



## DEVELOPMENT DRIVEN LANGUAGE POLICY TOWARDS A TRANSFORMATION OF NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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### **Abstract**

*This paper focused on development-driven language policy towards transformation of the Nigerian society, considering in clear terms of the complex linguistic setting of the nation. Sequel to the lukewarm attitude of governments over the years, the paper evaluates the value of an effective languages education policy and implementation to the development of nations across the globe. On the foregoing, the work identifies the low level of technology and science development in Nigeria as a product of purposeless approaches in language policy making and implementation. The paper observes that, little or no functional language policy exists in Nigeria even at over 55 years of independence. Nigerian languages ought to be central to societal development and should occupy an important place in the development discourse. In line with these and many more, the paper recommends that government should organize public enlightenment campaigns in the rural areas as the need arises and use the indigenous languages to sensitize the masses on the policies and programmes that should be of interest to them, government should make use of the media houses, especially the electronic media, in disseminating vital information to the people in the rural areas through the indigenous language sessions as an instrument of rural social mobilization and rural social transformation.*

**Keywords:** Development, Language policy, Transformation, Nigerian society.

### **Introduction**

Language study in the world today is an issue of growing social importance because majority of all living languages are

threatened in their continued existence. How they can be sustained is a matter of study and debate. Inadequate level of attention that has often been given to the language

situation in Nigeria tends to reflect on the level of general development. Nigeria is one of the countries with the largest number of indigenous languages. This situation should be seen as blessings rather than a curse. Contrary to these expectations, countries of this nature are rather turned into ethnic and religious struggles. Considering the multilingual and cultural differences, the issue of adopting an indigenous national language in Nigeria is described as complex. In reality, the relevance of language to development of any society cannot be overemphasized. Development cannot be achieved in any society unless the linguistics reality of such a society is put into play. It is evident that different languages in Nigeria coexisted in peace before the advent of the colonial masters which brought together the diverse socio-cultural backgrounds into one fold through the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914. This act resulted into the imposition of English language- as an official language in Nigeria (Adenipekun, 2010).

In reality, there are two possible reasons responsible for the neglect language issues. The first reason is that development is often conceived of in a rather narrow turn to the calculation of the Gross domestic product and gross national product and other economics metrics of income. The consequences of this quantitative approach to development are that economic indicators are often erroneously equated with national development and societal well-being. In this narrow sense, the role of language in societal development may rather be seen as a bit too marginal to be taken in reality. The second challenge is that the language issue has not featured well in Nigerian's

development discourse. This is as a result of the nature and role of language in society which is often completely misunderstood. Probably, it may be from the irresponsible declarations of some Nigerian writers and intellectuals. However, Nigerian languages can be used for effective expressions, irrespective of the diverse cultural situation.

The paper focused on the development-driven language policy towards transformation of Nigeria society.

### **Concept of Language Policy**

Language policy has often been defined as what a government does either officially through legislation, court decision, or policy to determine how languages are used in public contexts (Crawford, 2017). This definition makes language policy a top-to-bottom movement on how languages should be used within a multilingual society. However, Johnson (2013) argues that not all language policies are enacted by the government. Some language policies are made by grassroot organizations. Thus, this makes the language policy a bottom-to-top movement. Johnson (2013) concludes that not all language policies are carefully planned and intentional.

Whether language policy is top-to-bottom or vice versa, language policy is designed to favor some language(s) and discourage the use of other languages in a multilingual society. It is the deliberate effort to influence the status of one language above the other. It includes the implementation of the selected language as a medium of instruction or a subject to be taught in schools. Hence, Tondo (2017) defines language 'policy as a binding language guide which is meant to be

enforced by the society that formulates it through a political process. Robin & Jernudd (1971) define language policy as a deliberate act aimed at solving a problem within a social context.

### **The Language Situation in Nigeria**

According to Agbedo (2016), "the notion of linguistic heterogeneity refers to the existence of diverse languages within a society, most often, nation states. In such nation states, the choice and adoption of language or languages and role assignments either at the national, regional or state level becomes crucial". Most times whatever choice made is dependent on three key factors- the total number of different language within the state, the ratio of users of each language to the total population, and the geographical and socioeconomic situation of each language. The logic of the Nigerian language situation seems to suggest an effective language policy. In Nigeria, there exist some advances in an attempt to take record of the repertoire of the language situation in Nigeria. Since Nigeria is a multilingual nation with over 500 nationalities, the question of language choice poses a problem.

The term multilingualism can be seen as the phenomena regarding an individual speaker who uses two or more languages, or a community of speakers of different languages (Agbedo, 2016) notes that, a rigid definition of the term would see as "being native-like in two or more languages", while the loose definition would see it as "being less than native-like but still able to communicate in two or more languages". Nigeria's indigenous languages

can then be categorized into three major language groups or, more precisely, language subgroups but these groups do not conform to a one-to-one matching with the states of the country. Some of these contain very large numbers of mother-tongue speakers.

### **Language in Education Policy**

Nigeria did not have a consciously planned language policy that is national in scope until 1977 when some aspects of language teaching in schools were introduced in the National Policy on Education (NPE). The policy was revised in 1981 and 1985 (Akinnaso, 2016). This is not peculiar to Nigeria alone. The United States, for example, has not had a planned language policy. However, there were ad hoc responses formed to meet immediate needs due to the changing demographics of the US population (Crawford, 2017). Education is one domain where Nigerian government has made deliberate effort and decisions to influence the use and status of language. The role of language in education policy is to ensure that any language used for instruction facilitates real development. Such policies are not made to hinder the purpose of education, but to facilitate teaching and learning. These decisions have resulted in different policies, curriculum and assessment documents, and other official documents that affect language teaching profession from theory to practice. Three languages, Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo were elevated to the status of major languages. Students were expected to study one of these languages in addition to their Mother Tongue. This was done to foster unity in the

country and reject the colonial language of English as a national language.

The use of Mother Tongue in school's dates to the colonial era when missionaries and colonial government favored the use of Mother Tongue in the primary schools and English in the secondary schools. According to Ayankanmi (2016), mission schools provided a steady stream of "educated Africans" that filled the lower levels of the colonial administration. Despite the government's decision about the use of these major Nigerian languages in schools, the implementation of this decision has been challenging and frustrating. Ethnic minority groups believe that the decision excluded their languages and threatened their very existence.

The codification of language policy in Nigeria could be traced back to the Colonial Era. In 1919, the recommendation of the Phelps-Stokes Commission to use the Mother Tongue as the medium of instruction in the lower primary was accepted. English was retained as the medium of instruction in the higher primary and secondary schools (Akinnaso, 2016). The Phelps-Stokes Commission was a private, missionary group that was funded while calling for partnership between government and missions. The recommendation of the Phelps-Stokes Commission was upheld in subsequent policies on language education. By the 1940s and 1950s, when natives began to participate in government, more attention was drawn to the use of Mother Tongue in schools. In 1960, when Nigeria became independent, Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo had emerged as regional languages. They were dominant in the North, West, and Eastern

part of the country (Akinnaso, 2016). These languages were fully established as school subjects and medium of instruction in the lower primary content area. Other indigenous languages such as Efik, Ibibio, Kanuri, Ijaw, Tiv, Edo, Nupe, Igala, and Idoma were neglected due to the insignificant number of native speakers and lack of written orthographies

### **The Relevance of Languages Education in Societal Development**

Development is seen as the sustainable socio-cultural, economic and technological transformation of the society. The position of language becomes an important variable in the development process. The contribution of Nigerian languages towards the growth and development of the society cannot be overemphasized. There exists a considerable amount of literature on the subject of the role and functions of languages education in the society. Each language is systematically different from others in the sense that it has a particular way of arranging the sign that encode meaning, and communicating the world to its speaker. In that sense, every language is an efficient tool for encoding the peculiarities of the particular environment in which a people live.

In a broader perspective, the language factor weighs in heavily on the issues of development thinking in every society. If development involves the desired transformation of the socio-cultural, political and economic systems of the society and language is seen as a repository and a tool for the expression and communication of the these very socio-cultural, political and economic belief systems of the society, then

it goes without saying that a successful conceptualization and implementation of the societal transformation can only be achieved through the use of the mother-tongues or the languages indigenous to the society.

Hurskainen (2013) examined the level through which Nigerian development approached the interrelationship between language and development as noted early is a matter of concern. As such, the Nigerian slow pace of development is a major clue on how languages education can be a vital tool for the transformation of society in general and Nigeria in particular. It is obvious that language in societal development is normally centred on the people's personality (Kuju, 2014)

### **Language and the Structure of the Nigerian Education System**

The place of language in educational system is very essential. It is a means through which knowledge is shared for the development of the society. Ferguson (2019) contends the fact that there is a widespread academic agreement that the mother tongue or a local language well known in the community is, in principle, the most suitable medium for education in the initial years of education. Put briefly, the educational argument is that cognitive development and subject learning is best fostered through teaching in a language the child knows well. Instruction in a language familiar to pupils improves immeasurably the quality of interaction between teacher and pupil. It also narrows the psychological gulf between home and school, integrates the school better into the local community and gives recognition to the language and culture the

child brings to school with positive effects on the self-esteem of individuals and local communities. The work of Cummins (2014) and others suggests, moreover, that consolidation of the child's facilitates subsequent acquisition of a second language. In spite of equivocal early research findings, these arguments are increasingly bolstered by empirical evidence. For example, in a recent study Williams (2014) shows that fifth-year primary pupils in Malawi, where the medium until grade 4 is Chichewa, have no worse reading abilities in English than primary five pupils in Zambia, where the official medium is English from grade 1.

In Nigeria, there is a hierarchical structure of primary, secondary and tertiary educational systems of Nigeria, with very minor different internal subdivisions. In Nigeria, the educational system recognizes 6 years of primary education, 6 years of secondary education, divided into junior and senior secondary schools and finally leading to a tertiary level of education. At each of these levels we have different participants, interest groups, administrators, teachers, educational resources and goals of education. It seems to us then that each of the levels constitutes an important level at which communication takes place, at which participation and decision-making by the citizenry takes or ought to take place. The local, the state and national levels constitute discrete and important development cells of Nigeria. They are ingredients for a model of localized trilingual. What important lessons does this observation of the society present us in the language debate? It is clear to us that it is desirable for multilingual countries to formulate language policies which would

seek to exploit this natural model of social organization to achieve optimal communication among the citizenry at each level. We believe that the best language policy is one that can promote communication between discourse participants at each of these levels and between each immediate level in multilingual set-ups. According to Ferguson (2019), Development communication is seen as any communication between participants for the purpose of sustainable socio-cultural transformation. By most appropriate language, we mean the language in which the majority of participants in any discourse entity have communicative competence. One possibility proposed by Cooper (2018), is acquisition planning which refers to planning directed at increasing the numbers of users/speakers of particular languages. Another, perhaps preferable for being more encompassing, is language planning in education' within the scope of which would fall the following policy issues, many of which are as follows:

1. The choice of medium of instruction for various levels of the education system primary, secondary, tertiary.
2. The role of the home language (or 'mother tongue') in the educational process
3. The choice of second/foreign languages as curricular subjects of instruction, along with associated decisions on language Planning and Education when these languages will be introduced into the curriculum whether foreign language study will be made compulsory, for whom and for how long what proportions of the

school population will be exposed to second/foreign language instruction

4. In the case of English and a few other pluricentric languages, what variety of the language will serve as a model (or norm) for teaching purposes? Worth noting immediately is that, few of the issues above can be considered exclusively educational, they clearly have much wider social and political ramifications.

### **Development- Driven Language Policy towards Transformation of the Nigerian Society**

The role of language education in the transformation of Nigerian society remains the most controversial issue in language planning (Ndukwe, 2014). There is little doubt though that a consensus has to be reached on the matter in formulating a language policy for the nation. One profitable manner in which the issue of languages education and national development may be discussed is through focusing on the main point of disagreement among language planning theories. This relates to the provision of a definite and comprehensive outline of national beyond language planning. A viable national language policy would be one, which should seek to maximize the participation of the people with regards to various sectors of development. "The essential strands of argument point somewhat gloomily to the fact that Nigeria's timid language policy and the blind glorification of English language by the rating class conspired to undermine the local language and rob them of their utilitarian values in the important societal

development drive" (Agbedo 2016). In this connection for instance, Agbedo (2016) posits the concept of exclusion and shows how the efficacy of language as an instrument of exclusion has been used by the milieu diligent to exclude the vast majority of Nigerians from participating in the overall societal development process.

An effective national language policy in Nigeria has the tendency to assist the country in diplomacy, cohesion, conflict resolution, and interaction among and between the neighbours. It also assists to increase learning in the schools because through the national language policy, it is easier to decide which methodology to be used or applied by the teachers while teaching or convey knowledge to the students in schools. In saying that knowledge acquisition and creation is cultural. It is better in the language one speaks most as a first language. One can imagine the striving force to translate one's thoughts into English. Adenipekun (2010) identifies a wonderful idea in the early 1970s through an experiment in which some primary school pupils were taught in Yoruba and their counterparts were taught in English. It was found that those who were taught in Yoruba had an edge over their counterparts taught in English when a comparative analysis of their achievement was carried out. So, if you are taught in a particular language which is cultural to you, you are likely going to excel beyond translating your thoughts from your native language to a foreign language. Yes, English is our official language.

However, is it possible to form a policy in which to promote our languages

for instructional, transactional, diplomatic, and commercial purposes. For example, in Indonesia, they speak English but everybody speaks Bahasa-Indonesia. Why not practicing the same system in Nigeria? China is ruling the world today because everything is done in Chinese language. Malaysia and Singapore are thriving because they create ideas in their languages. The same thing goes for Japan and Russia. The paper is not in support of transiting Nigeria to one language due to its multilingualism but create a platform that supports indigenous languages. For example, the existing policy agreed that pupils should be taught in their mother tongue in the first three years at primary schools. This implies that for the first three years, pupils should be taught in native language and then introduces English gradually. The significance of Language planning and teaching in societal development cannot be overemphasized, since Nigeria is a complete multilingual and secular nation (Abekah, 2014).

### **Way Forward**

In regards to the dynamic nature and role of languages education to societal development, we must be conscious of the fact that putting a reasonable effort into language planning, language teaching and language engineering takes time to yield desired results. Therefore, language experts must be involved in national language policy. We should base our focus on benefits even if it takes long time. A nation lives longer than nationals. The government policy on language should be devoid of political manipulations. Rather Stringent steps towards the sensitization of citizenry on the need to accept a genuine policy on

language and look at it as a vital tool for functional societal development should be encouraged. Another step is to ensure corpus planning of Nigerian languages in order to give them a functional status in the society. In doing this, language teachers must be well mobilized to develop pedagogical materials for language teaching and development. If we accept that language is the most effective tool for cultural transmission, our national image can be better enhanced through production of home films couched in our indigenous languages. In the early 70s - late 80s, Indian films scripted in their language flourished in Nigeria. Showcasing Indian values, especially the potency of Indian medicine.

### **Conclusion**

The paper discussed the issue of development-driven language policy towards transformation of Nigeria society. Hence, Nigeria seems to have had more than its fair share of the global political, economic and social instability as the result of her complex nature. The fact that Nigeria society is really multilingual, Nigerians are rather polyglot, making use of their mother-tongue in their immediate localities and any other inter-ethnic languages and lingua franca (English Language) once they leave their indigenous environments. On a general note, Nigerian languages are naturally vibrant and widely used by reasonable number of the population.

Unfortunately, the indigenous languages are not adequately put to use in educational systems of the country. These same languages are not considered as languages of national or government and languages of mass communication, it is

pertinent to note that 90% of national stations broadcast in English language, leaving just almost 10% for indigenous languages. This situation then confirms our contention that there is a linguistic and communicative discrepancy on Nigeria and Africa as a continent. This behaviour has trivial consequences on the development of Nigeria. In conclusion, we need to involve language experts (Linguists) in language policy in order to put in place an objective and effective policy. Our country will be better structured by upgrading the status of the indigenous languages for nation building.

### **Recommendations**

The paper recommends that:

1. Organization of Public Enlightenment Campaigns: Government should organize public enlightenment campaigns in the rural areas as the need arises and use the indigenous languages to sensitize the masses on the policies and programmes that should be of interest to them.
2. The Use of the Media: Government should make use of the media houses, especially the electronic media, in disseminating vital information to the people in the rural areas through the indigenous language sessions as an instrument of rural social mobilization and rural social transformation.
3. The use of Religious Organisations: Religious organisations should be used by the government for the dissemination of vital information as well as distribution of translated

versions of the government policies and programmes.

4. The Use of Councillors: Councilors represent the interest of the people of their wards and, therefore, are their watch-dogs. As such, they should be used to transmit to the grassroots those translated policies and programmes of government that are for the benefit of the people.
5. Establishment of ICT Centres: Government should establish ICT centres in all the communities for easy access by the people in the rural area. The Use of Indigenous Languages to teach in Schools: Government should encourage the use of indigenous languages to teach the pupils/ students in schools, especially for the science and technology related courses.
6. Engagement of Trained Translators: Government should endeavour to get the services of trained officers in the art of translation from official language to indigenous languages.

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