

## THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN A MULTI-ETHNIC NATION

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### **Abstract**

*Language remains a strong source of transmission of culture and socio-economic dividends. It has been shown to be a viable instrument of integration or disintegration when improperly applied towards a common national consciousness. The language question remains a common discourse among linguists, technocrats and development experts, with diverse and at times, conflicting shades of opinions. The paper strongly contends for the English Language being an unalienable factor in national integration, especially in a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual nation like Nigeria. It further brings to the fore, the possible subjugation of some indigenous languages by more dominant ones, hence, establishing the need for the English Language to be the panacea for linguistic dominance and subjugation.*

**Keywords:** English Language, national integration, multi-ethnic nation

### **Introduction**

#### **English Language and National Development**

Language is an essential part of human endeavour and development. Language application is the bedrock and fulcrum upon which every human interaction and transaction; at the individual, corporate, national and international levels are premised. Every human development is based on education while language is the vehicle that drives education. Therefore, language becomes an essential and inevitable tool for the development of a nation. In a multi-ethnic and a multi-cultural nation like Nigeria, where linguistic pluralism is inherent, the need for a national language, acceptable to all for education and transaction is most expedient. According to Akindele and Adegbite (1992), Nigeria is made up of more than 250 ethnic groups with a conservative estimate of 4000 languages. The linguistic diversity of Nigeria presents a real challenge to the corporate existence of the nation. The tendency to advance any one of the three major languages: Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba as a national language appears worthy.

Nonetheless, the workability is not feasible. The adoption of one indigenous language as a national language in Nigeria will ignite an unprecedented disharmony in our national life. In the past, series of efforts had been made to resolve this language question. In one of such congregations, experts and linguists advocated an integration of the three major languages which resulted in the concept of WAZOBIA. While some scholars saw this as a close panacea of the language challenge, majority postulated that its adoption will culminate in the subjugation of other minority languages which form a reasonable part of the language community. Furthermore, within the major ethnic groups, there are still languages and dialects (Olusoji, 2012). Among the Igbos, the Abakiliki dialect is not understood by other parts of the sub-region. The Owerri person does not understand the dialect of the Nsukka person, While the Afikpo person does not understand the dialect of the Ngwa person. Such intra-tribal linguistic discrepancies abound in all ethnic groups. Therefore, some of the dialects found within a particular linguistic group is not intelligible even when the speakers belong to the same linguistic group. Within the Yoruba ethnic group, for example, the Akoko Yoruba speaker in Ondo state, understands the Ilorin Yoruba speaker in Kwara state but the Akoko speaker is not understood by the Ilorin speaker. According to Bamgbose(1968), this is a barrier to national unity and development. To break this barrier, there is a need for a common language appreciated by all to facilitate effective communication. It therefore appears without equivocation that finding an indigenous language which will serve as a national language is, to say the least an impossible task. Moreover, the choice of an aboriginal language as a national language will generate national suspicion, disharmony and fear of ethnic domination and may lead to a total breakdown of law and order.

### **The English Language and Political Development**

The political neutrality of the English language provides a solution to the language predicament in Nigeria. The English language has been accepted by all tribes and cultures in Nigeria as the lingua franca due to its neutrality. Despite its suitability for this purpose, Bamgbose and Akere(1991), Awobuluyi(1991) strongly opposed the use of the English language as a national language and advocated its replacement with one of the main indigenous languages. They cited the inability of most people to communicate effectively as a major barrier; irrespective of the patriotic underpinning of the postulation, it is incontrovertible that none of the indigenous languages has the linguistic capacity and structure to handle the teaching of subjects like physics, chemistry, mathematics and geography. A science student needs language to help him define concepts,

describe substances, objects, locations and processes, report facts, draw inferences, make conclusions, classify items and make generalizations. He needs language for acquiring and communicating knowledge and skills in Science and Technology (Adedeji, 1997). As people migrate from one linguistic group to another, the use of the English language makes it possible for non-speakers of an indigenous language of a particular linguistic group to obtain education and have a sense of belonging. Although scholars such as Dennis et al (1989), Brann (1977), Osaji (1979) have suggested that the best means of acquiring linguistic skills is a sound linguistic foundation in the mother tongue, the mother tongue cannot be effectively used as national language in a pluralistic community like Nigeria.

Since education is the bedrock of individual and national development, the languages through which education is communicated, that is the English language becomes pivotal and critical to national development.

### **English Language and Economic Development**

In the present dispensation where the English language is internationalized, the proficient use of the language translates to economic benefits. International trade and commerce cannot be enacted without a good appreciation of the English language. Nigeria has consistently interacted and transacted with the global community because of the use of the English language as lingua franca. The English language plays sophisticated roles in international agencies such as the African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN).

### **English Language and Social Development**

Another significant area of development is national unity and cohesion. The English language has successfully bonded the various linguistic communities of the nation and created an atmosphere of free trade interaction and national consciousness. The National Youth Service Corps Scheme introduced by the Federal Government in 1973 has been substantially successful as a result of the use of the English language as a means of national communication. Youths from various linguistic backgrounds are able to communicate and interact with others from different linguistic backgrounds because of the use of the English language. In this scheme, the English language plays the role of a communication bridge which accounts for the huge success of the programme.

The use of the English language as a language of communication in Nigeria, has facilitated the transformation of local and archaic methods of communication in

the villages, such as town crying, to more sophisticated information and communication technologies such as Sms, WhatsApp, Skype and so on, which has brought comfort to man's access to the global community. This fact is further corroborated by Brumfit (1995) who opined that 'There is easy knowledge transfer in quantities and at speeds unimaginable in the past; there is real communication not just through television but real communication of massive databases. We can be in principle, anywhere in the world and connect to databases that are traditionally preserved in Paris or in Oxford or in Washington'. The use of the television, internet, radio, telephone and print media have reduced the world to a 'global village' and the benefits of these devices are maximized through the use of a common language -The English language.

### **The English Language and Political Development**

The political development brought about by the use of the English as our lingua franca cannot be over emphasized. House to house campaigns and political rallies in different geopolitical zones of the nation have been facilitated by the English language. Politicians can address large congregations of people from different language backgrounds in English. The language barrier which would adversely have hindered such conveyances is eliminated. Despite the calls for the adoption of one indigenous language as a national language, the roles the English language has played in the overall development of the nation are prominent. The use of a common language which is neutral in all sense, is an acceptable norm in consideration of the unity and co-existence of the country. Proponents of the 'indigenous language as lingua franca' have cited countries like China and Japan, where the aboriginal languages have emerged as their national languages. Although these countries in their own rights are considered developed, many scholars have argued and reasonably too, that these nations would have gone further in their developmental strides if their national language of education and trade was English. The trade restrictions and difficulties encountered in education resource exchange which has bedeviled these nations cannot be quantified financially. Globalization is real and this comes with basic tenets such as the commonality of language for international transactions and communications. No doubt the English language has become an international language of education and commerce and must therefore be adopted by nations who wish to globalize their activities. Although Ferguson (2006) contended that there is a widespread academic agreement that the mother tongue or a local language well known in the community is in principle the most suitable medium for education, in the initial year of education. The study queries this assertion and posits that the development of the child transcends beyond primary

education. Science and technology are not native and are transmitted in this language of the original owners, mostly English. If the child must develop substantially, he must acquire an education driven by the language which enables him to fit into a globalized world of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Although the proponents of 'indigenous languages for national language' have advanced such arguments such as cognitive development and that subject learning is best fostered through teaching in a language the child understands well. Teaching pupils in a familiar language enhances interaction between the instructor and the pupil and reduces the gap psychologically between home and school.

In Nigeria where a hierarchical structure of education exists from primary school, secondary, up to the tertiary institutions, there must be a common language that facilitates both inter and intra group communications. While the paper appreciates the need to develop our native languages, it strongly contends that this must not be done at the expense of a common language which English has come to be.

### **Conclusion**

The pivotal role the English language plays in the international community is undeniable. Despite few critiques in linguistic discourses against the propagation of English as a national language, the developmental dividends of the English language in Nigeria is monumental. The study has showcased the diverse contributions of the language to national development.

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