National development in a multilingual environment

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ABSTRACT

Language is of paramount importance and a useful tool in the development of any nation. It is that variable in the development process that coordinates all other elements of development towards the growth of the human society. However, no society as it were, can claim to be totally monolingual due to the ease of mobility of peoples across the globe. Thus languages, which are means of cultural identity of peoples, have to coexist in a particular geopolitical entity. Rather than the multilinguistic nature and its attendant multiculturalism of nations serving as impediment to the development of nations it should be considered as part of the nations' natural resource for growth and development. The diverse languages in countries should be made to serve as a means of integration and source of strength. People must wake up to the reality of their multilingual identity by ensuring that languages co-exist to bring about the needed popular participation in national development. Multilingualism is therefore, a veritable tool in the development process of nations.

Introduction

In an attempt to discuss development, the parameters of development are often the Gross Domestic Product, (GDP), Gross Net Product,(GNP) and other economic notions as the Income per capita. However development includes also the complete transformation of the socio-cultural, political and economic belief system of particular societies to suit their needs. In fact, it is the ability of a society to sustainably improve the welfare of its people. Development is all about desirable socio-economic progress.

It involves a transformation of the economic and socio-cultural structures of a people, leading to an improvement in their living conditions. Such living conditions embrace the basic needs for food, portable water, basic health, shelter, energy supply and education. National development can therefore be viewed as the development of a nation's human and material resources in the achievement of a nation capable of meeting the needs and aspirations of its people. For a nation to be able to harness these human and material resources there is a need for a kind of human interaction which invariably leads to cooperation and this cooperation is hardly possible without communication. Language is a tool of communication known to man. It is the most remarkable tool that man has invented and it is the one that makes other tools relevant to him.

Tools of any greater sophistication demand the kind of human cooperation and division of labour which is hardly possible without language. Language, in fact, is the great machine-tool which makes human development possible.

The role of language in development cannot be over-emphasized; although a mere look at it may seem insignificant but if development is seen as the sustainable socio-cultural, economic and technological transformation of a society, then language becomes an important variable in the development process.

This is justified by Wee (2003) in Ukuchi Nwachukwu (2010) who viewed the existence of language in a community in terms of its usefulness in achieving specific utilitarian goal, such as access to economic development and social mobility.

Language performs a lot of functions in any society. One of such functions is a major one given by Ferdinand de Saussure (1959) which is that language is a system of signs .It is a system of signs for encoding meaning and the realities of the world. It is the realities of the world that are worked upon which later bring out development in any society. As such language is a tool of development.

The Concept of Multilingualism/ Bilingualism

Oloruntoba-Oju (1999) discovers that the terms, multilingualism and bilingualism are often used interchangeably. While bilingualism is the exposure to and acquisition of two languages, multilingualism refers to acquisition of more languages. Various definitions have been proposed for these terms. According to Bloomfield (1933) in Akindele and Adegbite (1999) a bilingual should possess native-like control of two or more languages. Akindele and Adegbite gave a more subtle definition of bilingualism as the ability of an individual to produce meaningful utterances in other languages. This definition will include all who are able to produce communicative utterances in any of the two languages.

An important feature of bilingualism is that it is a consequence of language in contact; which deals with the direct or indirect influence of one language on the other. Akindele and Adegbite gave the following factors for causes of bilingualism in the society: trade, colonialism, migration, borderline factor, annexation and amalgamation among others.

Though Akindele (2008) listed such countries as France, Great Britain, Spain, West Germany, Lesotho, Somalia, Botswana, Madagascar, Ethiopia and Switzerland as officially monolingual basing his argument on 90% population of speakers; bilingualism and multilingualism are fast becoming social phenomena governed by the needs of globalization and cultural oneness. Owing to the ease of

access to information facilitated by the internet, individual exposure to multiple languages is becoming increasingly frequent, thereby promoting a need to acquire additional languages.

Linguistic Policy of Nation States in Africa

In a multilingual state there is a need for proper language planning which is expected to promote development of the various spheres of life in a nation. Uncoordinated linguistic situation may result in ethno-linguistic agitation, breakdown of information and communication gap between the government and the governed and general underdevelopment.

Akindele and Adegbite (1999) sees language planning as a set of deliberate activities systematically designed to select from, organize and develop the language resources of a community in order to enhance the utilization of such resources for development. The result of language planning is language policy which is a government statement on a planned course of action contained in national documents such as the constitution and the National Policy on Education. Fishman (1971); Verdoodt, (1979) in Akindele and Adegbite (1999) identified three types of policy decisions in African nations; the amodal, unimodal and the multimodal types of policy decision.

The Amodal type of policy decision extols one 'exogenous language such as French or Portuguese and belittles all endogenous (indigenous) languages. This is the practice in most French and Portuguese ex-colonies, such as Mali, Niger, Senegal, Togo, (French) and Angola, Mozambique and Guinea Bissau (Portuguese). The identity and assimilation strategy of the French and Portuguese colonialists ensured that the metropolitan community and the African people share a common political belief and cultural destiny.

The unimodal policy selects one major endogenous language such as Swahili in Tanzania, Kirundi in Burundi, Somali in Somalia, Amharic in Ethiopia and Arabic in Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Sudan as the national or official language while other languages serve various other functions. While the multimodal Policy type in which an exogenous language as well as one or more endogenous majority languages are chosen over and above other minority languages, operates especially in formal ex-English colony, like Nigeria(English, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba), Sierra Leone (English and Creole), Kenya (English and Swahili) and South Africa (English and Afrikaans).

In all these policy decisions, it is observed that none of the African languages is considered suitable for national or official language; they are either used along with another foreign language or neglected totality.

Multilingualism and National Development

The linguistic feature prevalent in all the countries south of the Sahara is that each of them is composed of many ethnic groups with a resultant effect of clusters of local languages. According to Ethnologue (2013), Africa has about two thousand one hundred and ten languages (2110) which are about thirty (30.5) percent of the entire world languages; Europe and America together have eighteen percent of the total languages spoken in the world. Nigeria on its part has about four hundred indigenous languages within its geopolitical entity. The cluster of these local languages have been argued to be an obstacle to unity within the nation because one of the major features of a nation is the possession of a common language; and encouraging the use of many local languages will result in inter ethnic conflicts and so many countries prefer to support an exogenous language for its neutrality. Oseni (2004); Akanbi (2013).It is also a common belief, going back to the biblical narrative of the tower of Babel, that linguistic diversity causes political conflict, but this belief is contradicted by the fact that many of the world's major episodes of violence have taken place in situations with low linguistic diversity, such as the Yugoslav, the American civil war, the genocide in Rwanda, Ife - Modakeke and Offa - Erin-ile inter- city violence in Nigeria; where many of the most stable political units have been highly multilingual.

Moreover, multilingualism has been encouraged elsewhere and it is seen to be a strong force towards creating a sense of belonging among peoples of different ethnic groups. Example is Papua New Guinea, a multilingual Island with about eight hundred languages. She was able to tackle the problems of multilingualism through a gradual process of bilingual education starting from kindergarten. Klaus (2003) in Ogunwale (2013) reported that each child was exposed to several indigenous languages and by the year 2000 she was able to develop up to 380 languages.

Again, language is one of the several modes of identity of humanity; others include gender, religion, nationality, profession, ethnic groupings etc. If people are able to keep each of these identities as part of their social values, and are still able to co-exist, then diversity in mother – tongue should not be a cause of disunity. The richness of mother – tongues in the efficacy of teaching and learning is found in the experiment of Babs Fafunwa Ife Primary Education Research in 1968 where a group of pupils were taught all subjects including English language in their local language and they excelled in all subjects including arts, social sciences and science subjects.

The need to recognise cultural democracy is part of the general political development of a nation. Culture and language go together. When local languages are appreciated, grassroots development is bound to be rapid, because a **sense** of belonging is automatically created. Government reforms and policies are more appreciated when they are disseminated in local languages. There can be no national development when the grassroots is not developed and the only means towards such development is sensitization of the public about government activities which is only effective through local languages.

Language is the sum total of a peoples' life; value, culture, tradition and above all indigenous science and technology. There is a wealth of knowledge hidden away in indigenous languages and which if harnessed, could improve the well being of nation-states. Loss of local languages means loss of indigenous cultural values and orientation which leads to such societal vices as alcoholism, disintegration of family ties and other societal vices that pervades our societies today. Indigenous languages contain also local values that serve to protect the society. Foreign language brings alien societal values that cause disintegration and chaos in the society most times.

A lot of indigenous knowledge are lost when local languages are not encouraged which could assist in the scientific and technological growth of the society. Local remedies and control of disease, native science and technology, social values and wealth are all embedded in indigenous languages so that when they are lost all these too are lost, the society only becomes dependent on other nations' resources which does not augur well for national development. Such technology as blacksmithing, local weaving, farming and so on are

vocations that provide employment to teeming youths. The loss of those local vocations through our language shift has led to the mass unemployment being witnessed all over the world in recent time.

Above all, the continuous use of foreign languages in most developing nations of the world is also very symbolic. It shows that those nations are still under the authority and powers of the former colonialists. A country whose psyche is still in bondage of linguistic colonialism cannot strive for any meaningful development. The resultant effect is that such a people will never appreciate what is theirs. Leaders of such nations are seen rushing to those affiliated countries at every given excuse without any effort at improving their own nation. The price of learning a foreign language in developing nation is just too high. Efforts should be made at supporting the teaching and learning of indigenous languages. Foreign languages such as English and French do not have to be purchased at the price of losing one's indigenous language.

Multilingual nations could make great contributions to the world by virtue of the inevitable variety and mixture of their culture. They are in contact with the modern world and at the same time they are not losing the grips of their own values.

Conclusion

This paper examined the issues of bilingualism and multilingualism in the development of nation states and debunked the negative assertions that these phenomena constitute obstacles to national development. Multilingualism and its attendant multiculturalism if well harnessed and developed could be a veritable tool in the development of any nation. Indigenous languages ensure people remain within their native culture and values thus bringing diversity into the cultural milieu of the nation. This linguistic and cultural diversity are veritable resources for tourism. It will also encourage the harmonization of indigenous industries with modern science and technology to produce a better society.

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