

## Harnessing Nigerian Language Potentials for National Development

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**Abstract:** *Language is a veritable tool for national development. A country with vast linguistic resources like Nigeria needs to utilize these resources to better the life of her people. It is a wrong conception to regard multilingualism as detrimental to National development and that it is the cause of several ethnic wars. In fact, rarely can you find a society that is monolingual anywhere in the world due to the ease of mobility and communication. Language is constantly being recognised as a basic tool of communication. Formulation of a good linguistic policy such as the societal multilingualism that will ensure that every language takes her place in the developmental process of the country is a right step in the right direction towards making Nigeria a developed nation. The resources being expended in the pursuit of a non-existent National language could be channeled to other beneficial sectors, while the infinite linguistic resources of the country is harnessed to mobilize people to imbibe patriotic tendencies for the total integration of Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** *Multilingualism, Linguistic resources, National Development, Communication, National language.*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The importance of language in the development of any society cannot be over-emphasized. It is that variable in the developmental process that ensures the socio-cultural, economic and technological transformation of the society. It is that machine that brings about the social integration of the society.

Language has been defined by several scholars such as [1], [2], [3], [4]. However the definition of [5] shall be considered, they see language from a functional perspective where they posit that 'Man employs language as a tool of communication of thoughts, inner feelings and personal psychological experience'. To them it is a medium to establish social relations. Language serves to bring people together in a relationship in order to develop them and bring improvement to their environment. It is also a means of identification. Generally, very few nations exist in the world that are monolingual, thanks to the ease of mobility that has been made even easier by science and technology. As such, most countries are made up of different peoples, societies and communities with different linguistic resources within their political enclave. In fact the general impression of multilingualism is that it clogs up the pipe of states' cohesion and economic development. In order to manage these attendant problems of multilingualism, successive governments in Nigeria have taken steps to ensure that no Nigerian language is super-imposed on the others. The colonial masters played safe by choosing English language which is a national language for administration, government and business. After independence however, there arose the need for the recognition of the multilingual nature of the country and tap into this linguistic resources for national development. In this sense, provision is made for their use in the important documents which spelt out Nigerian National life; the Constitution and the National Policy on Education. Section 55 of the 1999 Constitution states that:

*The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English and in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made thereof [6].*

Also Section 97 of the same constitution affirms further:

*the business of the state House of Assembly may in addition to English be conducted in one or more languages spoken in the state as the House may by resolution approve [6].*

The National Policy on Education (2004) Section 1(8) states:

*... the Government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother-tongue. In this connection, the government considers the three major languages to be Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba [7].*

Also Section 2: 11(3) says:

*... ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother-tongue*

or the language of the immediate community; [7]

Also the establishment of cross cultural and cross linguistic agencies such as the unity schools and the National Youth Service Corps were established to ensure the maintenance of indigenous languages in the country.

## II. LINGUISTIC SITUATION IN NIGERIA

Nigeria is linguistically heterogeneous in nature. It is a multilingual and multicultural entity with over four hundred languages spoken by about two hundred and fifty ethnic groups. [5],[8]. Out of all these languages, three, namely Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are recognized as major languages based on such considerations as the strength of their population, their level of development as written languages, their status in education and the political influence of the speakers. They are regarded as regional languages or *lingua francas* in their ethnic boundaries while the National Policy on Education recognizes them as 'National languages' and sometimes serve some official functions within their environments.

All other indigenous languages spoken in the country are known as minority languages for some historical and demographic reasons. However, these minority languages are also sub divided according to the population of speakers. Some of the important major - minority languages sometimes called medium languages are Edo, Efik, Fulfulde, Ibibio, Idoma, Itsekiri, Izon, Kanuri, Urhobo, Tiv, Epira, Jukun. Also exist minority languages in Nigeria which are often put at three hundred and ninety seven (397) spoken by about half the population of the country.

Aside the indigenous languages which in general are the mother tongues of Nigerians, there also exists non-indigenous languages. They are English which is regarded as Nigeria's official language, Nigerian Pidgin (NP), which is regarded as Nigerian unofficial *lingua franca* and foreign languages. English is used as a second language in Nigeria. It is the language of administration and education and is used in most official domains. English and sometimes Nigeria Pidgin are fast replacing some Nigeria indigenous languages in informal domains. While English language is learnt formally in schools, NP is acquired informally. Similarly, while English function for inter ethnic communication among educated Nigerians, Nigerian Pidgin serve the same purpose for non-literate or semi-literate Nigerians. NP is also used as a link language between the educated and uneducated people.

The foreign languages used in Nigeria can be divided into two broad categories; those that serve special purposes and those which are thought in some communities. French and Arabic are language for special purposes. Arabic is restricted to usages in religion and education. However, it serves as a first language in some parts of Bornu State which uses the variety called *Shuwa Arabic*. Latin on the other hand is employed by Catholics for worship. French on the other hand, is taught in schools and some tertiary educational institutions. In principle, French was accorded the second official language status and made a compulsory subject of study in the 1998 National Policy on Education. It is even a second language to some Nigerian people who live along the borders of Nigeria and her French speaking neighbours.

The second category of foreign language comprises those which are learnt particularly in the universities. They include German, Russian, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese.

## III. NIGERIA LANGUAGES AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Development is a target desirable for every nation and as stated earlier language is a remarkable tool that fosters rapid development. In a multilingual nation such as Nigeria, recognition of all languages through a proper language planning process and language policy is an important step towards national development. Proper management of the linguistic diversity through proper recognition of the peoples diverse cultural identities will foster rapid development.

Contrary to [9] and [10], inter ethnic and inter tribal wars are not caused by language rivalry rather they are a result of inequalities and struggles for power. [11] in reference to Klaus, 2003 gave an instance of Papua New Guinea which is also a multilingual island with about eight hundred languages to about five million people yet they were able to surmount the challenges posed by multilingualism through a gradual process of multilingual education starting from kindergarten. Each child is exposed to many local languages and by year 2000 the Island had developed up to three hundred and eighty local languages.

[12] also discussed efforts in the revitalisation of indigenous languages in America. Language is a people's mark of identity and cultural awareness; not recognising this makes any meaningful development impossible.

Nigeria should by now realise that the search for a National language seems to be a 'search in futility' at least for now. Rather proper harnessing of our linguistic resources for our national growth should be the focus. None of the languages in Nigeria merits the status 'National Language' according to [5]'s parameter:

*'A national language refers to a language which has the authority of the government conferred on it....such a language must as a matter of necessity, cut across the entire strata of the society in its use and application'.*

In view of this therefore, it is pertinent for Nigeria to borrow a leaf from India with a complex linguistic situation similar to Nigeria that operates what is called Societal Multilingualism, which is a non-conflicting type of language policy because languages are allocated different functions. This policy has the potential of reducing multilinguistic tension in the society.

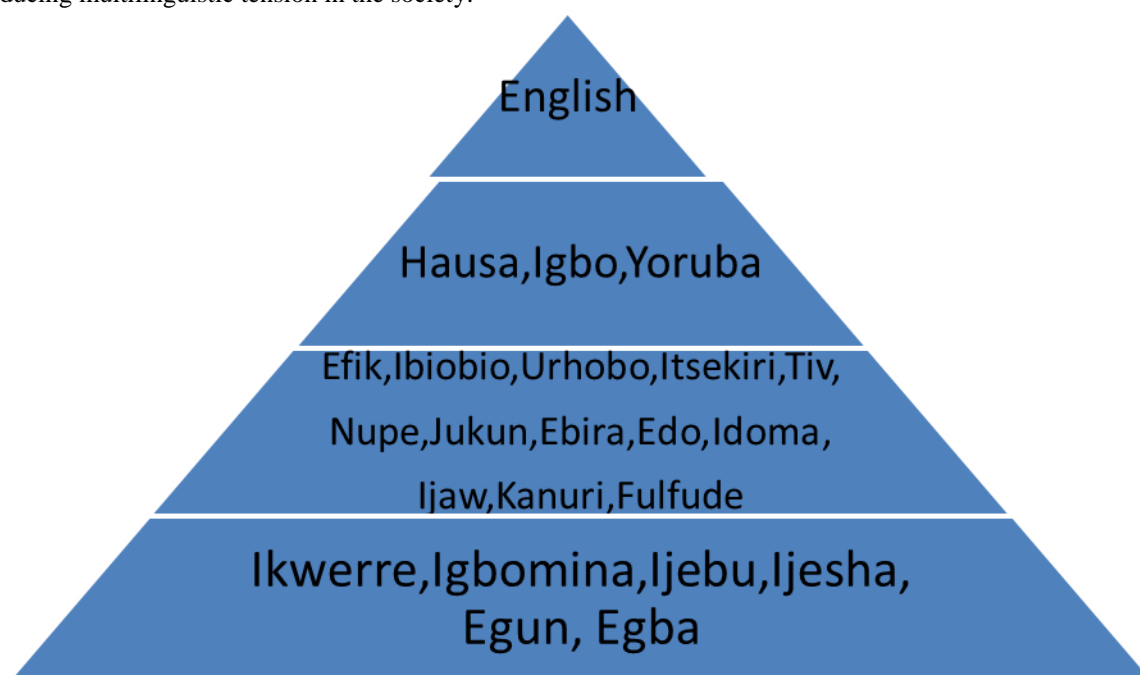


Figure 1: Progressive Societal Multilingualism

From the Progressive Societal Multilingualism pyramid above,

- English language represents Language of government, education, international communication and business. It commands the widest speaking population.
- Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba represents National language used for National Integration And Unity
- Major-minor languages. They could be used within the states.
- Minority languages of smaller communities Used in informal communities.

We must note that this division does not in any way portray one language as being superior to the other. Rather it is an attempt to show the geographical wide spread of the speakers. For instance English Language has the highest geographical widespread. It is spoken in the length and breadth of the country. However it is not native to the country as such it is the language of government, business, education and international communication and diplomacy. Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba have their roots in the three regions of Nigeria. Hausa(North), Igbo(East) and Yoruba (West). However, due to mobility speakers of these languages are also found in other regions.

The thirteen languages called Major-Minor languages are next in the number of speakers. These could be used as state languages. Each state may be encouraged to use them as tools of governance. Other minority languages which have been put at three hundred and ninety seven (397) languages have smaller number of speakers and they are also mother-tongue of some people. They could be used informally and in family discussions.

One beautiful thing about this policy is that it is progressive in nature. As languages gain more acceptability and it becomes standardized it moves up the pyramid. So rather than have rancorous competition; there exists a healthy rivalry as these languages aspire to move to the next level.

Another important point is that the possibility of a language going into extinction is near zero because there will always be a native speaker who is making effort to ensure the growth of his mother-tongue. Also the interactive domain of language usage will be strengthened thus making multilingualism an essential tool for social mobility and social cohesion.

As more of these local languages develop, indigeneous knowledge of health care, value systems, ethnic and native technology that would have been lost with the death of these languages will be made available to younger generations.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Language is an important tool in National development. Possession of about four hundred languages therefore make Nigeria a linguistically rich nation. However the poor management of these linguistic resources has for long pauperised the nation. The search for a non existent National language has thrown the country into several linguistic crises that have long deprived her of the needed development. This paper therefore posits that a careful language planning and policy formulation will bring out the needed National development. The adoption of a societal bilingualism policy which sees that every language takes her pride of place in the development process of the country will be a right decision in harnessing Nigerian language potentials for National development and will also ensure that all Nigerian peoples have equal stake in the Nigerian project.

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