected with the fact that there is paucity of indigenous language teachers because there is no spelt-out programme for the training of teachers in the local languages by the government. We can go on and on to point out the lapses in the so-called language policy but the bottom-line is that the policy is not only inadequate but also the implementation has failed to a large extent.

The Way Forward

In view of our discussion so far, it is abundantly clear that the government of Nigeria have failed to live up to their responsibilities in terms of maintaining the symbiotic bond between language and governance. Therefore, the way forward is that the government should wake up from slumber and play the expected role towards the development and usage of the languages in Nigeria. First, the government should come up with a feasible language plan. By so doing, the agencies charged with the responsibility of developing the local languages such as NILAN and Language Development Centre should be empowered the more by way of proper funding to enable them embark on meaningful researches that would pave way for effective development of the local languages.

Secondly, the Nigerian government should evolve a more comprehensive language policy, which would among other things recognize the minority languages and make provisions for them. The policy, when created, should be vigorously implemented by promulgating enabling legislations that would see to the successful implementation. In addition, the training and development of language teachers especially teachers of local languages at all levels of education should be taken more seriously by the government. The teachers should be encouraged by way of incentives such as in-service training, scholarships and language

teachers' allowance. In all, the suggestions for the way forward are best summed up in the words of Wale (2003):

Leaders of the nation are expected to demonstrate more patriotism by jettisoning their ambivalent attitude towards indigenous Nigerian languages and paying adequate attention instead of lip service to their development and utilization for serious communication purposes (p. 163).

CONCLUSION

Language is an invaluable asset to humanity without which man cannot achieve optimum success in any of his endeavours. Governance as a human endeavour largely depends on language for its success just as language equally depends on governance for it to maximize its development and usage. Therefore, the actors in the theatre of governance should ensure that all encumbrances which have hitherto retarded the development of languages (especially indigenous ones) in Nigeria are minimized as much as practicable in order to pave way for good governance in Nigeria.

References

- Elugba, B.O. (1990). National language and national development. In Emenanjo, E.N. (Ed.), *Multilingualism, minority language and language policy in Nigeria* (pp. 10-19). Agbor: Central Books Ltd.
- Emenanjo, E.N. (1990). In the tradition of the majors: Lessons in language engineering for the majority languages. In Emenanjo, E.N. (Ed.), *Multilingualism, minority languages and language policy in Nigeria* (pp. 88-98). Agbor: Central Books Ltd.
- Enitan, A. (2004, April 20). Imperatives of good governance. Vanguard. p.35.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (1998). *National Policy on education*. Yaba-Lagos: NERDC Press.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999). *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*. Lagos: Federal Government Press.
- Hansford, K.J., Bendor-Samuel and R. Standford (Eds.) (1976). *An index of Nigerian languages (Studies in Nigeria Languages)*. Accra and London: Summer Institute of Linguistics.
- Iheakaram, P.O. (2001). Language in education. NKA: *A Journal of the Arts*, pp. 17-27.
- Ihejirika, R.C. (2006). Language and national development. The implication for Nigeria. *Journal of School of General Studies (JOGS)*, 1 (1), 68-74.
- Jiboku, O. (2002). Literacy education and language education. Two sides of a coin in national development in Nigeria. In Lawal, A., Ifeoma Isiugo-Abanihe and Isaac Nnam Ohis (Eds.), *Perspective on applied linguistics in language and literature* (pp. 185-195). Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publishers (Nig.) Ltd.
- Jowitt, D. (1991). *Nigerian English language usage*. Lagos: Longman Nigeria Plc.
- Ogbodo, J.C. (2003). National language policy implementation and national development. *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities*, 13, 39-48.
- Trask, R.L. (1995). *Language. The basics*. London: Routledge
- Uguru, J.O. (2007). Scientific study of language for national development. In Anasiudu, B.N., G.I Nwaozuzu and C.N. Okebalama (Eds.), *Language and Literature in developing country* (pp. 103-113). Onitsha: Africana-Fep Publishers Ltd.

- Wale, A. (203). Multilingualism and national development. In Oyeleye, L.S. and Moji Olateju (Eds.). *Readings in language and literature* (pp. 153-167). Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press Ltd.
- Wallwork, J.F. (1969). *Language and linguistics: An introduction to the study of language*. London: Heinemane Educational Books Ltd.