

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MOTHER TONGUE AS A CATALYST FOR INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT: THE LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE.

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1.0 Introduction

Research findings in applied linguistics have shown that intellectual development in man is made possible and faster through the use of ‘mother tongue’ as a medium of communication than through any other language. This is evident in the biological fact that human language is the only medium of thought. In other words, language is the medium through which we express our thoughts, ideas, intentions, emotions, etc. Thus, language and thought are closely interconnected, and they are inseparable.

Either in the spoken or written form, human ideas and notions are better expressed through the use of one’s mother tongue or first language. The implication of this is that a perfect mastery and control of one’s mother tongue would ensure a proper understanding of any human activity embarked upon through the use of mother tongue as a medium of expression. Expressing a similar view, Olopade (2009, p. 4) observes that:

When a person uses his/her mother tongue, it is found that complex ideas might just be easier to grasp and that the level of understanding of the same idea in a second language is generally lower or at best can be at par with that of the mother tongue.

Based on the uniqueness of mother tongue as an effective medium of thought, many advanced industrialized nations of the world like Japan, China, Russia, Korea, etc. insist on mother tongue education for the purpose of intellectual and industrial development. Such nations have been able to practically and efficiently manage and utilize their indigenous language resources, rather than relying on those of the foreign languages like English, for the purpose of development.

However, the reverse is the case in Nigeria. What obtains in this country could be described as linguistic ignorance. It is a situation in which parents always insist on the need to impose acquisition of English on their children, at the expense of the mother tongue. As quoted in the Nigeria Tribune, Monday, 11th November 2013, page thirty-four, the late former Minister of Education, Professor Babatunde Fatunwa once said:

Africans have been unable to invest anything of note in the scientific field because we think in a foreign language and this tends to inhibit our native intelligence. We are forced early in life to imitate our erstwhile colonial masters in thought, word and action. Yet, we know the imitators are not usually capable of original thinking, neither are they inventive by nature.

The aim of this paper is to draw the attention of our readers to the significance of mother tongue as a tool for intellectual development, and highlight some of the challenges facing the development of our indigenous languages in Nigeria. Having examined some of the challenges, the paper makes some possible suggestions and recommendations towards overcoming some of the problems facing the development of our indigenous languages in Nigeria.

1.1 Defining Mother Tongue/First Language

The term ‘mother tongue’ or first language is distinguished from any other language. It is the language spoken by either of the two parents, and the native language with which a child had his/her first contact. The two terms are used interchangeably but they may not always mean the same thing. For instance, in some cases, the ‘first language’ may not necessarily be the ‘mother tongue’, it could be the language with which a child had his/her first contact in life. That is, the language in his/her immediate environment to which he/she was first exposed. For example, a Yorùbá child given birth to in London, where the two parents preferred to interact with the baby in English language rather than in their mother tongue (Yorùbá), the child would naturally grow up speaking English as his/her first language rather than Yorùbá. In such a situation, we cannot refer to the first language of the child as his/her mother tongue. While considering the different definitions and the overlapping meanings of ‘first language’ and ‘mother tongue’, Malmkjær (2002, p. 67) makes the following distinction:

The term *first language* is used in different, overlapping ways, and can mean: the first language learned; the stronger language; the ‘mother tongue’, the language most used. *Mother tongue* is also used ambiguously. It variously means; the first language learned, irrespective of ‘from whom’, the stronger language at any time of life; the ‘mother tongue’ of the area or country (e.g Irish in Ireland); the language most used by a person; the language to which a person has the more positive attitude and affection.

1.2 The Significance of Mother Tongue Education

The significance of mother tongue, as an effective medium through which man can acquire any form of knowledge or skills is clearly expressed in the above definitions, where Malmkjær referred to mother tongue as “the language to which a person has the more positive attitude and affection”. Such a language will no doubt provide the most effective medium of carrying out any human activities without any hindrance.

Professionally, linguists are of the view that where a child’s mother tongue is acquired as his/her first language (L1), the child would be able to perform any human activity faster and better than using a foreign language like English (L2). For example, while referring to the positive result of the Ife Six-Year Primary Project, Awobuluyi (1979, p. 7) makes the following remarks:

The experiment, which has been widely reported in the national dailies as well as at conferences, should be enough to disabuse doubting minds of the notion that the mother tongue is not to be preferred to other languages as a medium of instruction for upper primary education.

Experts have proved, through experimental projects in education that children learn better when taught in their mother tongue. In addition to the Ife Six-Year Primary Project in (1970) in Nigeria

(where pupils who studied all their subjects in Yorùbá and learnt English only as a second subject performed better than their counterparts who used English as medium of instruction), Bamgbose (2014, p. 27) gives other examples of such experimental projects in Africa. They include the Rivers Readers Project in Nigeria in (1970), the PROPELCA project in Cameroon in (1981) and the Bilingual Education Project in BurkinaFaso in (1994). Other similar experiment in other parts of the world include the **Iloilo** Experiment in the Philippines, and the Modiano Language Study in the United States of America (see Ibrahim 2014, p. 218), in which mother tongue is used as a medium of instruction in the acquisition of both knowledge and skills.

From the foregoing, it could argued that imposing a second language like English on a child, right from the cradle, is like suppressing the thinking ability of the child, and indirectly killing his/her native intelligence. Expressing a similar view, Amfani (2012, p. 4) makes the following assertion:

A good mastery of one's own mother tongue provides the initial base for thinking in one's own mother tongue. The ability to think in one's own mother tongue provides the much needed solid foundation for an individual's literary and scientific development.

By implication, such native intelligence and wisdom are naturally embedded in the mother tongue via cultural elements like proverbs, idioms, riddles and jokes, traditional stories and taboos, etc. These cultural elements constitute essential ingredients that are required for the intellectual development of a child.

Similarly, Lyons (2002, p. 324) examines the interrelationship between language and culture and explains how a better understanding of the semantic interpretation of words depends on full understanding of the culture of a given language. According to him:

Full understanding of the several kings of meaning that are encoded in the grammar and vocabulary of a language comes only with a full understanding of the culture, or cultures, in which it operates. - - - particular languages are associated historically with particular cultures; the languages provide the key to the associated cultures, and especially to their literature; the languages themselves cannot be fully understood otherwise than in the context of the cultures in which they are inextricably embedded; so language and culture are studied together.

As implied in the above quotation, a child, is by necessity, requires both the cultural and the linguistic domains of his/her mother tongue in order to enhance his/her intellectual development. This is why linguistic experts view the situation in Nigeria where parents opt for the idea of '*Straight for English*' as a dangerous dimension that can only afford the pupils the opportunity of acquiring what is technically referred to as '*Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)*' and not '*Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)*'.

This negative linguistic approach accounts for the reason why many pupils who have attained some degree of competence in spoken English, through early contact, still fail woefully in the examinations conducted by public examination bodies like the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) and the National Examinations Council (NECO). Therefore, it becomes a thing of concern for language experts when proprietors of schools exclude the teaching and learning of

indigenous Nigerian language from the school curriculum. They consider such languages as vernaculars that must be prohibited.

2.0 Some of the Challenges Facing Mother Tongue Education in Nigeria.

There are many problems facing the use of indigenous Nigerian Languages as medium of instruction in the educational system in the country. Some of the major problems include the following:

- i. Negative attitudes towards the use of mother tongue in the educational system.
 - ii. Many of the indigenous languages are yet to be written and those that have standard orthography do not have enough teaching materials like primers, readers, and other relevant text-books and dictionaries.
 - iii. The dominant role of English as an official language in Nigeria.
 - iv. Non-implementation of the National Policy on Education (NPE) in Nigeria.
- We shall discuss in detail how each of these factors has contributed to the problems of indigenous languages in Nigeria.

2.1 Negative Attitudes Towards the Use of Mother Tongue in the Educational System.

Despite the policy statement by the Federal Government as contained in the National Policy on Education (NPE) that, “Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and at a later stage English”, many parents (both literate and illiterate) have no regard for the use of mother tongue as a medium of communication in schools. Instead, such parents always want their children to acquire English language right from the cradle. They do have the fear that the use of mother tongue will place their children at a disadvantage with respect to other children who study strictly in English. This is because English is considered to be superior to any indigenous language, in the sense that competence in English is considered a major determinant factor in job prospects and social advancement in a modern society. Contrary to this belief, linguists are of the view that no language is superior to the other; and that every language is endowed with prestige and such prestige is usually commensurate with the prestige or the influence of its speakers. Thus, extra-linguistic factors like political power enjoyed by the speakers, the numerical strength of the speakers, their historical background, etc. do determine the ultimate destiny of a given language (Sanusi (1996, p. 10).

2.2 Lack of Writing Systems for the Un-written Languages

Many indigenous Nigerian languages are yet to be written. And no conscious effort, either on the part of the Government or the native speakers, is being made to provide standard orthography for such languages. No degree of literacy can be achieved in any natural language until such a language is reduced into writing. In other words, teaching and learning cannot take place in a given language until such a language has a standard orthography. In order to ensure practical and effective mother tongue education in a given language; effort must be made by members of the speech community to employ the services of professional linguists and set up an Orthography Committee that would be charged with the responsibility of developing an orthography for the language. Subsequently, reading materials like primers, readers and other text-books as well as dictionaries can be produced for learners and users of the language. A written language has the opportunity of preserving the cultural heritage of its speakers. It also has the chances of surviving than an unwritten language.

According to current statistics, we have well over 500 indigenous Nigerian languages, but only very few of this number have standard orthography.

2.3 Effects of the Dominant Role of English as an Official Language in Nigeria.

Apart from being the official language, English is the most prestigious language in Nigeria. And by default, for lack of functional indigenous national language, English serves as the most effective national language. It is not just taught as a school subject, at all levels of education, but also the medium of instruction in the country's educational system.

The multi-ethnic situation in Nigerian and the accompanying emotional attachment to ethnic identity by various groups has made the adoption of a neutral language like English very relevant. Also, the National Policy on Education (NPE) gives English a *pre-eminent* position among other languages in the country. This has led to its imposition through teaching, learning, and usage at all levels of education in the country. There is no doubt that the imposition of English has compromised the socio-cultural integrity of Nigerians and their native languages. Given the linguistic fact that language dominance leads to language shift, and language shifts may consequently lead to language loss; we can claim that the dominance of English over all other languages in Nigeria can be considered as a case of **linguistic imperialism** (i.e. a linguistic act of injustice). It is a situation in which its imposition has compromised the socio-cultural integrity of Nigerians and their native languages. According to Tollefson (1999, p. 210):

Each time a society requires some people to learn another language in order to carry out human activities necessary for survival, an act of injustice has occurred that places those people at a disadvantage. Moreover, it defines those individuals as outsiders who will suffer socially and economically.

Similarly, Aliagan (2004, p. 6) considers the imposition of English language on Nigerians as a kind of cultural imperialism. According to him:

Imposition of a language on a people is seen as cultural imperialism. Adoption of the English language as lingua franca in Nigeria has had a corrosive effect on the indigenous languages. It has further eroded cultural values and robbed the people of maximum benefits derivable from functional communication.

2.4 Non-Implementation of the National Policy on Education (NPE)

Considering the degree of negligence with which issues relating to indigenous languages are handled by the Government, language experts and many Nigerians who have concern for the development of indigenous languages are of the view that the country does not have a coherent language policy. Many issues relating to this have been discussed in academic conferences and published in newspapers. For example, as far back as 1979, Professor Oladele Awobuluyi of the Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, University of Ilorin, in his inaugural lecture titled: *The New National Policy on Education in Linguistic Perspective*, highlighted, under different sub-headings, some of the weaknesses of the implementation strategies employed by the Federal Government. And up till today no conscious effort has been made by the Government to re-visit most of the key aspects of the policy statement that have to do with education in the country; most especially the role expected of the indigenous languages.

3.0 The Relevance of Mother Tongue Education to Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

Given the background information in this paper that acquisition of any form of knowledge or skills is made faster through the use of mother tongue, research findings in Computer Science have also shown that a software developer performs better when computer programming is carried out in his/her native language. Many countries of the world like Japan, China, Spain, etc. are now making conscious efforts to develop software in their indigenous languages in order to reap the full benefits of ICT. Unfortunately, many indigenous Nigerian languages that have not been reduced into writing can never dream of this kind of innovation. Invariably, if such languages are still in existence they may never witness any serious development. This is why the community of native speakers of such unwritten languages must find a way of getting the languages written.

4.0 Conclusion

If Nigeria must develop socially, intellectually and scientifically, the Government at all levels, must take the necessary steps that have been taken by developed and developing nations of the world, by emphasizing the use of mother tongue as an agent of development. To attain the same height attained by the developed countries of the world, we must embark on the development of our indigenous languages that are yet to be written, and create sufficient teaching materials for the ones that have been written. Effort must be made to create domains of their effective use. Native speakers of the indigenous languages must be loyal to their languages and be proud to speak the languages to their children. Effort must be made to encourage computer experts to involve our indigenous languages in software development. Enough time and space must be created for the use of indigenous languages for the purpose of information dissemination on both radio and television across the nation. Lastly, Government must provide motivation, in all reasonable forms, for both the teachers and the learners of indigenous Nigerian languages.

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