

**THE NEED FOR EFFECTIVE USE OF LOCAL LANGUAGES IN NIGERIAN  
DEMOCRACY**

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**Abstract**

Language is universally accepted as the most effective instrument used by man in his daily life activities. It has undeniable importance in human affairs even in democracy. Local languages play a vital role in a democratic nation. This paper stresses the importance of Local languages as an indispensable means of democracy. The neglect of local languages in the democratic system is decried. Ways of improving the use of local languages in Nigerian democracy are recommended.

**Introduction**

Language has been defined in many ways by linguist and scholars. Crystal, (1987:396) presents three definitions of language given by three different scholars. According to him, Sapir states that language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotion and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols. Trager view it as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which the members of a society interact in terms of their total culture. Interaction, as used here, possibly substitutes communication, while Hall takes it to be the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory symbols.

There are other scholars who think that language is best appreciated when it is described. For Chumbo (1984):

Education and training in whatever form requires imparting knowledge and skills as well as awaking and developing the intellectual potential of the learner. This can be done through language. The language used as the medium of instruction in the educational process is very important because the effectiveness of the educational training programme depends (among other things) or whether effective communication has taken place between the teacher and the learner or not.

Benzies (1940) describes language differently:

We can scarcely think at all without using words (language). Even if we do not speak, we are constantly using words in our heads to help us to think. It is hard to imagine thought going on at all without using words (language).

Language is an abstract system of word meanings and symbols. It is a distinctive work of the Homo sapiens. It is a medium of communication which depends upon elements of shared experience. Without language there will be no shared meaning, hence, no social co-operation (Okediadi, 2007).

**Democracy**

Etymologically, this term comes from two Greek words, 'demos' and 'cratia' meaning people and power respectively. It means then the people's power (power of the people). It has many nuances

**THE HUMANITIES AND NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC EXPERIENCE**  
**(Nnamdi Azikiwe University Faculty of Arts International Conference, 2009, page 456-460)**

of meaning hence looks virtually meaningless. Holden (1974:2) holds that "... virtually everything political (and not only things political) has been called "democracy" or "democratic".

Abraham Lincoln says it is "a government of the people by the people and for the people". Hampsch (1982:16) oiled and cemented this definition thus "government and society which is of the people, by the people and for the people". Democracy is both a form of government and state; the body governing is a representative of the entire body and a mode of appointing, organizing, controlling and sacking a government respectively. Marriam (1939:44) expands the meaning of democracy; he says it is "a set of thought and a mode of action directed toward the common zeal as interpreted and directed by the common will".

Although there can be nuances in the world's democracies, it is generally a government in which power and civic responsibility are exercised by all citizens, directly or through their freely elected representatives. Democracy is a set of principles and practices that protect human freedom; it is the institutionalization of freedom.

As a system of government, democracy has been much eulogized but also vilified. Nevertheless, it has remained the most initiated system of government in the world. Democracy is preferred to all other systems of government because it is the affirmation of human rights and natural law.

According to Oguejiofor (2007), "with the sudden demise of the former communist block at the beginning of the 1990s there arose a wide acceptance of democracy as the best system of government". He goes further to say that on the practical level; this undeclared triumph of democracy was seen in the rush of many countries that were hitherto ruled by dictatorial regimes to democratic.

Democracy cannot be separated from language which links the people together. The language of any society makes for understanding and co-operation; and through it the people live together peacefully and harmoniously. Political systems are built upon our ability to communicate with each other, to formulate and exchange opinions and viewpoints, and to try to influence each other.

**Language Situation: Nigerian Experience**

There are diversities of languages in Nigeria and that is why it is seen as a multilingual nation. It is a country with multiple ethnic groupings which were brought together by Lord Lugard in 1914. According to Okediadi (2007), "the coming together of different ethnic groups with different linguistic backgrounds has thereby created problems of language diversity". To Okonkwo (2002), "the amalgamation of the different language games within the geo-polity of Nigerian in 1914 created the potency for the conflicts within Nigeria today".

In Nigeria, the number of local (indigenous) languages cannot be arrived at with mathematical accuracy due to multi-ethnic nature of the nation. Scholars have however, attempted giving numbers ranging from 400-500 languages. Igboanusi (2002:102) has this to say, "Against the background that over 400 indigenous languages exist in Nigeria". Nigerian local languages are grouped under major and minority languages. Bangbose (1992:73) explains;

Nigerian languages are often grouped into major languages and minority languages based on such factors as a number of speakers, status in education, acquisition as a second language, and availability of written materials.

Major languages include Hausa (in the North), Igbo (in the East) and Yoruba (in the West) while minority languages comprise all other languages spoken in the country (Odinye, 2009:1).

**THE HUMANITIES AND NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC EXPERIENCE**  
(Nnamdi Azikiwe University Faculty of Arts International Conference, 2009, page 456-460)

The language provisions in Nigerian National Policy on Education, NPE (1977, revised in 1981) stipulate that every child should be taught in his mother tongue or the language of his immediate community for the first three years. The provisions also stipulate that the mother tongue should be used in pre-primary education. Consequently, the Federal Government places greater emphasis on the teaching and learning of the three major Nigerian languages in National Policy on Education. The National Policy states that:

In addition to appreciating the importance of language in educational process, and as a means of preserving the people's culture, the government considers it to be in the interest of national unity...in this connection, the government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (p. 9).

It should be borne in mind that by this policy language has been used as a tool to promote inter-ethnic understanding to foster cultural unity and integration through facilitating communications among Nigerians from different geographical areas. It is argued that the various governments in Nigeria from 1960 till date have failed to accord language the importance it deserves in national integration simple because of the general fear that it will generate inter-ethnic unrest among the general populace (Bangbose, 1991:7).

Apart from the local languages, which are the mother tongue of Nigerians, there also exist non-indigenous languages. English is one of them. English has continued to play many roles in Africa, and particularly in Nigeria, a former British colony. Here, it serves as the language of education, the language of administration at different levels, and the language of organized commerce and journalism (Igboanusi, 2002:27).

At the moment, English serves as an official language in the country, but there is, yet, no national language or languages for Nigeria. In principles, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are seen as Nigerian national languages. The call for the adoption or retention of English may also be due to the growing status of English both nationally and internationally (Igboanusi, 2002:108). English is the language in use in most formal situations in Nigeria.

Recently, many Nigerians have begun to question the position of English language in Nigeria's education. They question, in particular, what they regard as the undue emphasis given to English in Nigeria's education especially at pre-primary and primary schools levels. The argument points to the fact that the undue emphasis on English language is a great impediment to Nigerian education as it has ruined the careers of many Nigerians who happened not to be proficient in the language. This is because English has become a compulsory course for an admission into Nigerian universities, even when a candidate wants to study Nigerian languages.

**Local Languages for Sustainable Democracy**

Much as language is considered as one of the least visible, least measurable and least understood aspects of discrimination which can easily be squeezed out by a proper and understandable focus on structural and institutionalized force (Roberts et al 1992:360). However, it is a powerful instrument of control which can be, and has been used globally to maintain power relationships (like democracy).

In other words, we can state that the primary consideration in the discussion of the politics of ethnicity is the salient relationship between language and one of the most basic social concerns: power. The view that language difference is a marginal consideration compared with the fundamental problem of the need to tackle power relationships is under-stable one, but it can

**THE HUMANITIES AND NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC EXPERIENCE**  
(Nnamdi Azikiwe University Faculty of Arts International Conference, 2009, page 456-460)

ignore the fact that communication is an aspect of power and that language is a major factor frequently used implicitly in decision-making by the governance over the governed.

Therefore, in the recognition of the importance of language in relation to other factors in order to bring about true national integration, sustainable democracy, primordial ethnic sentiments would first have to be removed among other. Bangbose (1991) was quick to add that it is not language that divides but the attitude of the speakers and the sentiments and symbolism attached to the language.

It is until after this that language, among other factors, can be used to enhance national integration and sustainable democracy. It is this same factor that has remained the impediment for the achievement of a workable national language policy to the detriment of national development and sustainable democracy.

It must be noted that one of the major factors hindering active participation in politics is the language barrier. Okediadi (2007):381 agreed with me by saying:

Because political opponents cannot communicate with the electorates in their own indigenous languages, they misconstrue the action to be enmity and so, prefer tribal-politics rooted in their languages.

However, if we understand the local languages, the political problems will be minimized to the barest minimum and there will be a sustainable democracy. A common language, therefore, particularly where it is indigenous is fundamental for national integration, national development, national consciousness and even sustainable democracy.

Also, the local language of the people can be used as a powerful tool of social control. In view of UNESCO, a local language of a people is a vehicle for expressing the people's deepest feelings and as a means of national self-expression, giving rise to the spirit of democracy. For Kleif (1976:60), "a native (local) language ties a people more closely to its landscape and breeds definable loyalties to it. Fishman (1971:40-41) sums it up in his words stressing the importance of local language for national integration and sustainable democracy:

A common indigenous (local) language in the modern nation states is a powerful factor for unity. Cutting across tribal and ethnic times, it promotes a feeling of single community. Additionally, it makes possible the expression and development of social ideas, economic targets and cultural identity easily perceived by citizens. It is, in short, a powerful factor for mobilization of people and resources for nationhood.

### **Recommendation and Conclusion**

The contribution of Nigerian language in the Nigerian democracy is far from satisfactory. The use of the local languages as a medium of instruction in the lower primary, as recommended in the National Policy on Education, is flagrantly ignored in some areas.

The local languages in Nigeria should be given more attention. The focus should be to develop those languages that are not developed or underdeveloped. The compulsory instruction on the select major local languages (Hausa, Igbo Yoruba) in all the educational institutions at the primary, post-primary and post-secondary levels as was already provided by the government in the new National Policy on Education should be encouraged. Also, there should be frequent activities to enhance the importance of local languages like workshops, seminars, symposia, cultural activities, etc.

**THE HUMANITIES AND NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC EXPERIENCE**  
**(Nnamdi Azikiwe University Faculty of Arts International Conference, 2009, page 456-460)**

In conclusion, as we state earlier, democracy cannot be separated from language which link the people together. The language of any society makes for understanding and co-operation; and through it the people live together peacefully and harmoniously. The local languages should be used effectively as indispensable tool for a meaningful and sustainable democracy in Nigeria. People should be carried along since the government is for them and by them. Their languages should best convey any information in education, politics, governance and democracy.

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