

Exploring Language Conflict and Attitudes in Nigeria's Multi-lingual Context

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Abstract

Nigeria as a multi-lingual nation, recognized for its cultural diversity and linguistic varieties, presents a unique landscape for examining the intricate relationship between language, conflict and social attitude. At the most recent count, it has some five hundred (500) languages spoken in the country. Language has become a significant factor in influencing conflict, shaping social dynamics, and informing attitude towards different ethnic groups. This paper investigates the ways in which language is related to conflict, identity and power dynamics in Nigeria, and how attitude towards different languages impact social cohesion and national unity. Consequently, an attempt was made to explain the two sociolinguistic concepts especially with regard to Nigerian society which is both multi-ethnic and multi-lingual. It also looked into the influence of English language on language attitude and conflict with regard to the indigenous ones. The findings of this work have implication for language policy, conflict resolution, and national development, highlighting the need for inclusive language planning and management to promote social cohesion and national unity. The study therefore recommends that relevant language policy provisions should be fully implemented to facilitate social interaction and national development as well as to reduce language tension.

Keywords: language, attitude, conflicts, indigenous language, multi-lingualism

Introduction

Language is a vital instrument for human relationship, cooperation and interaction. In fact, it is the most distinguishing factor between human beings and other creatures. Interestingly, in Nigeria, the federal government seems to appreciate the importance of language as a viable tool for social integration and national development. Hence, section 1, paragraph 10, of the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004) says: "Government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion; and preserving cultures."

However, the inability of government to ensure a proper implementation of the follow-up stipulation which is that "every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment and in the interest of national unity..." one of the three Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, seems to contradict the above position. With regard to language attitude and language conflict which is the main focus in this paper, the introduction of English and some other foreign languages such as French, Arabic, Latin, Portuguese and German in Nigeria and other multi-lingual nations appears to have broadened the two concepts both positively and negatively. Again, the characteristic multiple dialects or varieties of each of the languages also have their own impact on language attitude and conflict. All these are examined in detail in the course of this paper.

However, one thing that is apparent is that the presence of these foreign languages, particularly English and the recent accordance of three Nigerian languages, namely, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba national or major status while the numerous others are classified as minors have brought another dimension in the language attitude and conflict. It is pertinent to observe from the foregoing that though Fafunwa (1989) findings reveal that any language is adequately endowed or equipped to cater for all the needs, developments and challenges of the society that owns it, the attitude of people and government towards it vis-a-vis other languages that exist in the environment can go a long way to determine its fate as well as the extent of conflict that could result from their co-existence. Nevertheless, while language attitude could be negative or positive, favourable or unfavourable, language conflict could be either internal or external depending on the circumstances surrounding its or their existence/co-existence.

Language attitude

According to Crystal (2000), language attitudes refer to the feelings people have about their own language or the languages of others. From this explanation, attitude to language can be distinguished from other attitudes by the fact that they are precisely about language and towards speakers of a language (Grosjean, 2002; Numfor, 2022). Such attitudes or reactions are either negative or positive. Alternatively, they can be favourable or unfavourable. To this regard, Babajide (2001:2) averred that:

A reaction or attitude of any kind is believed to be dependent on, and informed by a number of factors - historical, political, ethnic, economics, educational or religious. At times, an attitude can be a product of unexplainable phobia or love for a given phenomenon.

With regard to language attitudes, the above observation is more relevant and pronounced in not only multi-lingual societies but in speech communities with varieties of dialects. In both cases, Nigeria serves as a good example. The nation is not only blessed with so many languages, together with some foreign ones introduced since the colonial era, but each of these languages has multiple dialects some of which are nearly mutually unintelligible.

In fact, attitudes towards language and its use have been of major interest to researchers and of particular interest to linguistics (Babajide, 2001; Igboanusi & Ohia 2001; Igboanusi, 2002; Adegbija, 2004). Their desires, among other things, are to ascertain to what extent attitudes toward different languages and varieties of language reflect perceptions of people in different social groups, and how such perceptions influence interaction within and across the boundaries of language use. In the words of Adegbija (2004:12), "Language attitudes are formed and established according to the functions, status, and potential that people perceive particular languages having."

Perhaps, as language is characteristically dynamic, people also exhibit dynamic attitude towards it. Moreover, Babajide (2001) strongly believes that people tend to be more favourable and positively disposed to using both in speech and writing and tolerating a language that has the following attributes:

- A considerable national and (or) international coverage of users.

- A metropolitan and cosmopolitan status
 - A considerable numerical strength and some measure of economic and political power;
- and
- A sufficient reliable codified form.

Generally, the above criteria greatly favour English and many European languages like French as well as certain religious-inclined ones like Arabic, Latin, Hebrew and Greek. With regards to Nigeria, such criteria seem to favour and inform the choice and accordance of national status to Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

Babajide (2001) also highlighted certain criteria capable of making any language unattractive or unpopular and consequently make people's attitudinal dispositions towards it negative. To him, such language could be:

- restricted in use to few native speakers
- a mere vernacular; not yet codified
- associated only with rurality
- irrelevant to the socio-economic and political needs of the people.

However, it is noteworthy that languages, like human beings, grow or rather pass through certain developmental stages; and majority started as dialects before developing into full-fledged languages. It is also not unlikely that any language no matter its present status must have passed or must be passing through the above listed stages. Nonetheless, people all over the world do attach a lot of importance to their culture, and language is not only an aspect of culture but also a viable medium for cultural preservation and dissemination.

In Nigeria and many African countries, English which is the language of the colonial masters and missionaries has been the dominant language. Almost everybody wants to be identified with the language which they see as a language of high status, prestige, education and power. They attach a lot of importance and respect to it. Many a times, whoever cannot speak the language or its pidgin form is regarded as an illiterate. However, in recent times, the Nigerian government seems to have changed her attitude towards indigenous languages. Hence in the NPE (FRN, 2004), there is a stipulation that:

- ... every child shall learn the language of immediate environment.
- Furthermore, in the interest of national unity, it is expedient that every child shall be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

Though the policy is a commendable one, the government's attitude towards its implementation has been quite lackadaisical. As a matter of fact, language attitudes constitute a determinant factor in deciding the adoption of a common language (Igboanusi, 2002). Its consideration in a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic society like Nigeria is very essential in ensuring effective interaction, harmonious co-existence, social integration, national development and national unity as well as minimizing social conflict and fear of domination. According to Lewis (2000:24):

Any policy for language especially in the system of Education has to take account of the attitude of those likely to be affected. In the long run, no policy will succeed which does not do one of these things: conform to the expressed attitudes of those involved; persuade those who express negative attitudes about the tightness of the policy; or seek to remove the cause of the disagreement.

Perhaps, much of the criticisms the language policy of NPE received could be attributable to non-conformity with the above conditions. However, it is expected as rightly observed by Igboanusi (2002) that language attitude, in so far as it reflects inter-ethnic attitudes, are crucial and central to language policy and planning. He is also of the opinion that any future language policy should take into account the attitude of the speakers of both the minority and majority languages because they will be affected. In the same way, such attitude should be extended to the dialects of a language, particularly, in a bid to choosing a standard dialect which will in turn become the standard language to avoid conflict or crisis.

Language conflict

Conflict results when at least two parties fail to agree with each other or express divergent views or opinions. It is a phenomenon that manifests in almost all human societies, organizations or relationships but varies in degree and form of expression. Relatively, contacts between different languages do inevitably result in conflicts between speakers of those languages (Nedle, 2001). Moreover, language conflict not only manifest a great deal in multi-lingual societies, but also within speech communities where different dialects of the same language exist.

In Nigeria which is a typical multi-lingual and multi-ethnic nation, Igboanusi (2002) reports that one of the conflicts which has hindered her unity and socio-cultural development is language conflict. He said that language conflict in Nigeria has to be understood from the backdrop of the numerous ethnic languages, all of which are in competition for supremacy and survival.

In fact, the classification of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as major Nigerian languages and all others as minor appears to have aggravated the unhealthy rivalry among the speakers of the languages. Hence, the relationship of the major to the non-major languages constitutes a constant source of language conflict in multi-lingual and multi-ethnic society like Nigeria (Bamgbose, 2000). It is pertinent to note however, that language conflict exists not only between or among languages but also within languages. In Nigeria, examples of both cases abound (Uwalaka, 2001). According to Bamgbose (2000), certain activities designed for promoting the major languages and which have attracted adverse reactions or strong opposition from the minority language speakers include:

- the language provisions of the NPE of 2004
- the introduction of second language courses in the major languages in some colleges of education in order to prepare teachers of such languages in secondary schools.
- the entrenchment of a clause in the defunct 1979 constitution for the use of the three languages in the National Assembly in addition to English
- the compilation of a metalanguage for the teaching of each of the three major languages.

Perhaps, what motivated the fierce opposition could be fear of displacement, domination and marginalization. Again, the failure of WAZOBIA (wa-Yoruba, zo-Hausa and bia-Igbo: the words mean come in their respective languages) experiment and inability of Nigeria, and indeed most multi-lingual nations to fashion out their own indigenous national languages (Lingua Franca) may not be unconnected with the rivalry and mutual suspicion between the speakers of the two groups.

Furthermore, language external conflict is not restricted to language of Third World Countries alone. To this regard, Uwalaka (2001) lists certain characteristic features of Modern English which resulted from language external conflict. They include:

- the enlargement of the vocabulary of English
- the simplification of English inflectional system
- the loss of English grammatical gender, and,
- the decay of English inflectional endings.

She also maintains that the influence was so enormous that the language was transformed from non-configurational to a configurational language.

In Nigeria today, the introduction and extensive use of English and other languages such as French, Latin, Arabic and German, though good for language development, has broadened the language conflict situation in the country. For instance, in many communities, ability to communicate effectively in English language has been one of the major criteria for assuming leadership position. Many a time, this situation does generate a sort of conflict between the “old” and the “new” generations. Some external language conflict situation can also be noticed in some local courts or churches that make use of interpreters/translators who usually translate what is said in the target language (TL) to the source language (SL) or vice versa. Many a time, what is said in one language could be translated wrongly in another and this could bring about misunderstanding, confusion, conflict or even crisis. This is more apparent in the translation of proverbs, idiomatic expressions, riddles, puns and other literary terms. For instance, a proverb like “A stitch in time, saves nine” in English can hardly be translated properly into any of Nigeria’s indigenous languages due to the fact that some of the terms involved are culture-inclined.

On the other hand, Uwalaka (2001) is also of the view that the reduction of language external conflict usually encourages language internal conflict, which she sees as the phenomenon in which, for political, economic or socio-economic reasons, dialects of a given language vie for ascendancy. It could be observed that those eventually adopted as standard languages or dialects are those that gained upper hand in the struggle. Moreover, the advent of colonialism and missionary activities in the late 18th century further heightened dialect consciousness with its concomitant language internal conflict. For instance, in Igboland, while those of the Roman Catholic Mission adopted Onitsha dialect in most of their writing and translation, their protestant counterparts made use of what they christened 'Union Igbo' which appeared to be an admixture of the dialects of Owerri, Unwana, Arochukwu and Bonny (Oraka, 1993). Apart from this, speakers of other dialects were also clamouring for attention. Thus, making dialectal

diversity one of the major factors for language internal conflict. The situation was complicated by the rivalry between the different missionary groups and their faithful/adherents. Furthermore, the orthography controversy which bedeviled Igbo and perhaps some other languages in their different development stages is another serious language internal conflict. It was not until 1961 that, that of Igbo language was amicably resolved through Onwu Orthography Committee. It is sufficient to note that these language conflicts - both external and internal - if not checked could degenerate to cultural conflict since language subsumes a greater part of the people's culture (Uwalaka, 2001).

The relationship between language attitude and language conflict

From the above, it is sufficient to observe that language attitude can affect language conflict, and vice versa. This is so because if the people's general attitude towards a language or languages spoken in a particular society is positive or favourable, it will likely minimize the extent of conflict that could result from such co-existence. On the other hand, if the language attitude is poor or hostile, it will likely have an adverse effect on the language conflict that could result from such interaction.

Importantly both concepts manifest in every society and they are more pronounced in multi-lingual societies as a result of language contact and language competition. Again, both of them can be influenced either positively or negatively due to social, political, religious and economic reasons. In Nigeria, the adoption of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as national languages and English as official language, according to the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004) is to facilitate social integration, national development and cooperation and, perhaps to minimize conflict, among the different ethnic groups.

Nevertheless, the type of status and type of importance attached to the languages involved or their dialects do affect both people's attitude towards them and the kind of conflict that could emanate from their co-existence. Both language attitude and language conflict are aspects of socio-linguistics which thrive in almost every society, most especially in multi-lingual and multi-ethnic societies. The facilitators are usually the speakers of the language(s) through their attitudes and activities.

Conclusion

As the essence of language in any society cannot be over-stressed, people should appreciate it as a natural endowment, cultural heritage, instrument of socialization and human development. Consequently, they should avoid displaying language attitudes capable of promoting conflict or crisis in the society.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

1. Consequent upon the fact that language is the most important means of communication and interaction and a means of preserving culture, no language or its speakers should be under-rated or looked down upon as so doing could breed conflict or crisis.
2. Relevant language policy provisions should be fully implemented to facilitate social interaction and national development as well as to reduce language tension.

3. The undue emphasis on English as a language of study, language of instruction and official language will not augur well for the proper development of indigenous languages; hence there should be a change of attitude in this regard.

4. There is crucial need for more elaborate research in these aspects of socio-linguistics as they affect language development, human relationship and co-existence.

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