

LANGUAGE, LITERACY, AND ETHNICITY: A REVIEW OF THE ETHNO-LINGUISTIC SITUATIONS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, language, literacy, and ethnicity have been looked at as very important tools in the identification and analysis of a people, whether as an ethnic, racial, or national group. However, no single group is in the majority in Nigeria. Three ethnic groups were marked as the largest ethnic groups and they have often encountered ethnic and linguistic situations from other groups in the nation. In other words, the complex ethno-linguistic situation in Nigeria has been the prime representation of the classic set of problems in matters relating to national planning and development. Historical and sociocultural elements are fundamental requirements for national development which requires social cohesion, understanding, and cordial relationships among the citizens. This can be achieved through language which is a medium of communication. Language influences an individual's interpretation of reality; also, ethnicity and literacy can be established using language which is one of the main symbols of a people's culture. The Nigerian Society is multilingual and pluralistic as such most of our social problems involve some type of conflict, and sometimes, disagreement over cultural tradition and language symbols of our identities. In order words, language meets universal human needs for identification and communication. This paper explores the place of language, literacy, and ethnicity in the identification of a people and their culture, it x-rayed some notable situations induced by ethnic and linguistic affiliations and concluded by advocating for a policy that should encourage the existence and maintenance of these concepts in Nigeria. This will help the nation to achieve cordial relationships, and a good understanding of the present-day interdisciplinary dialogue in language, literacy, and ethnicity, for greater national development.

INTRODUCTION

Language, literacy, and ethnicity have important values as symbols of national, educational, and ethnic identities. In the world today there abound interaction of different ethnic groups which differ in shared cultural heritage, language, religion, customs, values, education, and morals. There may be the dominance of ethnic identities that can also beget competition and other situations that do not help a nation to develop. Language is one of the main symbols of a people's culture. It has an important value as a symbol of national and ethnic identity. Nigeria has been classified as the largest country in West Africa (Central Intelligence Agency, 2008). According to the National Bureau of Statistics Nigeria, (2023), Nigeria has an estimated population of over 225 million people. Nigeria is a country with over 400 languages and 520 tribes respectively (Lewis (ed.) *Ethnologue* 2009 and Heine and Nurse

2000.

The multilingual nature of Nigeria could transcend all barriers and bring about a unifying force even in the 'face' of diversity. There is an emphasis on equity and single common citizenship in multilingual Communication which creates interrelationship between culture, language, ethnic identity attachments and community relationship. It relies on the functionality of language and the intricate relationship between language and context. This has enhanced multilingual literacy in Nigerian environments. (see Njemanze, 2014)

Literacy is central to knowledge acquisition while knowledge acquisition is the onus of educational achievement. Howana (1999), sees literacy as that which, ...frees imagination, inventiveness, creativity, literacy. Helps us to deepen our understanding of our origins, our roots, tradition, and culture and to extract from these that which prepare us to contributing members in the world that is wider than our birth, our villages, and our community, p.5.

Literacy is important to the process of human development. It is fundamental to economic growth, competitive performance, professional development, and education of modern nations. Literacy skills make a difference in the development level of individuals. Literacy as a medium of reading and writing was introduced to Nigerians during colonialism and has projected the image of Africans to the stereotyped figure of being barbaric, without form and value, a duck continent full of Negroes who were daily living without a God, laws, and religion. (Achebe 2000: 46). Contrary to this description, literacy has prepared us (Nigerians) to accommodate the challenges of the present era.

Culture on the other hand, is everything a people has, it is the way of life, the belief, and the totality of man finds the summation of the ethos, principles, and rules that guide and hold the people together. That is why when the culture of a people is questioned, threatened, or misrepresented. it means that the totality of the people that believe, and uphold that culture is threatened. Just as a man's passport contains important data, the culture of the people is a carrier of all the indices that make up the people.

Over the years cultural language has been looked at as a very important tool in the identification, and analysis of a people. Because of the number of ethnic groups in Nigeria language has been one of the major identifying symbols of the various ethnic groups. However, the smaller ethnic groups have the fear of being dominated by the more powerful ones, while the powerful ones are afraid of losing out to their rivals. Each group therefore sees the other as a predator ethnic group that hungers for power through linguistic, political, and economic dominance. Given this situation, conflict arises.

Thus, Mezieobi (1994) asserts that whatever is done or anticipated in Nigeria, particularly at the government's quarters, has an ethnic undertone. In employment, admissions into schools, distribution of social amenities, and in social relationships, ethnic affiliation, and attachments are very strong and conspicuously manifest (24). There is therefore evidence of multi-ethnic vices such as intra-cultural and inter-ethnic antagonism, hostility, bitterness, mistrust, and war. This paper thus, explores issues on language, identity, and ethnicity and their implications on social stability in Nigeria.

DIVERSITY OF LANGUAGES IN NIGERIA

As stated earlier, Nigeria has been classified as the largest country in West Africa (Central Intelligence Agency, 2008). According to the National *Bureau of Statistics Nigeria, (2023)*, Nigeria has an estimated population of over 225 million people. It is situated in the Western part of Africa. It has three major ethnic groups namely Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. There are also minority ethnic groups which include Delta State, River State, and Cross River State. This population made the

number of indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria to be estimated between 420 and 500, Bamgbose (1992). Nigeria is made up with a great variety of people with English language as our common, official, language.

Nigerian society is pluralistic, and many of our social problems involve some types of conflict, and sometimes, disagreement over cultural traditions and languages - which form the symbols of our identity. The Nigeria society is therefore marked by diversities of ethnic groups with each speaking its distinct language. Jowit argues that to determine the exact number of languages indigenous to Nigeria is a daunting task. He goes further to argue that estimates of the Nigerian languages range from two to four hundred. Social stability is a fundamental requirement for every nation to develop. It encourages social cohesion, understanding and cordial relationship among the citizens of a particular ethnic region. This, in turn, enhances peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding among citizens of a particular nation. Thus, to achieve social stability in the Nigerian nation, every citizen needs to acquire and demonstrate appropriate civil attitude in Nigeria. This will foster unity core and sustainable development strides.

A country with this number of ethnic groups and population is bond to experience ethnic problems. This is affirmed by Nweke thus, one of the most striking characteristics of Nigeria is its singular ethnic diversity, a demographic tapestry woven of more than two hundred different ethnic groups, where except for the effect of migration are often geographically homogenous and often coincide with linguistic cultural and religious groupings (3). Many of our social problems therefore involve some type of conflict and disagreement over cultural tradition and language - symbols of our identity. It is the view of this paper that to stem this tide of discord and attain social stability, something must be done concerning our differing cultural and linguistic situations.

LANGUAGE, LITERACY, AND ETHNICITY AS CONCEPTS

The word language denotes key concept which have general specific usages. It can also be used metaphorically. One can speak of "English Language", " Animal Language", Computer Language", "Sign Language" "The language of love", The language of religion", Bio-cybernetic language", etc. In estimation therefore, language may be equated with, or serve as a synonym for any sort of communication expressed in any medium. However, linguists define the term language to apply only to human vocal communication; they argue that while humans speak, other animals only communicate in special ways. Hickerson (1980) asserts that: There have been many recent advances in the biological approach to language. Research have learned a great deal about the anatomical and neurological endowment, and the inter-workings of these, which enable human beings to formulate messages of greater complexity, transmit them more rapidly and utilize them in a greater diversity of ways than do members of any other species (2). Language, therefore, is a universal occurrence in human life and human languages are many and diverse.

'Language is therefore man's intrinsic inheritance for communication, part of man's image of God as a speaking being. Language is therefore very necessary, a *sine qua non*, for the identification of a people. Chomsky tells us that when we study language, we approach the human essence. Fowler (1986) sees language as something that shapes a peoples world view: language is one of the most important areas of knowledge that human beings possess since it is a powerful influence on the way people perceive and adjust to the world outside them. This knowledge has positive and negative aspects. The usual tendency of linguistic practice is toward stability, the consolidation of socially legitimated areas of

knowledge, mode of control and types of relationship (39).

Lyon (32) sees the main function of language as that of "communication". Leech (45-58) enumerated the functions of language to include: (a) Expressive function: that is expressing attitudes, (b) Informative function: it carries information from one source to another, (c) Directive function - influencing the behaviour and decisions of others, (d) Aesthetic function: bringing out the artistic effect, (e) Phatic function: maintaining and cementing social bonds. From the Leechian functions of language, one can deduce that language provides a focus for man's deepest religious, cultural, and aesthetic experiences. Through language, a people's values, cultures, hopes and aspirations are transmitted from generation to generation.

Given the foregoing, one can therefore say that language is organized both at the oral and the written levels. The system of organized symbolic level through which man communicates includes both the vocal as well as the written (graphic) forms - books, pictures, video, song, and other paralinguistic gestures. Language is therefore a main component of cultural identity. Obviously, it will not be proper to deny a people the means of expression of their cultural and traditional ways and expect peace to reign. This paper thus reviews the concept of identity.

LITERACY

Adieseshia (1976) in (Njemanze 2013) defines literacy as; "a functional instrument for transforming, constructing, and reconstructing human experiences. Literacy is not just about reading and writing but about carrying out the skills of reading and writing intelligently and successfully. A literate society is a productive and progressive one. Literacy liberates and empowers people; it is the foundation to a wide range of concepts. In other words, there is a correlation between success in one's job, every other activity, and his ability to read and write.

Through literacy Africans have come to the realization that there is power in narratives and have used this medium to give Africans and the world at large authentic stories of the lives of their peoples. Their priority, therefore, is to take back their narrative from those who claimed they, had the right to narrate the African stories for Africans by virtue of their acclaimed 'superiority' and insight into the sociopolitical situation in Africa. Despite the works written by Africans on the loss of culture and our dispossession and the confusion occasioned by colonialism, and its effects on the African man's psyche. This theme has remained an open-ended issue in African literary canon. That is why even in the twenty first century, the theme of cultural rejuvenation and assessment still holds sway. According to Achebe (2000:83).

Literacy has contributed in great measure to help the people uphold and defend their identities. The word "identity" has its origin from the French word *identite* which means "the same". Authors from different fields of study - anthropology, sociology, philosophy, medicine, psychology, political science, etc have broached the study of identity. Identity can be described as a person's conception and expression of individuality (personal identity) or group connection (social identity). However, for the purpose of this study, identity is defined as the distinctive characteristics belonging to any given individual or shared by all members of a particular social group.

There are different kinds of identity - personal identity, social identity, cultural identity, collective identity, and gender identity. Personal identity looks at those idiosyncratic things that make a person unique. It is sometimes called the ego identity-the self. Social identity is

defined by Turner and Oakes as the portion of an individual's self-concept derived **121** from perceived membership in a relevant social group (6). Cultural identity is the identity of one which is determined by historical factors. Such factors according to Turner and Oakes, include location, history itself, nationality, language sexuality, religious belief, ethnicity, aesthetics even food (324-337). Tajfel and Turner went further to argue that nations provide the framework for culture identities.

Collective identity looks at such issues as class, status and even party as their sources of identification of a group. Melucci sees collective identity as a useful analytical tool to explain social movements. It helps in understanding the development of modern collective action, distinct from formal organizations (Melucci, 23). Gender Identity refers to a person's private sense of and subjective experience of their own gender. It is generally described as one's private sense of being a man or a woman, consisting primarily of the acceptance of membership into category of people male or female (Neil and Donald, 140-141).

ETHNICITY

Ethnicity as a concept has attracted several scholarly discussions. Ethnicity has a strong link with language because it is the instrument with which people and their cultures are identified. In the words of Hawkins (ed.), it is "a group sharing a common origin, culture or language" (137). Ethnicity is further described by Nnoli as, "a social phenomenon associated with interactions among members of different ethnic groups" (5). Ethnicity involves a kind of informal interest groups with different members within the same society. They share similar kinship, religion, economic and cultural systems.

According to Ogugua, "ethnicity is characterized by common consciousness of one in relation to other ethnic groups relevant within a polity/" (7.) In other words, a particular ethnic group manifests a unique aspect of culture in their society. Thus, the onus of ethno-linguistic situations in Nigeria, is dependable on language, literacy levels, ethnic groups, cultural identity and geography of the population.

A REVIEW OF THE ETHNO-LINGUISTIC SITUATION IN NIGERIA

Having recognized that language has an important value as a symbol of national and ethnic or cultural identities in Nigeria, and with varieties of people using English language as our common, official language, this paper notes that, we have maintained the slogan of "Unity in diversity" to explain our unity in the face of differing linguistic and cultural, loyalties. This slogan reflects not only the diversities of the people who have come together as one nation since the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914 but has remained as a motif which tends to reduce differences and produce uniformity in our dealings with one another.

It had seemed as if the English language will make us rapidly forget our cultural differences if not immediately, then at least during a couple of generations. Hence, the policy of the Nigeria government has not favored most indigenous languages as part of the official national language for government, politics, commerce, law and justice, the upsurge of cultural loyalties has been instrumental to the review of the complex ethno-linguistic situation in Nigeria.

Also, Nigeria as a big nation with diversities of language, culture, belief, worldview and many languages including, Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Efik, Nupe, Edo, Ibibio, Anang, Gwari etc is such that, the diversities of languages will hamper effective communication, breed suspicions

and fear of political domination by the more populous tribes and those holding political power. This situation, hence, makes ethnicity as a concept to connote struggle.

According to Udezo and Nwadiolor in Chiegboka (eds) “there is contextual discrimination by members of one group against others based on differentiated system of socio-cultural symbols¹⁷ (240). When two or more ethnic groups live contiguously, many issues tend to bring about trouble - language use, governance, education evaluation, religious belief, economic dominance, etc. This leads to what Hullington in his analysis of civil violence, sees as giving rise to large scale violence that are vicious and divisive.

Again, Nigeria over time, has some group who never wanted to use other ethnic language as their language of communication in whatever scenario. Those groups seem to have rediscovered a need for, and have tried to reassert, their tradition and cultural heritage which finds expression in their cultural language. Such groups include the *Boko Hamm* Sect, the Niger Delta militants, the Biafra movement, AREWA, MEND, ODU People's Congress etc. These sects have many other reasons for their resurgences. These movements and groups are powerful social forces in our time, one which has increasing momentum to redefine and recreate ethno-linguistic situations in Nigeria.

The Nigerian situation is such that English language is the only link between the various ethnic groups and the textbooks that are in use are not designed to meet the linguistic needs of the specific language groups in Nigeria but written for all Nigerians even at all school levels. The result is that errors which have close correlation with structural and cultural contrasts seem to be endemic and can be categorized as a form of English called “Nigerian English” (See Adegbija, 1989).

There is also the problem of “translational English” which arises from cultural differences between L1 and L2 and consequently this can impede international literacy. These differences are found in such cultural items as marriage, farming season, burials, births, foods, sports, and superstition.

Other examples from student’s conversation include:

I am seeing you from SMAT (I can see you from School of Management building)

Please *wait* I want to get down. (please stop, I want to get off).

Our course reps. (representatives) *have eaten* our money. (Embezzled)

I heard the smell of fuel when I came to the office. (I perceived the smell of fuel when I came to the office).

Please, send a text, my line is not reachable. (Out of reach)

I am having a flat tire. (Have)

Nobody *hears* English better than me. (Understands better than I do)

I am understanding you. (can understand)

put off the light. (Switch off)

John *is lacking* behind in our department (lagging).

Please *borrow* me your GST book. (lend)

However, the dominance of the English language exists more at the level of usage. In practice, most bilinguals still see, think, and speak their thoughts in their first language. This explains why the level of interference is relatively high especially in the areas where there is no central indigenous language for better communicative purposes. (See Anjola, 2010).

POLITENESS AND RESPECT: In Nigerian Pidgin, modes of addresses are formalized to reflect age and social status in the Nigerian environment. Certain epithets, phrases, and words are used to show respect in NIGP in line with the cultural norms and the social relatives of the users. This is prominent in the following expressions in the student’s speech pattern.

“Baba-ekaro Sir” (Father good morning, Sir)

“Dadi ejoo...” (Daddy please)
“... our Presido...” (Our President)
“Sori Ma...” (I am sorry Madam)
“Ok ma” (it’s alright madam)

There is prominent use of the following exclamation marks in the different region.

Wetin/wa-o! – English – What? Or Why?!
Na wa-o – NIGP – What? Or Why?!
Sho-o – Yoruba – What? Or Why?!
Haba-a /kai – Hausa – What? Or Why?!
Ewo / chei – Igbo – What? Or Why?!
Isho-o – Delta – What? Or Why?!

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Most students have withdrawn from Universities and Colleges based on several agitation and insecurity. The National Youth Service Corps selects places that are a bit secured to deploy their graduates for their national service program. Most intellectual activities and interactions between the North and the South are at the lowest ebb because of insecurity in the country. When there is intellectual interaction, scholarship is enhanced; this is no longer the situation in Nigeria, because of the increasing rate of kidnap and crisis in the country.

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Instead of harnessing our ethnicities for better growth through deploying proper human relations methods, our politicians, and sometimes prominent people in the different fringes of Nigeria, use politics for divisive ends to win votes for election and to teach others to hate, and see others as the "infidel". Ojo (1980) is right when he argues that "the reaction bourgeoisie has concerned itself with the fomenting of religious strife, in order to divert the attention of the masses from the really important and fundamental economic and political problem" (P. 133). One cannot but see that language use and ethnic membership had caused a lot of problems in Nigeria.

The language of hate is as infectious as the language of love. There is an Igbo saying that: *okwu di uro n 'eme ka onuma juo oyi* (Palliative speech douses anger). Do our brother states, and other parts of Nigeria know this? If members of the state know how many Nigerians they have angered through their slogan: "Born to Rule", then they would change it.

RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS

There is no doubt that there is a rise in ethno-religious strife drawn mainly from the use of language. While the Muslims see Christians as "infidels", the Christians have had the belief, and brazenly preaches that Christianity is the only religion that holds absolute religious truth and that no one comes to the Father (God) except through Christ - the head of the Christian church. This kind of situation breeds contempt and often leads to blinding controversy, ethnic bias, motivated demonstration, and strife.

ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

Essien (2012) contends that the fall in economic indices is directly proportional to rise in secular violence in Nigeria. Many times, economic activities in Nigeria have been disrupted because of language-induced religious clashes in Nigeria. Between 1995 to the present day see Njemanze (2020) and Njemanze and Nwulu, (2013). There have been many violent clashes that led to poor economic activities in Nigeria. The economy of-the Northeast today

is in crises. Most traders who buy yams, tomatoes, beans etc, from the North have either stopped going to the North to buy and sell or have been using proxies to have these goods delivered to them in smaller quantities. Given the foregoing, there is an increase in the poverty level of Nigerians especially in the North, deteriorating infrastructure, joblessness, and dislocation of populations.

Nigeria has been known to have socio-political, economic, and religious instability, since the inception of her independence. Each ethnic group assesses the other with utmost suspicion. This has not yielded desired development in the country. The educational system is crippling by day and the citizens far from achieving functional education. This has reduced the quality of human input necessary for the development of a nation. Again, the multiplicity of ethnic groups has increased the diversities in the Nigerian nation. There had been series of inter-tribal crisis which erupts because of every little provocation. This has destroyed lives, valuable properties of people, and most times disorganized the school systems, which in turn breeds illiteracy in our society.

Unequal distributions of resources and facilities in Nigeria have also been instrumental to crisis. The less represented ethnic groups generate hostilities that beget crisis which paralyze meaningful activities in Nigeria. This should be reduced to achieve a stable process of nation building in the country. In the past, there were crisis in other parts of the world such as the separatist struggles - by the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the Quebecois in Canada, Basque Separatist struggles in Spain and Walloon nationalists in Belgium - all express the desires of minority peoples to maintain a separate entity, and not to be completely adsorbed or assimilated into a larger nationality.

However, in each of these cases, language plays a prominent role. Therefore, there is the need to retain and use indigenous languages, and to teach them to the younger generation. This can be achieved through the provision of a well-articulated multi-ethnic education programs to help the younger generation to appreciate other ethnic cultures for better understanding and tolerance.

RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Hence, the following recommendations are made below. Language develops from the wants of the people who tend to disperse themselves in a common given location over a particular period. This according to Haslam, tends to allow people to share a way of life that generally links individuals in a certain culture that is identified by the people of the group. The affluence of communication that comes along with sharing language promotes connections and roots to ancestors and cultural histories.

Since the Nigeria situation is such that language enables its speakers to relate to their environment, to describe and identify natural and cultural objects, and to organize and co-ordinate their activities such as in hunting, in organizing military expeditions, engage in group hunting, farming and sports. Language emphasizes citizenship along with religion; it reminds us of our cultural identity, and it is a main component of cultural identity, every language should therefore be given the opportunity to thrive in its society.

Another challenge that faces all societies is the need for the maintenance of social stability. We all know that stability is desirable, but it should not be at any price. Language should be used in such a way as to douse anger. To promote social stability therefore, we hereby recommend as follows:

The ethnic languages of the different ethnic or cultural groups should be encouraged by the Federal and State Governments by giving grants for research on such languages. The ethnic groups should be allowed to retain the use of their cultural languages in all human areas of endeavour to enable them to continue to bond together in peace. The State Houses of Assembly should be allowed to use their indigenous languages as official languages in their debates in the house business.

The ethnic group's languages should form the basis of their languages for education, communication, commerce, government, politics, without any legal restrictions. It is believed that if these recommendations are carried out, the Nigerian society would see more peaceful and stable years ahead.

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