

Language and Literature as Catalyst for National Integration and Development in Nigeria

By

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Abstract

Language and Literature play a pivotal role in shaping the socio-political and cultural landscape of any nation. In the context of Nigeria –a multilingual and multiethnic society the effective use of language and the creative power of literature serve as crucial instruments for fostering national integration and driving sustainable development. This paper explores the symbiotic relationship between language and literature and their influence on national identity, unity, progress. It argues that language is not only a means of communication but also a vehicle for transmitting cultural values and promoting mutual understanding among Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups. Literature, as a mirror of society, reflects and critiques national realities while inspiring collective consciousness and dialogue. The paper further emphasizes the importance of promoting indigenous languages and encouraging literary expressions that resonate with the lived experiences of all Nigerians. The paper concludes that language and literature, when harnessed effectively, can serve as powerful catalysts for national cohesion, educational development, and socio-economic transformation in Nigeria.

Keywords; National, Language Development, Integration, Catalyst

Introduction

Language which is very important plays a significant role in the totality of an individual. The importance of Language cannot be over emphasized, as it is a vital instrument for man's activities, and is built on the principle that it helps to inculcate knowledge, skills and competences, and is a vehicle for communication. Essien (1995) redefined Block and Tragger's definition of language as a means for which humans convey meaning and communicate with each other in a given community. He goes further to say that language is a system of rules in which sound structure and meaning are integrated for communication. The definition above emphasizes that language is the basic tool for communication. Every individual is born into a unique linguistic community with a unique language and cultural practices. Moreover, our political, historical, religious and cultural lives are preserved in our languages. Greenberb (1971) proposed:

Language is the prerequisite for the accumulation and transmission of other cultural tracts. Such fundamental aspects of culture as organized political life, legal systems, religion and science are inconceivable without that most basic human tool, a linguistic system of communication. Language is not only a necessary condition for culture, it is itself part of culture.

More significantly, language is a vehicle or tool for communication. It is man's basic tool without which it would be difficult for human beings to live together. Language unites people who speak

the same 'tongue' for this group of people, their language serves as their national flag which gives them common identity.

According to Obuko (2014), it has been the plan of the government that every Nigerian should be able to live anywhere in the country without fear of molestation, intimidation or marginalization irrespective of their differences in tribes and tongue. In order to encourage peaceful co-habitation, the federal Government has continued to address the issue of national language. The Federal government has not relent in his effort to address the issue of national language in order to encourage peaceful co-habitation. Nevertheless, it is believed that the multilingual nature of Nigeria, as in some multilingual nations, is usually the adoption of a lingua franca or an official language at the national level. English plays such a role in Nigeria.

However, some scholars have posited that there should be a change of the status of English as the lingua franca. Olagoke quoted by Sofunke (1990) posits that the need to adapt an indigenous language as national language goes beyond the need to foster national unity. In addition, he contends that in fostering national unity, we need to convince the outside world and ourselves that we are independent of Britain. Nevertheless, in line with such patriotic and nationalistic feelings, there have been several proposals from renowned scholars in the choice of a national language all in an attempt to redress the imperialist legacy in Nigeria through language. Jowitt (1995) pointed out some of these proposals as follows (1) an artificial language (2) an African, through non-indigenous language (3) one of the minority indigenous (4) pidgin (5) one or all of the major indigenous languages.

The issue of a choice for a national language for national unity has been discussed by various scholars. Different scholars have made attempt to propose different languages to solve the problem of a national language. Among the scholars are Soyinka (2022) who proposed Swahili. The idea was not welcome on the basis that the language has no existing consistency in Nigeria. Also, Igbineweka (2002) had suggested Guosa, but the language was also not accepted because according to Elugbe (1999) quoting Bamgbose (1995), we may have to look for him each time we need to form a new sentence as the sole arbiter of the language. Some scholars have also considered pidgin but for Elugbe and Omamor quoted in Bamgbose (1995). Pidgin is still insufficiently developed, and its vocabulary is also limited.

Also, in the consistently pursue for a national language, some scholars have also proposed the establishment of one of the minority languages. Scholars like Sofunke (1990, p.47) has suggested Igala, because according to him, it shows strong linguistic and/or cultural links with the three major ethnic zones of Nigeria but its acceptability is offset by factors such as unfamiliarity to the majority of Nigerians.

In addition, some scholars like Adetola (2015) and Fafanwa (2015) have also proposed WAZOBIA, a situation where the three major languages Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are put together to form a new language. The problem with WAZOBIA, is that it does not put into consideration the corporate existence of Nigeria. If a National language is going to be put into place, it ought to be a language that is already spoken in the country and not evolving a new language by combining the three major languages. A national language should consider all the ethnic groups that make up the polity that is the minorities should also be taken into consideration and not be

ignored. If not, this will in no doubt divide the nation further.

The federal government in 1971 proposed three languages, rather than one as our national language with a view of adopting one of them as our official language in the near future. Then the question was what yardstick would be used for the choice of Igbo, Hausa or Yoruba as a national language in the light of all this, Sofunke (1990, p.43) explores that it is only a language which can adequately serve as the cultural, political and linguistic bridge, between the cultural North of Nigeria and cultural South of Nigeria can be considered as national language. On the other hand, it will be difficult to lay hands on any language today that is politically neutral. Nida and Wonderly expressed the view that:

In Nigeria, there is simply no politically neutral language. In fact, the division into three major regions reflects the three language poles: Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo. The political survival of Nigeria as a country would even be more seriously threatened than it is if any of these three languages were promoted by the government as being the one national language.

The Concept of National Language Policy and National Development

The Federal Government in the aim of building a united and democratic society through language, formulated a language for the country in 1977. The national language policy (NLP) stipulates that a child should learn any of the three major languages in addition to his mother tongues. But, it has been observed that most students cannot speak their mother tongue. Often times, such students claim that they were born and bred outside their state of origin. The problem can also be traced to their parents who never spoke their mother tongues to these children. Onuigbo and Eyisi (2009) observed:

Sometimes, some parents insist on the use of English as the only language of family interaction. To children from such families, English apparently becomes the first language. We notice however that in these families, children will never speak with the proficiency of the native speakers especially as the environment does not enhance the development of that level of performance.

Flowing from the above, it becomes evident that most people cannot speak their mother tongues let alone, mastering a second national language. In addition, Sofunke (1999) stated that most Nigerians cannot read or write their mother tongue effectively. He also observed that the semi-literate or illiterate is generally more competent in his mother tongue than his educated counterpart. From this, it will be seen that the educated ones do no longer show interest in their mother tongues despite the importance of the mother tongue. Moreover, this paper is of the view that every child in Nigeria should master his/her mother tongue instead of asking for the mastery of a second indigenous language. It is important to note that, no meaningful development can take place in any country where the indigenous languages, and by extension their cultures, have gone into extinction, Elugbe (1990) concluded as follows:

Once we accept that education is part, if not the corner-stone of national development, it will become obvious that Nigerian language have to be developed so that education may be on a super footing. Unless we make it possible for our children to learn the basis of modern technology, science and mathematics, for example put in their mother-tongue i.e a language they fully understand then as Bamgbose (1983) has aptly put it “the seed of transferred technology will fall on barren

ground and fail to germinate.”

Potential of Mother Tongue

The effectiveness of the use of mother tongue for instructional purposes has created some controversies by different scholars. Some scholars have argued that the use of other language such as English as a medium of instruction will result in cognitive or pedagogic difficulties. While, other scholars have also argued that the use of mother tongue has no defined role on the academic success of the child. Chumbow (1990) submitted the importance and role of the language used as a medium of instruction in the educational process because the effectiveness of the educational or training programme depends (among other things) on whether effective communication has taken place between the teacher and the learner or not. This buttress the fact that appropriate language is foremost in the impartation of knowledge, skills and values. If we don't pay attention to the use of indigenous languages, we will neglect our culture and value system. Also, we should not also lose the foundation in English, so as not to isolate our children from the wind of civilization across the world.

Moreover, Onuigbo 2009, ascertain that there is no doubt that the mother tongue is the language that the child can fall back in situation of uncertainty. The mother tongue establishes the basis of our thinking as it is closely related to the mind. According to Chumbow (1990) it is the means by which we conceptualize and think, so that we normally cannot think without a language. Besides, the mother tongue is also the means by which cultural orientation is carried out. The lost of a child from his mother tongue equate to lost in the beliefs, value system and cultural affiliation of his people which are embedded in their language. According to Ngugi (1986) every language has two aspects; one enables us to communicate with one another while the other is a carrier of the history and the culture, built into the process of that communication over time.

To summarise, the importance of the English Language in the trend of development cannot be ruled out, we should also note that the indigenous languages is also important in the life of our children. The child is in touch with his immediate family members and his culture through his mother tongue. Osunfor (2002) quoted Akindele and Adegbite's view that “The mother tongue is natural to the child like his or her mother's milk. And, it is the means by which his or her attitudes and aptitudes are best developed.”

Role of Literature

The relationship between language, culture and literature is inherently symbolic and interdependent, each functioning both as a contributor to and a beneficiary of the others. Language and literature serves as the primary medium through which cultural values, norms and ideologies are encoded, transmitted, and preserved. Storytelling, drama, dance are all aspects of literature. These are equally used to praise, mirror or sanitize the ills in the society. However, the thrust of this paper is how literature contributes to teach the culture of a people through language. Here, literature is taken to mean any written or spoken works that expresses ideas, emotions, stones, and reflection of human experiences through artistic language.

Literature emerges as a dynamic expression of both language and culture. It utilizes language as its vehicles while simultaneously reflecting and critiquing the cultural milieu from which it

originates. Through various literary forms-prose, poetry, drama – literature not only preserves linguistic and cultural dialogue. Also, in literature, aspects of the culture such as family, structure, greetings, marriage, food, occupational hospitality, religion, festivals, sacrilege, incest, are brought to bare. Many literary giants like Chinua Achebe have used their works to showcase aspects of their culture in its specificity and African experience during colonial era in its generality. For example, in *Arrow of God*, one sees how virginity is cherished in Igbo land as against indecency and immorality which is prevalent in modern Nigeria. In addition, Africans are portrayed to be strong and independent people with various occupations like farming, caring palm tree tapping to mention a few. This is in contrary to massive corruption, bribery, kickbacks, greed and incompetence in the country today. Literature inculcates in the reader a sense of national fraternity and identity while still demonstrating what is unique and special about our cultures.

Selecting a National Language: A Modest Proposal

In looking at a selection of a national language, there are two levels to this positions; first every Nigerian (children and adult alike) irrespective of educational status should master their mother tongue. Such an individual should be able to use the mother tongue within his linguistic locality. However, the mastery of one's mother tongue predisposes one to the mastery of other languages including English and other indigenous languages used in the place of his residence. Also, with the mastery of the mother tongue through a more friendly approach than through a forced government proposal, it is obvious that the culture of the host communities will be very much appreciated. The second level is that the English language should maintain the status quo as the official language and our *lingua franca* in Nigeria. Looking at this option, Bamgbose (1971) strongly asserted. Of all the heritage left behind in Nigeria by the British at the end of colonial administration, probably none is more important than the English language. It is now the language of government, business and commerce, education, the mass media, literature and much internal as well as external communications.

According to Obuko (2014) anybody calling for a change in order to bring national unity and development seems to be asking for the impossibility. This is sequel to the fact that Nigeria is faced with multiplicity of languages which the speakers are so attached to. In the views of Afolayan (1986) “It is unrealistic for anybody in Nigeria today to think that national unity can be achieved without recourse to the utilization of the English language. The fact that it is now functioning as the national language cannot be denied”. The case for English as seen in this paper is to encourage comprehensibility and mutual intelligibility globally, and, in the interest of civilization and development. There is no point trying to change the position. Hear Omodiaogbe in (Onuigbo 2009):

So long as the English language remains the bonafide official language of Nigeria, so long as most text books are written in English and so long as the language remains an international one and a veritable gateway to the understanding and mastering of science and technology, it will continue to be the *primus inter pares* if not the *numerosus*.

However, Obuko (2014) in trying to make an argument for both the mother tongue and the English language the point remains that the plurality of mother-tongues cannot be a basis for divisiveness. Elugbe (1990) agreed that most new nations are based on a plurality of segmental

groups. He goes further to say that the natural tie by the people to their segmental group is often valued more highly than their civil ties with the nation. In line with this, Bamgbose (1994) believed that some of the real causes of divisiveness have nothing to do with language. For him, many nations thrive with multiplicity of languages. In Nigeria language cannot be said to be the reason for divisiveness. However, it is sometimes exploited to represent the actual terms of division. The point is that a nation can still be united even when the people speak different languages. Succinctly put, Elugbe (1990) maintains that linguists are also very aware of many examples where people who speak (perhaps unrelated languages) can be united through common and non linguistic aspects of culture such as religion, trade, agriculture etc. He cites an example with the Hausa/Fulani unity.

Obuko (2014) reiterates that the point remains that multiplicity of languages as the case in Nigeria should not be basis for divisiveness. Emphasis should not be on the rate of diversities but on how the leaders are able to hold the diverse units together as a nation. This is obviously, what will bring development. Gupta as quoted by Elugbe (1990) presented the argument more clearly when he said, "On account of the fact that most new third world countries are faced with linguistic and other diversities, the successful new nation will be that whose leaders acquire the political art of holding diverse units together in a national community." In summary, the appellation given to the English language as national, official or lingua franca should not be of interest to Nigerians. The truth remains that the language serves as a 'binder' in our national life. Babajide (2001) held that given the many roles that English language performs, it becomes expedient for any Nigerian who wants to be relevant to his social, economic and political environment to learn and acquire some appreciable knowledge of English. Considering the above factors, the English language appears indispensable in Nigeria. Its longevity and permanency remains unquestionable. To this end, school children and adults should be encouraged to learn the language alongside the indigenous languages.

Conclusion

Building on the preceding discussion, this paper emphasizes that a string command of one's mother tongue, alongside efforts to encourage non-indigenes to learn the language of their host communities through inclusive and supportive approaches is essential to the nation's overall development. A nation devoid of indigenous languages in essence, a nation stripped of its cultural identity, while English may serve as the official language, indigenous languages remain vital for addressing local and ethnic communicative needs. If the suggestions outlined in this paper are implemented, they can lay a solid foundation for genuine national development, unity, and integration.

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