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Language Policy in Nigeria: Prospect for National Unity

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Abstract

Various studies on the National Policy on Education (NPE) have concentrated on the cognitive value of pedagogy and learning of the language aspect but few have viewed its importance on the togetherness of the nation - Nigeria. This paper deals with how the language policy can influence and ensure the co-existence of Nigeria in achieving self-actualisation, national unity, social, cultural, economic, and educational advancement for collective benefit. It also reveals that, the language aspect of the NPE is also providing sustainable attempts using the three major languages in Nigeria – Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba - and English language as well. The paper suggests that, the language policy can be used to foster a desirable and the real *Nigerianism* philosophy of our forefathers. It moreover concludes and recommends that, Nigeria leaders should exhibit patriotism; shun the (audible and bodily) language of disintegration and division for the sake of national unity.

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1. Introduction

Many attempts have been made to ensure the unity and coexistence of Nigeria right from the 1914 amalgamation by Lord Lugard. The slogan of General Yakubu Gowon and people in his government 'to keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done' was aimed at national unity. Radio Nigeria has always put it as its slogan 'Radio Nigeria: uplifting the people and uniting the nation'. Though the civil war, Boko Haram terrorism and the oil-subsidy removal demonstrations of 2012 shook the veracity of our unity as a nation, yet the efforts of all and sundry glued the nation together. That the ugly civil war gave birth to a beautiful National Youth Service Corps is an instance that seems to show that Nigeria is surviving every threat to its togetherness. This paper is one of the many interests in the togetherness of Nigeria. It recognises that, the philosophy of Nigerian education has the strategic aim of developing effective citizenship and ensuring the provision of equal opportunities for all Nigerians at all educational levels irrespective of religion, sex, social, or economic status (FGN, 1981). In addition to this, the philosophy is set for the achievement of self-actualization, national unity, social, cultural, economic, political, educational, scientific, and technological advancement of the entire nation. The philosophy is grounded on the belief that there are potentials in the togetherness of Nigeria; meaning that, there is a 'self' that is envisaged to be actualised by the togetherness of Nigeria. This 'self' could be a laudable position that Nigeria is supposed to occupy in the African continent and pioneer the movement of Africa as an important contributor to global issues.

This paper suggests that, these laudable objectives will remain unachievable without the consideration of language as an indispensable tool for unity. In addition to appreciating the importance of language, education should proceed as a means of preserving the people's culture. It is true that, Nigerian government appreciates that, when each Nigerian child is encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than her/his mother tongue it would greatly influence national unity. However, there can be perpetual effectiveness if minor languages of

the nation would receive appropriate consideration as well. This paper will re-emphasise the importance of language as a vehicle of thought. It maintains that, since language is very important and crucial as an instrument of communication and substance of social, cultural, political, economic, educational, industrial, and technological development in any society or nation; the people in responsible positions of governance should be aware of this and avoid dictions that could separate the existing links that bond the citizenry. They should strive to facilitate the language network, which is very crucial for national cohesion and to ensure smooth interaction between the culturally diverse Nigerians. Language is one of the factors that make the world a global village. Without language, there would be little or no effective communication, and communication is the umbrella that secures understanding, cohesion, and unity. Thus, language *glues* the world together.

2. The Necessity of Collective Involvement in Language Policy

In a democratic setting, people themselves must determine what goes on, not only in their religion and social life but also in their politics. Spolsky (2004) was aware of this when he considers language as political in nature. The political nature is not only that language is of great influence on human nature as political beings, it also covers the fact that the politicking of human beings has great effect on power and values of language in the society. As part of the political systems, language planning could be determined to an extent, by the attitude of parents towards a language, the role of media, peers, and the social pressures. According to Kachru (1991), one of the parameters that help in sharpening the conceptualization of language policy is pressure. Pressure is considered as having the power to influence a change in language policy and its educational value. According to Kachru (1991), the parameters of language policy are only partial in the hands of the planners. He cited the examples of India, Indonesia, and Malaysia where the recommendations of the planners had to be changed to meet the real political demand or the project ideological image. The examples buttress the point that, the recommendations of

the planners are not theoretical; they are not mere documents to be kept in some academic depository. They are to be applied to the current situation of the society; they are thereby pragmatic recommendations and could be adjusted to fit with the demands of the society. Government needs to trek the path of caution when it involves an important issue like language policy especially in a multilingual nation, like Nigeria, to avoid the replica of language riot experienced in Ethiopia (See Woldemariam, 2007). The sensitive nature of policy making is described by Lo Bianco (1990) that, “policy making is not, therefore a technical application of formulae, but rather one of negotiating consensus, of haggling out workable agreements about desired outcomes on language questions” (p. 18). If a speech community is multilingual, like in Nigeria, it is imperative for such a community to seek an adoption of a language policy that will be applicable to every aspects of existence in that community, and this could only be feasible if the community has proper participation in the formulation of the policies. It is then that, the language policy would have great significance on the communication, sustenance of social, cultural, political, economic, educational, industrial, and technological development of such a community.

A recent study of Edwards (in press) on the roles of immigrant families and the community in Catalonia gives some support to the relevance of community influence in policy formulation. With the cooperation of the immigrant families (especially from Spain), the *Generalitat* and the Vic City Council implemented language-in-education policies that helped in fostering integration of the immigrant families into the Vic society. Although the immigrant families were not even fluent in Catalan (the Catalonian language), they encouraged their children to speak the language because they understood the fact that the language could help create a future and sense of belonging for their children in the Vic society. The action of the immigrant families informed the City Council to adopt ‘an early immersion policy’ (Edwards, in press) that is structured to develop the children into the society by using Catalan in the schools. The policy was adopted for ensuring equal rights among Catalonia’s pupils

notwithstanding their origin or mother tongue. The Vic situation also suggests that, language does not only reflect communication, it also demonstrates solidarity and represents reality and culture. At times, when a speaker communicates in an indigenous language, s/he does not only want to show her/his antipathies to other languages but to show her/his allegiance to the language in which s/he communicates.

The importance attached to a language largely determines its suitability as a medium of instruction. How prestigious a language is, can be determined by its perceived socio-economic value, its status raising potential, perceived instrumentality, esteemed functions or roles in the nation, its numerical strength, political and economic power, the use of that language in official domains, and its educational value. Adebija (2004) is of the opinion that, there is a development of positive attitudes, covert or overt, towards a language that appears to have value in all these different areas. In essence, positive attitudes develop towards a language in proportion to its enhanced function and use. Conversely, negative attitudes, covert or overt, develop towards a language in proportion to its lack of function or narrowing of its distributions in registers. Take for instance, Hausa, as a dominant language in the Northern parts of Nigeria, gains positive attitudes from many speakers of minority languages because the speakers of Hausa are seen to be politically powerful. The language is regarded as having some measure of influence at the national level. The ability to speak it raises one’s ego and links one with its influence, because it is also considered to be the language of a politically, linguistically, and economically dominant group, a traditional power broker elite ruling oligarchy whose voice counts (‘Born to Rule’). Therefore, many speakers of small languages, e.g., Gure-Kahugu Wadana, Gbaya, Amokata, Kamuku, Kitimi, etc., in Kaduna State or minority languages, e.g., Angas, Barke, Barawa, Boboh, Gera, Gewzawa, Kayung, Jeraina, etc., in Bauchi State are keen to learn Hausa language. Hausa language is one of the Chadic branch of African Languages spoken in Northern Nigeria and adjacent areas. It is one of the two most widely spoken languages of sub Saharan Africa (the other being Swahili). Some learn it because, according to them, it has a strong

appeal as a lingua franca. The language is also a means of communication in the media, even in the British Broadcasting Corporation (i.e., BBC Hausa). It is noteworthy to explain here that, other two languages recognized by Nigerian government have similar qualities like the Hausa. The Igbo language in the south and Yoruba language of the Niger-Congo Branch is spoken in the west. They are prestigious nationally and even taught in our tertiary institutions. That is why there is a shift. For example, children speakers of some languages (e.g., Baatonu, Burutin, and even Nupe) raised in urban areas such as Ilorin grow up not able to speak their indigenous language. Instead, they gain greater facility in Yoruba the dominant language of Ilorin community. Even usage of English in Nigeria is another good evidence of the influence of language on social cohesion. The importance of English in Nigeria obviously goes beyond the boundary of academic, administrative, political, commercial, and religious communication alone. It is important to note that, English language goes as far as to the coffers of cohesion, solidarity, and national unity. Those who can speak the English language have a feeling of solidarity, linguistic prestige, and elitism among themselves.

However, the importance attached to the three major languages has greatly influenced admiration and respect from indigenous speakers of minority languages, even to the detriment of their languages. Though it seems that the minority tribes are becoming united with the main speakers of the major languages in that regard, a perturbing issue is that the *status quo* in which three major languages are becoming dominant has great probability of generating a tripartite society. A society in which Nigerians would simply identify themselves as belonging to their respective main linguistic background (that is Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba). The sense of belonging to a minority language community would become absent soon or later. This decreases the needed unity in the nation; it can clone the citizens into three units of averse peoples. A preferable option that could sustain the unity (or the desired Nigerianism) is to seek a means of maintaining a mutual growth or usage of the main languages and the minor languages. In this way, the identity of the minority speakers is retained and their language would not

become endangered. The minority would not consider themselves as not belonging to their linguistically diminishing communities but only to the larger linguistic community. Instead, they would consider themselves as belonging to the larger community as well as retaining their own linguistic heritage. An efficient way of making this possible is additive bilingualism that I would consider in the next section.

3. The Importance of Additive Bilingualism

The minority communities speaking a particular language have a sense of belonging and solidarity to the community whose language they adopt. Government will gain a lot of grounds if it uses the opportunity to create an avenue to solidify the relationship whose foundation the communities have already laid. This can be drawn from additive bilingualism: a situation where a language is dominant, neither posing threat nor receiving threat from any other language and learners can completely learn with both languages (See Merrill & Lapkin, 2014, p. 203). Where there is decline in the usage of a minority language or the minority language is going into extinct, pupils can use one language as medium of instruction and their minority language that has not been coded or lacking orthography can be employed as the language of interaction. I am aware of the critique by Peter Pluddemann (1997) that additive bilingualism (and even the subtractive bilingualism) is not reliable because it is not applicable to all situations. This could be true in some cases. For example, in a situation where there is lack of political will, or some sect in the leadership of the nation desire that their language should be dominant over other languages, additive bilingualism may not be effective. Even if additive bilingualism is introduced in that situation, it is not certain that it will flourish or even produce any positive result. Fortunately, the Nigeria situation is very dissimilar to such counterproductive example. The sociocultural context in Nigeria is permissive; there is no persecution or coercion by any tribe to force some minority or some less dominant group to speak a major language. In fact, the National Policy, provided by the Federal government, indicates that, there is a permissive ground for additive bilingualism to flourish to a greater extent in the country.

In some situations, the applicability of additive bilingualism is largely depending on the choice of people, that is, the parent and the children and not necessarily the government. For example, Zepp (1988) explains that, children of the Chinese in America have their learning in English but their parents insist that they attend Chinese lessons in the evening time in addition to their English lessons that were done during the day. This is a bit different from the situation in Canada, where students have the opportunity to study both in English and in French because of the government policies concerning bilingual official languages. In both cases, the students could equally learn in both languages, Chinese with English and French with English, respectively. Nigeria may not be able to practise a bilingual official language policy, but an additive bilingualism has efficient potentials in the nation. If Nigeria really adds sincerity and adopts this socio-linguistic determining variable in her language policy formulation, it will cement the unity of the ethnic groups in the country. So, the pedagogical viability, simplicity and suitability are not only expected to be the only determinant of instruction medium, socio-linguistic variable should be put into consideration.

4. Socio-linguistic Variable: Assessment of Current Scope and Challenges

It is, however, worthy of note that, the importance of socio-linguistic variable receives some emphasis in the draft charter for the promotion of African languages in education, during the Pan African seminar held in Ghana [on the 26th to 30th August 1996 on 'The Problems and Prospects of the use of African Languages in Education']. The preamble of the draft charter expresses that, languages all over the world have always been important for personality development and the attainment of both group and national consciousness as well as in the cultural development of group and nations (See Prah, 2009, p. 155). This shows that, socio-linguistic variable gears toward unity of purpose and stimulates the collaborative efforts of citizens for the upliftment of the culture of the people. This will invariably affect people of all races in time and space. Challenges may arise, but then, solutions will emerge, leading to

prospects arising from such languages in use. It is important to understand and value the essence of language as means of communication for the development of humankind both at individual and social levels. Section one paragraph eight of the National Policy on Education (NPE, 1981), states that:

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 interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother-tongue. In this connection, the government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. (p. 8)

The indication from the above is that, many children may not actually study their mother tongues but an indigenous language of wider communication instead in primary and earlier part of secondary school. For example, in Bauchi, Plateau, and Kaduna States, Hausa would appear to serve as language of wider communication, and in parts of Ondo, Edo, Kogi, and Kwara States Yoruba similarly serves as a language of wider communication. A fundamental question that has been the concern of some writers and commentators is whether such children should be encouraged to study yet another major indigenous language as their second language (L2). Bamgbose (2001) feels that, such children by having the indigenous language, as L1, would have satisfied both the letter and the spirit of this section. Awobuluyi (1991), on the other hand is of the opinion that children in that category would have satisfied the letter but not the spirit of the NPE language provision quoted above. The two divergent views acknowledge that, such children would be conversant with, if not versed, in one of the two languages. However, the opinion of Awobuluyi (1991), seems to be more appealing, to a greater extent, because it gives separate acknowledgement to the spirit of that provision which is in the interest of 'National Unity'. This bespeaks that learning a language should not only be for its sake but also for the sake of national unity. If the children were only versed in their indigenous

language, they would lack social affiliations that emanate from the use of language. There is need to encourage the children to go beyond the language barrier caused by lingual diversity. Neville (1989) gives support to this by saying that, "if we want to fight against prejudice or racism then we have, among other things, to break down the language barriers" (p. 7). For the sake of national unity, each child in the country should, as much as possible, be encouraged to inculcate the habit of communicating in a major indigenous language native to some major cultural zone in the country other than his own indigenous language.

Nonetheless, when a child studies a major language as his first language, s/he is thereby exposed to that cultural and linguistic zone that typifies the major language; but going by the fact that the major language is his or her indigenous language, the child needs to study another major indigenous language as his L2. This is required in order to satisfy the real spirit of national unity, which is the unambiguous bane behind the language provision in the section cited previously. Though it would require a collective commitment from parent, community, and the government, there is certainty that if such is put into serious practice people will associate together in unity and togetherness. The spirit of unity in diversity will be more predominant especially among the youths. There have been some acknowledgement of primacy of national unity in the formulation of language policy or the usage of language in the society. For example, a report concerning African indigenous languages, compiled by the Ministerial Committee appointed by the South African Ministry of Education (2003) stated that, "African's languages reflect a rich tapestry of cultures which, by definition, particularly in contemporary Africa, strongly suggest that intercultural communication should be one of the central pillars of the development policy in the African Union" (p. 7).

It goes further to say that, the policy may benefit significant regional distribution while simultaneously balancing such a necessary bias with the need to empower provincial citizens with linguistic ability in one or more of the languages that are statistically,

economically, and socially more widely distributed nationally. This would not only meet a practical requirement to assist South Africans who love to travel and who insist on staying wherever they like in the country, but would also engender national awareness through active multilingualism. If Nigerian government would show sincere commitment to similar acknowledgement, the desired unity in the nation would not be farfetched.

A principal challenge to L1 medium of education policy relates to its implementation in cosmopolitan areas like Lagos, Ibadan, Port Harcourt, Kaduna, and Abuja, cities in which people from many diverse ethnic groups live. The diverse ethnic backgrounds existing in these cosmopolitan areas may make it difficult to consider one language as major or not or even to encourage the learning of one major language for all the children from different ethnic origins. Amao (2010) notes, however, that there is no reason why the L1 medium policy cannot succeed in such cosmopolitan areas because the majority of children are normally from a particular language group. Such children could be taught in their first languages while special school could be established for children not catered for in the first-language medium policy, where other languages, both foreign and indigenous could serve as media of instruction. It is pertinent to note that, this opinion could pave way for unity and cohesion if well implemented for the benefit of learners, teachers, government, and other stakeholders both within and outside the African soil.

There are also a number of responsibilities on the part of policy formulators. Lo Bianco (1990) identifies one responsibility by suggesting that, "it is the responsibility of policy makers to extricate themselves from the interest-based lobbies" (p. 20). In a multicultural setting, it is possible that, the political leaders or traditional leaders would try to influence the formulation of language policy to benefit their sociocultural affiliations. The policy formulators should distant themselves from such prejudiced influences –this is also applicable to those who implement the policies. In addition, policy formulators should not only think of policy formulation leaving everybody to their own interpretations, which may breed confusion

and ambiguity. There is the need for clarification for effective implementation. The implementation of the policies should also be religiously motivated and monitored in the hands of both administrators (Ministry officials) and users (teachers) who will interpret, expound, and expatiate on the policy for proper implementation. They should be informed that, such a provision is not only for instrumental purposes but also for national interest and must be treated as such. Thus, those that implement the policies should undergo some sensitisation that an important objective of the policies is that children should have the right to a familiarity with, and as much as possible, the perfect understanding of the major languages of their country for the sake of unity, co-operation, and mutual development of the nation.

5. The Relevance of Cohesive Dictions and Political Behaviours among Leaders

The provision of the NPE (section 8 part 1) moves towards removal of tribalism, discrimination, and ethno-linguistic prejudices and replaces them with the promotion of positive attitudes, respect, and the spirit of 'One Nation bound in Freedom, Peace and Unity'. To achieve this laudable objective, among other things, the language of disunity from our leaders should stop. Unity is unlikely when Yorubas are seeking to break away to establish *Oduduwa Republic* and the Igbos are nursing the *Biafra Republic* ideology to secede from the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The Hausas, as well, are promoting the *Arewa Confederacy* because of the nonchalance of some bad eggs that sponsor political thuggery, intolerance, and self-aggrandizement resulting into 'Boko Haramism' yielding incessant bombing terrorism, killing, and kidnapping. How can we claim to be one nation in such context? Perhaps, there should be an inclusive and sovereign national conference (not for disintegration) where we can discuss what necessary steps we can take as a nation to create a sustainable and lasting unity among us so that anarchy and strife would give way. Awolowo (1981) affirming this says that, Nigeria cannot be rebuilt with the bricks of flake. Many leaders who should show practical examples by living out the true meaning of unity are just engrossed by their own interests. Some of these leaders (better conceived as

rulers) are the true example of 'political chameleon' who cross-carpet from one political party to the other and talk of disintegration and dismemberment when their political whims and caprices are not achieved. They erase the love and friendship between people by distinguishing between settlers and non-settlers in the political regions. This is what Igboanusi and Lothar (in press) has defined as 'discriminatory citizenship'. The actions and dictions of these politicians have greatly increased acrimonious disunity and hatred among Nigerians in order for them to acquire political positions or prevent some opponents from acquiring it. I will borrow the analogy of "blood and body" as used by Abobo (2013, p. 108) to stress the point that the society is the body while language is the blood. When political and traditional leaders, due to egocentric ambitions or ethnic hatred, use words that can disunite and provoke chaos instead of unity, they are poisoning the blood of the society. They forget that the spirit of co-operation is sine-qua-non to actualising the great nation dream of our ancestors. Misunderstanding will come, but people should be magnanimous enough to overlook injury or insult. We receive forgiveness from and for our sins by forgiving those who trespass against us. Awolowo (1981) has this to say, "Whenever the spirit of forgiveness, peace and unity are closely and individually related and we see this trinity as our guiding lights, our progress is sure and our prosperity and welfare can no more be diminished or beclouded" (p. 142).

The policy that can produce unity must aim at encouraging people to perform or act magnanimously. We need to understand that, the influence of language on our unity has serious attachment with the political behaviour of our leaders. It is necessary for political leaders to know that their dictions have much effect on the unity of the nation; that is a major reason why leaders should shun rancorous speeches and utterances, especially in a multicultural setting like Nigeria. In fact, electorates should understand the principle that people that find it difficult to tame their tongues, when necessary, cannot be good leaders. This should be one of the guiding principle when exercising our suffrage. We need people who will show practical magnanimity in our society, people whose life-

style is worthy of emulation in place of those who make people or country ungovernable for their opponents. We can recall the presidential visit of Dr. Goodluck Jonathan to Kano (the second largest city in Nigeria) after the bombing that claimed about 200 innocent lives. He said the master-minders and the sponsors of this dastardly act are not ghosts, they are not spirit, they live among Nigerians, and they shall be surely brought to book. Many Nigerians would appreciate the tact of Goodluck Jonathan in anonymising the conceivers of those vicious acts. He probably displayed a high sense of patriotism there. Who dare mention their names? One can only try that secretly when one gets to 'Aso Rock' where one is safe in the cleft of the God-given Rock (of maximum security and safety). Kudos! But how long shall we live with the fear of the unknown whose agents are arrested today, declared missing tomorrow and announcing a worrisome ₦500m gratification for anybody outside the 'Aso Rock' who can tell the armed, but timid, Nigeria army and police where the 'husbands' of our security men are relaxing. Which civilians know such hideout? The culture or attitudes of our leaders seem to discourage rather than encourage the unity in the active process of making the society harmonious for peaceful co-existence. Sincerity is thrown carefree to the winds. Truth is evading us or we are just circumventing it. Yet, we sing it daily that, 'the labour of our heroes past shall never be in vain'. An important addition here is that, language can effectively create and sustain our unity as a nation if there is an enabling environment to sustain the cohesive objectives of the language.

6. Concluding Remarks

In order to ensure solid unity for this nation – Nigeria, the suggestions and recommendations of this paper are that:

- It is important to determine what is socially and psychologically desirable for our country in the determination of social and psychological values.
- The support of the target population should be ensured in the language policy objective if it is meant to bind-up the people and unite the nation.
- Government should see to the implementation enforcement especially of the non-compliant policy.
- To avoid cracks in the wall of the policy and remove the red signal of national breakdown, there should be proper monitoring and supervision in the implementation procedures.

In this contemporaneous period, there seems to be grave notions and social concerns of many Nigerians leaders in assuring to keep Nigeria as one. Of course, there loom some crisis-ridden situations shaking the veracity of our nationhood. There is social, religious, political, economic, and even educational crisis. Further still, are resource management crisis (e.g., coining our Five Naira, Ten Naira paper currency), and discipline crisis among others. It is still a task for Nigerian leaders to focus on the target of uniting the nation and ensuring the cementing of the diverse ethnic groups, and teaching our children through example and not by precept only that Nigeria belongs to us all and we should be free to live in any part of it – North, South, East, or West. This is true unity, which is attainable by virtue of good language policy. The three languages namely Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba are considered major because the ethnic groups where each is used has the largest number of people. The population has little or no significance to the nation's economic or political growth. The three indigenous languages, including English are considered as national languages, meaning the languages that can foster unity. They are capable of promoting national unity and nationalism. English is a language that is not only national and official but it also fosters the administration of Nigeria and its political, economic unification. The roles assigned to English and other indigenous languages signify the good attempt to foster nationalism.

Nigerians, despite the drumbeats and songs of disunity from some unpatriotic leadership, remain one. It is fortuitous that, the fostering of majority languages on the minorities has not engineered political polychotomy, chaos, crisis, or language war since 1960. People in the minority tribes have not used the weapon of physical force to frustrate the majority-based language policy decision that gives social and political advantages to the major ethnic groups. It seems that, most Nigerian

masses, if not our leaders, are interested in the real Nigerianism: a united Nigeria. It is therefore expedient on any sincere government to have a body of language policy formulators and administrators from both minority and majority sides to assist in sustaining the unity of the nation through proper language policy formulation and implementation in order to avoid possible disintegration.

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