

Language As A Tool For National Integration: The Chinese Example

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Abstract

Language is an ethnic identity. It is an indispensable instrument for human communication and national integration. It can also be a vehicle for the promotion of national consciousness and unity. This is to say that people who lose their language have lost their identity. Generally, human activities make use of language and man is incomplete without language because cultural traditions are preserved through language. This paper, therefore postulates that language is a veritable tool for national integration using Chinese language as a case study. The argument is based on Collier and Thomas (1988) Cultural identity theory which stipulates how individuals use communicative processes to construct and negotiate their cultural group identities and relationships in particular contexts.

Keywords: Language, Culture, National integration, Cultural identity theory, Chinese language

Introduction

The introduction is divided into three parts: language, culture and national integration. Each of them is defined and explained below.

Language

Language has been defined in different ways by linguists, language experts, and scholars. There is no comprehensive definition of language and no definition is perfect. In this paper, we shall look into some definitions by different authors. Sapir (1921) said that “language is a primarily human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily pronounced

symbols”. From the above definition, it is clearly seen that language is human and non-instinctive method of communication. This means that only human beings can use language. Another definition is “language is a symbol system based on pure or arbitrary conventions...infinitely extendable and modifiable according to the changing needs and conditions of the speakers” (Robin, 1985). This definition is like a continuation of the first definition which ends with the word ‘symbols’. In his opinion, language is a symbol system based on pure or arbitrary conventions. The symbol system here is the sound system which is based on pure or arbitrary conventions or

rules. According to Chomsky (1957:13), language is a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements. Chomsky took a linguistic approach in his definition. He sees language as a set of sentences which are what we say or write when we communicate. Finally, Wardaugh (1972:3) defined language as “a system of arbitrary vocal symbol by means of which a social group cooperates”. The above definition added something by saying that language is within a social group. From these definitions, it is clear that all of them are saying the same thing but in a different way. From the above definitions, we can say that language is an arbitrary symbol of system which human use as a means of communication in a social setting. I will adopt Winick (1956) definition of language which sees language as “a system of arbitrary vocal symbols, used to express communicable thoughts and feelings and enabling the members of a social group or speech community to interact and to co-operate”.

Language is primarily spoken not written. This means that language is first spoken before written. All languages have spoken forms but not all languages have written forms. The history of language dates back to antiquity. Language is as old as human society. It is a

special gift from God to mankind. Language is exclusively human, though other animals have their means of communication. The ability to use language distinguishes man from other animals. Some believe that man is a rational being by the use of language in a society. Language is important for man and significant in the society at large. The importance and significance of language can be summarized into three: social contact and communication; preservation and transmission of culture; and conveyance of ideas, feelings and emotions. According to Egbokhare (2004:507 cited in Obi 2013), language:

permeates all aspects of human endeavour...It exists in a socio-political, historical, cultural and temporal milieu...The fortune of language is closely tied to the fortune of the people who speak it. This implies that language is very essential in every aspect of human endeavour and one can hardly make a meaningful impact in the society without making use of language.

Ishima (2004) affirms the above view by saying, “language is a vehicle of thought and the expression of culture. It expresses a people’s way of life, their perception of things and their

world view”. Solanke (2006 cited in Olaoye, 2013) affirms and says:

Language is the vehicle through which people’s culture is transmitted. It is an index of identity which serves as a repository of a people’s culture, industry and exploits. The most effective engine of a people’s culture is their mother tongue. Indigenous languages are treasures of culture and self-identity. In other words, language is the indicator of history and self-identification.

Culture

In this paper, I will not go deep into the etymology of culture for want of space but according to Sorrells (2015), “the very word culture meant ‘place tilled’ in Middle English, and the same word goes back to Latin colere, ‘to inhabit, care for, till...To be cultural, to have a culture, is to inhabit a place sufficiently intensive to cultivate it, to be responsible for it, to respond to it, to attend to it caringly.” Culture is a difficult concept to define. Nevertheless, it has been defined by many scholars in different disciplines like anthropology and sociology. Culture is defined by Linton (1945:32) as “a configuration of learned behaviours and results whose component elements are shared and transmitted by the members of a particular

society”. Going from the above definition, culture are the learned behaviours and their resultant elements that are being shared and transmitted by people living in the society. Hofstede (1984:51) defines culture as “collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another.” Hofstede sees culture as the collective activities of the human minds that distinguish one society from the other. Lederach (1995:9) defines culture as “the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them.” This definition of culture is a bit different from the previous ones in that it sees culture as shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for one thing or the other. It means that culture is man-made unlike the spoken language. Useem, J. & Useem, R. (1963:169) tried to summarize definition of culture by saying, “culture has been defined in a number of ways, but most simply, as the learned and shared behavior of a community of interacting human beings”. Yes, culture like language has been defined by so many authors and writers but there has not been a perfect or generally accepted definition. However, my view of culture is in line with Lederach (1995) which sees culture as the set of shared

knowledge and beliefs created by people living a particular society.

Most scholars agree that language and culture are closely connected. Some people believe that language is culture and culture is language. One of the links between language and culture is that most cultural practices are stored and passed from one generation to another generation through the use of language. The relationship between language and culture is in the way they share human norms, values, realities, beliefs and behaviours of a society. Culture is the reference point of language and that is why we cannot understand a culture without a language. This is the reason why learning a language, especially second or foreign language, requires the learning of the cultural beliefs, norms and practices of the society. Therefore, no language learner can master a language without mastering the culture of the language. In support of the above assertion, Kroeber (1923) said, “culture, then, began when speech was present, and from then on, the enrichment of either means the further development of the other”. Sapir (1970:207) posits that language “does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives”. In my own experience in learning and teaching

Chinese language, I see the relationship and link between Chinese language and its culture of over 5000 years. One cannot understand Chinese language without an understanding of Chinese culture. That same goes to every language.

National Integration

National integration, otherwise termed nation-building, national unity, national cohesion, national loyalty, or the national question (Liddle, 1970:205 cited in Edosa, 2014) is a process of creating a sense of national consciousness, uniqueness of identity and loyalty among people with different socio-cultural identities (racial, ethnic, language, religion, etc) into a single territorial political society (WAEC E-learning Online). According to Edosa (2014), national integration is the same as nation-building, national unity, national cohesion, national loyalty and national question. In the paper, these terms are used interchangeably. From the above definition of national integration given by WAEC E-learning Online, some terms like, ‘process, creation, sense, national consciousness’ are carefully used. In other words, national integration is a process of making citizens have a sense of national consciousness in a society with different languages and cultures. In line with the

above definition, Chine (1971:50 cited in Isiwela, 2013) sees national integration as a process of cohesion between two or more social units, whereby these units come together to constitute a political whole which include among other things the joining of various parts of society into a functioning whole, the growth of obedience and loyalty to its parts and the emergence of shared national values.

National integration is also viewed as:

a process by which members of a social system develop linkages so that the boundaries of the system persists over time and the boundaries of sub-systems become less consequential in affecting behavior. In this process, members of the social system develop an escalating sequence of contact, cooperation, consensus and community (Morrison et al, 1972:385 cited in Ojo, 2005:51 cited in Edosa, 2014).

In other words, national integration encourages contact, cooperation, consensus and community in a society. In support of the above definition, Ojo (2009:206) and Osaghae (1984) argue that national integration is the process by which sub-national and particularistic identity with and loyalty to the state supercedes primordial loyalty. According to Eisinger

(1976:53), “national integration is a situation in which diverse groups in a political system have been successful in developing common institutions and norms by which to settle conflicts peacefully or pursue collective goals cooperatively, by depending on the situation”. National integration is viewed by many scholars and authors as a process, as we have seen above. The recent definition sees national integration as a situation instead of a process. We would like to see the concept of national integration as a situation where the members of a state see themselves as one, treat one another fairly and work together cooperatively and freely agree to and do resolve their differences perfectly in the overall interest of the nation (Ojo, 2009 cited in Edosa, 2014).

The importance of national integration cannot be overemphasized. Johnmulu (2017) on www.kenyaplex.com lists some important points of national integration thus:

- i. It promotes development of national unity.
- ii. Citizens develop a spirit of responsiveness when dealing with national calamities and disasters.

- iii. It promotes patriotism and loyalty among the citizen.
- iv. It reduces fear, suspicion and strife.
- v. National integration enables a country to develop and work towards achievement of unified (common) national goals.
- vi. It enhances national unity and rapid development in commerce and industry, leading to social and economic progress on the nation.

Chief Bayo Ojo (SAN), former Attorney-General of the Federation and Minister of Justice, at the inauguration of the Bar Center of the Ogoja Branch of the Nierian Bar Association (NBA) in Cross River State Nigeria talked on a topic, 'How to achieve national integration' saying:

National integration is a critical building block for the harmonization of the socio-political as well as the economic life of a heterogeneous society into one whole entity to enhance rapid and sustainable development. It is the feeling of oneness that comes from an atmosphere of integrated and harmonious co-existence of the diverse ethnic nationalities and culture (Unachukwu, 2013).

This summarizes the importance of national integration as listed above. National integration

harmonizes a heterogeneous society and enhances the rapid economic development. This is a typical example of china. Chinese government uses a common language called Mandarin to harmonize different ethnic groups which is a veritable tool for national integration.

Theoretical Framework

Erik Erikson was the earliest psychologist to write on identity. The Eriksonian framework handles the distinction among the psychological sense of continuity, also known as the ego identity or the personal identity; and the social identity or cultural identity. A social identity is the portion of an individual's self-concept derived from perceived membership in a relevant social group (Turner et'al, 1986). Social identity theory was formulated by Henri Tajfel and John Turner between 1970s and 1980s. The theory introduced the concept of a social identity as a way to explain intergroup behaviour (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Social identity theory suggests that an organization can change individual behaviour (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

A similar theory to social identity theory is the cultural identity theory. The theory was formulated by Jane Collier and Milt Thomas. Cultural identity is a person's sense of

belonging to a particular culture or group. This involves learning and accepting traditions, heritage, language, religion, ancestry, aesthetics, thinking patterns, and social structures of a culture (Lustig, 2013).

That means cultural identity is having self-identification and a sense of belonging to a social group. A culture identity of a person depends upon various factors. These factors might be: race, gender, sex, sexuality, nationality, age, religious beliefs, political beliefs, location of living, class, health condition, social status, language, ethnicity, ability (disability), ancestry, traditions, social structure, etc (source: www.businessstopia.net). According to Littlejohn & Foss (no date) in Encyclopedia of Communication Theory, “cultural identity theory (CIT) is one of the several theories developed to build knowledge about the communicative processes in use by individuals to construct and negotiate their cultural group identities and relationships in particular contexts.”

These communicative processes are the factors that construct cultural identities. Cultural identity theory suggests a relationship between inter-cultural competence and cultural identity. This theory will serve as a lens to look into Mandarin (standard Chinese language) as a tool for national integration.

Chinese Language

The Chinese language referred in this paper is Mandarin Chinese. Mandarin has many interpretations and definitions. Etymologically, the term Mandarin is “from Portuguese mandarin; which is from Malay menteri; which is from Sanskrit mantrin, which means ‘minister or counsellor’ and originally meant an official of the Ming and Qing empires (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (6th ed., 2007)). The term ‘Mandarin Chinese’ is not a monosemy, but has at least three references. In a broader sense, it refers to the native dialect of China. More narrowly, the term Mandarin Chinese means any one of the individual Mandarin dialects such as those of Jinan and Chengdu. The third reference is Mandarin as Standard Chinese (Lin, 2001). Mandarin as Standard Chinese is officially defined in the People’s Republic of China as ‘the modern Han people’s common language, taking the Beijing sound system as its pronunciation standards, the vocabulary from the Northern Dialect as its foundation, and the grammar from the model modern writings in the vernacular as its grammar standards (Chen, 1974). According to Ethnologue: Language of the World (Grimes, 2000), “Mandarin has 885 million speakers, surpassing English, the most widely-spoken language, by 63 million”. Majority of Mandarin speakers live in China

and the rest are found in Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, United States, etc. it is widely used all over China in the government, schools and media. In ‘A Grammar of Mandarin Chinese’, Lin (2001) asserts thus,

It is the dialect used in all the major media systems in China, comparable to BBC English in the United Kingdom, and is used extensively in school teaching in China. It is widely spoken in non-Mandarin areas as a second or an additional dialect (or language) in the country.

Mandarin Chinese has had different names in the past at various places. It is widely known as Mandarin in the West. In Taiwan and Hong Kong, Mandarin Chinese was referred to Guoyu, national language. In Singapore, it was known as Huayu, the language of the Hua (Chinese) people. In China, it was called Hanyu, the language of the Han people. It has been officially designated and popularly accepted as Putonghua, literally, common language.

Mandarin Chinese is a group of related varieties of language spoken across the northern and southern China. Most of the Mandarin varieties are mutually unintelligible. Mandarin is the largest of the seven recognized dialect groups in China. Mandarin has been an

influential language for centuries because it had been within the capital. Mandarin had served as a national lingua franca in the past. In confirmation, Li and Thompson (1981) say that “China did not officially establish a common language for the nation until 1955...the People’s Republic of China proclaimed a national language embodying the pronunciation of the Beijing dialect...This national language has since been known as (Mandarin) Putonghua, which means the ‘common language’”.

Promotion of Mandarin for National Integration

Language is a tool for national integration. Mandarin Chinese is an example to this statement. Wei (2015) says that “language has been the key to the unity and identity of the Chinese nation. The Chinese people hold a deep-rooted linguistic ideology that they share one unifying language that has been in existence for over 5,000 years”. China, with over 1 billion population, needs a strong and effective national language for national integration. This national language took a long period of time to become strong and effective. There were earlier attempts to unify, simplify and reform a national language for China before the Republic, under the Republic and People’s Republic of China (PRC). And the goal of reforming the Chinese

writing system has been one of the main tasks of modern Chinese language management (Rohsenow, 1986 cited in Spolsky, 2014).

Spolsky (2014) asserts that “since the establishment of People’s Republic of China in 1949, language management has been a central activity of the party and government, interrupted during the years of the Cultural Revolution”. To affirm what Spolsky (2014) says, Dwyer (2014) opines that:

language has been an enduring pillar of China’s national identity. When the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was triumphantly established in 1949, two of the first tasks that the new government undertook in its nation-building project were to promote Mandarin Chinese and to classify the languages within China’s borders. These two acts resulted not only in the formal recognition of over 50 ethnic groups and their languages, they also set the stage for Mandarin’s ascendance over all other kinds of Chinese.

This is to say that Chinese government understands the importance of language as a tool for national integration. Dwyer (2014) affirms that language has been an enduring pillar of China’s national integration. He goes

further to say that the promotion of Mandarin Chinese was the first nation-building project of PRC since 1949. Dwyer (2014) asserts that ‘the promotion of Mandarin as the premier variety of Chinese and national language of China was a cornerstone of national development and ethnic unity’. He says that from the inception, the central tenet of PRC language planning was to promulgate Mandarin Chinese, no matter the ethnicity of the speaker. This is to say that Mandarin Chinese as a national language has become a tool for national integration and cultural identity in China.

The PRC has focused on the promotion of Putonghua (Mandarin) as a national language and simplification of written script, known as character. According to Spolsky (2014), the simplification was paralleled by moves to define and promote Putonghua (Mandarin) as a Standard National Language and to develop a method of writing it phonetically. The promotion of Mandarin was the main thing in China’s language policies and the policies moved towards the concept of one nation with one national language. The PRC realizes that it can use Mandarin as a means to integrate and unify the whole nation. The promotion of Mandarin Chinese by the PRC has gone global. Ding and Saunders (2006) say that Chinese

(Mandarin) is more than just the language associated with the country's 5,000-year civilization and oriental philosophical thought. It is also a fast-developing commercial lingua franca in the Pacific basin.

Conclusion

Chinese government has achieved national integration using Mandarin as a tool. This achievement is not without some challenges like the diversity of ethnic groups and multiplicity of languages in China. Despite the challenges, Chinese government has shown that it is possible to unify and integrate a nation using a national language as a cultural identity which is what Cultural identity theory stipulates. Ding and Saunders (2006) assert that although the Chinese government's decision to make Mandarin Chinese (Putonghua) the common language of all Chinese-speakers within and outside China, the promulgation and promotion are not without criticism. Other nations like Nigeria can achieve the same height if the following recommendations are put into practice.

Recommendations

1. The need for a national language.
2. Acceptance and love for a national language.

3. Development and promotion of a national language.
4. Standardization of a national language.
5. Use of a national language in schools, government and media.

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