

HAND OUT PUBLIC LECTURE

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INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES AND DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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1. INTRODUCTION

The present Institute of Nigerian Languages of the University of Nigeria is not a new institution. It is the former National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN). Indeed the functions and the objectives are very much the same. Essentially, the institute is all out to cater for the development and sustenance of all Nigerian languages. However, under the new administration of the institute and especially under the stewardship of Professor Clara Ikekeonwu, and in line with the vogue around, and more so one initiated by women of caliber, we shall all expect a re-branding of the entire activities of the institute. This public lecture is part of the re-branding.

I have been called upon, in my capacity as the President of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria, to talk on the topic Indigenous Languages and development in Nigeria. The topic sounds simple and straight forward, but on a close examination, it is elusive and controversial. On one hand, it is not easy to say with some degree of precision, the number of indigenous languages available in Nigeria. On the other, it is equally not easy to convince people that indigenous Nigerian languages have any significant role to play in the overall development of the Nigerian nation. My task in this talk is to try and give a picture of the indigenous Nigerian languages with a view to sensitizing Nigerians on the need to appreciate their mother tongues. Another task is to explain how indigenous Nigerian languages can play significant roles in various sheds of development. It must be pointed out here and now that development is a very wide concept and subsumes quite a number of issues.

I divide the lecture into three major sections. There is a section on Nigeria and its indigenous languages. Here, we remind ourselves what the political entity Nigeria is: how it came about and its present structure. Another section discusses the concept of development and various forms of development. The third section attempts to show how indigenous languages can be meaningfully engaged in various forms of development, and especially scientific and technological development.

2. NIGERIA AND ITS INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

The present Nigerian nation came into being in 1914 after the amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria, and Lagos protectorate. Nigeria is an independent country located in the sub Saharan West Africa. According to the National Census figures of 2001, Nigeria has an estimated population of 120 million. In 1967, Nigeria was divided into twelve states.

Today, Nigeria has a total of 36 states and a capital territory. The 36 states are further divided into 6 geo-political zones for ease of administration and even development. The geo-political zones are (i) North West, (ii) North East, (iii) North Central, (iv) South West, (v) South East, and (vi) South-South. Each zone has its own share of concentration of languages. Grimes (2000) reports that there are about 500 languages in Nigeria. These languages comprise both minority and majority languages as well as some few non-Nigerian languages such as English, Arabic and French.

The classification of Nigerian languages into major and minor is essentially based on numerical strength of speakers of each language. The so called majority languages usually have millions of speakers, while minority languages tend to have few thousands or hundreds of speakers. The development of Nigerian languages to the level of attaining proper codification in the sense of Urua (2005) (i.e. having standard orthography, dictionaries, grammars, full documentation), was initially carried out by the missionaries and British colonial administration (compare R.C. Abraham who wrote Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Tiv and Somali dictionaries), and currently by indigenous linguists. It must be pointed out that only few Nigerian languages attained the desired level of codification. This position has a direct consequence on whether or not a language can be engaged in the attainment of some forms of development.

3. DEVELOPMENT

The verb ‘develop’ means ‘(cause to) grow larger, fuller or more mature, organized’. ‘Development’ means ‘developing or being developed (in all senses)’. (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English). This is the ordinary meaning and popular understanding of the term ‘development’.

Thus, development can be in respect of an individual or society; it can also be religious, political, linguistic, technological, scientific, military, etc. A more

conceptualized meaning of ‘development’ is usually added to any form of development under discussion. We need to draw attention here on an important distinction between the development of Nigerian indigenous languages in a purely linguistic sense, and the role of Nigerian languages in the development of other spheres of life. This being the case, we ask the following questions:

(i) How linguistically developed are indigenous Nigerian languages?

(ii) Which indigenous Nigerian languages can meaningfully be employed in the development of other spheres of life? (The second question forms the topic of section four) How linguistically developed are indigenous Nigerian languages?

This issue has been discussed in various quarters (see the cited references) and the general feeling is that only few Nigerian languages are developed in the sense of full codification. Since there are differences in levels of development amongst the indigenous languages, we may wish to advocate that each language should be treated on its own merit. Thus, languages with fully developed orthographies, and which are used in schools and in other spheres of life (politics, evangelism, newspaper, etc.) are likely to be used for serious development purposes such as scientific and technological development.

Less developed indigenous Nigerian languages on the other hand, are to be uplifted for use in initial development stages especially personal development. Less developed Nigerian languages must be used for the acquisition of native intelligence and native wisdom which are enshrined in the languages (proverbs, idiomatic expressions, tongue twisters, stories etc.). This can be achieved through full mastery of the language at the spoken level. Notice that native intelligence and wisdom which are enshrined in the language, are the essential ingredients for any future development and the breakthroughs to be initiated by individual speakers in whatever form.

4. NIGERIAN LANGUAGES FOR PARTICIPATION IN ALL FORMS OF DEVELOPMENT

4.1 Individual or personal development

Let us state the plain fact that every individual needs a language to communicate in his immediate environment. The ability to speak one’s own mother tongue

(linguistic development) is the surest identity of being a member of a particular linguistic group. 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. For the sake of true cultural identity and proper grounding in the ability to use one's own mother tongue for literary and scientific thinking, people must develop their indigenous languages.

4.2 Linguistic development

Linguistic development is seen here partly as the attainment of proper codification by a given language. In addition, the language must also be in constant use by its speakers. Most indigenous Nigerian languages are yet to be fully codified. They lack systematic descriptions and are not documented. Speakers of indigenous Nigerian languages must strive to have their languages codified. It is pertinent for speakers of non-codified languages to note that gone are the days when government codifies languages. It is now the responsibility of ethnic communities to sponsor the codification of their languages. The codification will facilitate development on various fronts. Fully codified languages are taught in schools due to availability of orthographies.

The writing facility can allow native speakers of a language to put down their thoughts on paper and such documents will facilitate faster growth and development. It must be mentioned here and again that one of the major functions of the Language Institute is to facilitate for the codification of indigenous Nigerian languages. Indigenous language groups must contact the Language Institute for this valuable service. Linguistic development is the first step towards any other meaningful and desirable development. Scientific or technological development for example, cannot be attained by a people who had not developed linguistically. Suffice it to say that all technologically developed nations and societies must have attained wonderful linguistic development prior to the scientific or technological development.

4.3 Social Development

Every society needs to develop socially. Social development includes religious or spiritual development, political development and cultural development. Every society is unique with respect to possessing a language. The language is the only true identity of the society.

4.4 Religion

Members of a given society may decide to adopt a particular faith as a religion. Religious expressions, prayers, incantations and other religious matters are expressed via language. It should be noted that only a fully developed language is conveniently used in religion and religious development. Thus, languages that are least developed can hardly be used in any serious religious enterprise. For example, in the Nigerian context, only the major languages could be said to be meaningfully engaged in the translation of the major scriptures. The major languages have developed reasonably and are therefore used effectively in religious matters such as preaching, praying, translation and general evangelical work.

4.5 Politics

The role of language in Politics can not be overemphasized. For a successful political delivery, a language must be rich enough to provide the required vocabulary and related terms for an adequate political expression. Political activities such as campaigns and their slogans, speeches, and other forms of political persuasions and bargains, are expressed in language, and only languages that are developed politically can effectively be utilized for political purposes. A further development is the ability to teach political science and political philosophy in a given language. Native administrative wisdom and political philosophy can be expressed in most indigenous languages.

However, the science of politics, and especially modern politics and its concomitant terms and concepts, can only be expressed in languages that have attained higher level of political development and are fully codified.

4.6 Scientific and Technological Development

Of all the spheres of development, Nigerians and indeed most other people, see scientific and technological development as the only true development that societies should seriously focus attention on. This being the case, most people can

not imagine the role of language in scientific and technological development. Other people, as contained in the classification by Matemidola (1999), are of the opinion that only English language can be used in scientific and technological development.

4.7 Stages in Scientific and Technological Development

Most people are not aware that the role of language in scientific and technological development is seriously graded and a language can gradually attain the highest level of participation in the description and documentation of the scientific knowledge. It has been mentioned earlier on that for a language to participate in any meaningful scientific and technological development, such language must be fully codified. The codification will allow for the writing of scientific terms and the translation of same. At the highest level, a language is used for the documentation of scientific literature and discussion of same.

Scientists at this level, do their scientific thinking in this particular language. Indigenous Nigerian Languages in Scientific and Technological Development It is true that some Nigerian languages have made head way in their effort to attain scientific and technological development. These languages are codified and for quite some time, have been taught in schools and are used in various scientific endeavours.

Three Nigerian languages, namely, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are taught at all levels of education, i.e. from nursery to the university. There were early efforts to develop these languages scientifically by translating scientific and technological terms and concepts for pedagogical purposes. Amfani (1999) reported the effort by John M. Dalziel (1916) to write a book entitled *A Hausa Botanical Vocabulary*, which is a collection of over one thousand Hausa botanical names with their Latin equivalents. Other efforts in the colonial period include E.A. Clark's (1913) *Hundred Birds of the Niger Province*, Hanns Vischer's (1936) *Vocabulary of Nigerian Names of Trees, Shrubs and Herbs* and Hausa Language Board's *Glossaries of Technical Terms* (1959). According to Amfani (1999), 'these works constitute the early attempts to provide necessary base for scientific and technological advancement'. Similar works abound in Igbo and Yoruba.

Very recently, Microsoft (Nigeria) in conjunction with Alt-i, Ibadan provided a Language Interface Pack (Hausa/Igbo/Yoruba Glossary) which was a careful translation of all computer terms in the three languages. Microsoft has carried out similar effort for some notable African languages.

5. RESIDUAL ISSUES

The threat of globalization will surely affect quite a number of indigenous Nigerian languages to the point of extinction. The negative attitude of speakers towards the development and well-being of their languages is most unfortunate and must be changed if only to allow some degree of continuity for the languages.

With regard to overall development in various spheres, perhaps Nigeria may adopt the Russian solution in which languages were officially chosen to develop in certain fields. Thus, government may decide to make Igbo the language of technology, and throughout the country, technology must be taught only in Igbo at all levels of education.

Other languages will be selected in the same fashion for the study of other facets of development. For languages that could not be used in certain spheres of development for lack of codification and other issues, effort must be made to document them properly and keep on using them.

6. CONCLUSION

The focus of this presentation had been an exploration into the capability of indigenous Nigerian languages to participate meaningfully in development in all its facets. It has been pointed out that languages differ in their ability to partake in certain facets of development. However, it was shown that every language can meaningfully be used for development since development has a large sphere, and that a language may develop in a particular sphere even though it requires certain qualities to allow it participate in other spheres of development.

Scientific and technological development is more popular and also very difficult to attain, and especially when a language does not attain full codification. This being the case, individual speakers of less developed languages and their communities

should concentrate in using their language for development in other less demanding spheres. Further effort towards full codification, teaching and general usage will one day qualify such languages for full participation in scientific and technological development.

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