

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF NIGERIA IN WEST AFRICA

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Abstract

Language is a rule-based system of signs. Saying that language is rule-based system makes people think of other kinds of situations where rules are enforced by particular authority. For example, think about classroom behavior; students are expected to sit still, be quiet, pay attention, clap or carry out any other instruction commanded by the teacher; typically, there are consequences if they do not follow these rules. This means that, they come into existence through the above common practice by the users of language. Therefore, this study is based on the role of language in the development of Nigeria in West Africa. The focus is to discuss the major terms, explain the role of language in the development of Nigeria in West Africa. Basic problems that face Nigeria's development and solutions to solving the problems were highlighted. The article adopted a qualitative descriptive method. There should be an implementation of policy put in place to enhance language study, this will expose learners to the culture, socio-economic issues, and situational circumstances in which proverbs, idioms, and native wisdom are put into practical expression. The study finds out that language plays a vital role in the development of Nigeria. Ways of improving language study are recommended.

Keywords: Role, Language, Development Nigeria and West Africa

Introduction

Language is a means of communication. People use it to express their feelings, opinions, desires and ideas. It helps in establishing and maintaining relationship among people. Through the use of language, thought is organized, refined and expressed. Languages help in the information of concepts, analysis of complete ideas and to focus attention on things which would otherwise be difficult to comprehend. According to Crystal (265), language refers to "the concrete act of speaking, writing or signing in a given situation". In this case, language is seen as defining the feature of human behaviour. Similarly, Merriam Webster defines language as "a body of words and phrases used by a large community or by people, nation, or group, or a group of nations" (439). This supports that language is widely used by all. In language, words are combined to form sentences in a systematic way. These words are the physically definable units which one encounters in a stretch of writing bounded by spaces. The words we select in the language we use have power. They can praise, delight, inspire and also hurt, offend or even destroy. Words that offend break the golden rule of

language use, preventing others from identifying with one and “thus damaging one’s credibility” (Lunsford, 282). Language is also used to talk about “events, places, persons, or situations that existed in the remote past never existed at all” (Eruchalu, 9). A good command of language is a passport for social and economic development.

Conceptual Clarification

In other to carry out this study, there is need for conceptual clarification on major terms used in this work as such will get a better understanding and insight of the terms. These terms are: Language, Development and West Africa.

Role

Crystal defines role as “the function of an element in a sentence or derivation” (418). It is particularly used in the analysis of syntactic or semantic functions, such as agent or locative. It is also the expected behavior of an individual in a society. Role can also be defined as the function or position of something. Similarly, it means designation that denotes an associated set of responsibilities, knowledge, skills and attitudes. In grammar, role means the function of a word in a phrase.

Language

Language plays important roles in people’s life. It helps in expression and administration. Similarly, it could be seen as a special attribute which differentiates human beings from other animals. Language has been identified as a potent instrument for transformation, moral training and overall change in behaviour modification. Humans have the gift of creativity in language to capture the uniqueness of each context and language situations. Examining the way people use language in different social contexts provides a wealth of information about the way language works, as well as about the social relationships in a community and the way people convey and construct aspects of their social identity through languages. Language is individualistic and people use different styles in different social contexts. Our language gives clue to others about whom we are, where we come from and perhaps what kind of experiences we have had. This implies that language cuts across the social structure of a people and that the study of the people’s language can reliably predict the social situations under which the language is generated.

Language is the source of human life and power. It is primarily spoken and written. It is used to eliminate misunderstanding and misrepresentation. Hornby defines language as “speech and writing that is used by people of a particular country or state” (666). Going by this definition, it will be safe to say that language can be expressed in speech form, and written form. Language can only be used by human beings and not animals or birds. Our language changes to meet the needs of people (MicCallum et al, 86). From the above context, it is obvious that language is not only central to man but also flexible, adaptable, and productive. The general understanding that comes from all the above views on language is that it is not a matter of communication alone; it is a way of expressing fastidiousness, elegance and imaginativeness.

Development

Development is defined differently by some scholars. According to Ezigbo, “development is the gradual growth of a people and society so that they become better,

more advanced, leading to an unfolding of the potentialities of the individuals in that society” (4). For a country to develop, the citizens must be equipped with sound, well-grounded and balanced education right from the kindergarten to the tertiary levels. “Development is also a process by which people are awakened to opportunities within their reach. It therefore starts with people and progresses through them” Akyeampong and Fofack (qtd. in Onaga, 20). This definition showcases that development is a continuous process. Odimegwu (2006) defines development as “the process and growth of the individual human person, processes and events of change and progress in the society”. This definition explains development as process and growth of the individual human person, if development is limited to individual human person, it is not total. “Development is usually taken to involve not only economic growth, but also some notion of equitable distribution, provision and health care, education, housing and other essential services all with a view to improving the individual and collective quality of life” (Naomi, 1995). Naomi’s definition of development is more detailed and elaborate because of the inclusion of collective quality of life. Life here is not limited to a person but everybody.

Furthermore, Mbaegbu opines that development is “a situation of improvement in the standard of a people” (87). This definition sees development as something that changes level from less to more desirable position. In support of this, Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Thesaurus (206) defines development as “progressive advance from a lower or simpler to a higher or more complex form”. In this case, development makes a nation to move from a lower level to a higher one. However, development according to Ajaegbo (30), is “a concept which implies a conscious and progressive transformation”. This definition would have added positive in progressive transformation to make it specific. Seers (1969) looks at development from the perspective of creating conditions for “the realization of the potential of human personality”. In developing human personality, one can begin to examine ways in which changes occur and how these changes can be influenced for the greater good of the nation. In the same vein, development is a planned process, which involves change and growth from the economy to the social.

Angya (8) says, development involves “social transformation but even more critically an understanding of development from different perspectives”. Here the definition concentrates at looking at development from different perspectives which is vital. Nosike has a different opinion about development, to him, development is “about improving people’s quality of life” (53). It occurs when the maladies in the society assume declining magnitude. Uche opines that “development in all its ramification is about social and cultural transformation and improved new identity” (178). From all the above definitions, development is seen as climbing the ladder of complete good standard of living for everyone, from all indication, if we look at the state of things in Nigeria, we will conclude that there is no development.

Nigeria

Nigeria is a country on the coast of West Africa, bordered by the Bight of Benin, Cameroon, Chad and Niger. It shares maritime border with Equatorial Guinea, Ghana, and Sao Tome. It has the largest economy in Africa. It is projected to rank among the world’s top ten economies by 2050. It has abundance of resources like oil and gas. It

holds the largest natural gas reserves on the continent, and it is Africa's largest oil and gas producer.

West Africa

This is the western most region of Africa. The United Nation defines West Africa, as the 16th countries of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo, as well the United Kingdom Overseas Territory of Saint Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha. The population of West Africa is estimated at about 381 million. People as of 2018 are 381,981,000 as of 2017, 189,672,000 are female and 192,309,000 are males. Larger cities in West Africa are: Lagos in Nigeria, Abidjan in Ivory Coast, Accra and Kumasi in Ghana, Onitsha, Abuja, Kano, Ibadan and Port Harcourt in Nigeria.

West Africa can be divided into four major periods: First, its pre-history in which the first settlers arrived, developed agriculture, and made contact with people to the north. The second is the Iron Age Empires that consolidated both intra-Africa and extra-Africa trade, and developed centralized states. Third, major politics flourished, which would undergo an extensive history of contact with non-Africans, fourth, the colonial period in which Great Britain and France controlled nearly the entire region, and fifth, the post-independence era in which the current nation were formed.

The region of West Africa includes the southern portion of the bulge of the continent, which extends west to the Atlantic Ocean. This region is bisected by the African Transition zone, which borders the Southern edge of the Sahara Desert. The main physical features include the Sahara Desert and the Niger River. The tribes in West Africa are around 3,000 and 2,000 languages and dialects. Africa is a continent with fascination around every corner. It is the most dangerous place on the planet. It is probably the one place on earth where one should go to extreme to protect oneself from mosquitoes. One should not sleep without a net and should not go to anywhere without malaria medicine compared to other regions on the continent. West Africa has the greatest number of countries with more than 30 percent of the population living on less than \$1.90 a day.

The Role of Language in the Development of Nigeria in West Africa

The role of language in development in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized. Language as a subject of study is a supportive base for the development in Nigeria. At all sectors or regions people move about for their different undertakings. As they move about in search of greener pasture, they communicate with different people from different regions using language. Language has really helped them to communicate their ideas, feelings, experiences, opinions, wishes and emotions making it easy for them to buy and sell and to better their standard of living, this has brought about development in Nigeria. Without language, leaders will not be able to inform their subjects of their developmental ideas. Language also specifies clearly the culture and environment one is, thereby giving room for one to abide by the rules and regulations of the Nigerian culture. Language also exposes learners to the socio-economic issues and situational circumstances in which proverbs, clichés, idioms, and native wisdom are put into

practical expression in Nigeria and West Africa, this has really developed many scholars.

Furthermore, development can take place when people who make use of their language properly are in position to exploit the natural resources they have in order to provide necessary infrastructure for the upliftment of the society. This is because for a people properly educated and socialized, there is a drive for developmental matters. They are well equipped, well-grounded and balanced to think right. This is supported by Agbedo who avers:

It is language which gives our thinking form, sequence and coherence and it is by means of language that we give substance to our thought...thus, we think in language, and effective thinking is not possible unless we possess linguistic competence adequate enough to realize and express our ideas (173).

This is because language thoughts and processes are conceived in language, and through the use of language, the thoughts are made manifest to reality. Language also enables man to create and transmit culture and pass it from one generation to another without stress. In those days, “culture was preserved exclusively through oral tradition” (Eruchalu, 9). Throughout the universe, language is conceived as an embodiment of people’ culture” (Sapir, 207). This means that language equips the individual with greater responsibilities of self-expression and provides man with access to the experience of others through writing and speaking. It is of tremendous importance in all stages of human responsibilities. In this modern time, the culture of the people is written down through the use of language. The written culture of the people is stored in libraries, CD disks and other electronic gadgets for preservation for the future generation. As children are born and grow, they learn the cultural heritage of their forefathers. All these have helped in the development in Nigeria in particular and West Africa in general.

In the world today, great language works are stored in electronic devices rather than on paper alone, there have been technical motions like the white board, power point gadgets, laptop computers, software for presentation and uploading of language results. This is an evidence of development in that in the days of old, there was no such thing. We also look on language to provide human imagination, human capacities and heritage. It is the duty of humans to interpret human experience or create activity in language. Language has a lot to contribute to the process of development, there should be no doubt in our mind or in the mind of our leaders that such a fundamental field of knowledge as language must not be trifled with or taken for granted. For example, people like, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Chukwuemeka Ike, Flora Nwampa, Ken Saro-wiwa, John Munonye and so many others have used language greatly. Some of these people wrote books in their areas of expertise that led to the foundation for the study of the relevant subjects under which they wrote. Achebe is today the best known and most widely read African writer, described by Nobel Laureate, Nadine Gordimer, as the Father of African Literature. His *Things Fall Apart* is celebrated all over the world and has been translated into more than sixty-two languages. This is an evidence that language has really contributed immensely to development in Nigeria.

Furthermore, language is used as a vehicle to achieving set goals in Nigeria. This is because, any goal that is for the development of the nation, people must surely come together to discuss on it before it can be put into effective usage. During discussion, language is involved. In order words language facilitates socio-economic development, unity and also attainment of educational goals.

Basic Problems in Nigeria that has deterred Development

Nigerians are linguistically proficient. The educated and highly placed share their experiences and ideas on daily basis for the development to thrive in Nigeria but there are some hindrances which are: Nigeria inherited a foreign form of government that is alien to its norms, values and cultures, so anything imported is usually associated with problems. There is no doubt therefore, that our leaders in Nigeria are usually epileptic in anything they want to do. That is, they find it difficult to be creative in times of making decisions for their country.

Furthermore, there is the problem of instability in government in Nigeria as a nation. This has even started before the arrival of the colonial masters. The states and colonies in Nigeria, usually wage war against one another prior to colonialism, this has continued up till today where societies and communities fight one another on issues that could be resolved without problem. In a place where people fight one another, development becomes difficult.

Similarly, Nigerian leaders have the problem of trying to grab more than they can consume. This can be tied to monarchical form of government that was prevalent before the coming of the colonial masters. Our leaders are so corrupt and not prudent in the management of states resources. They want to accumulate, grab and siphon government's scarce resource. This they do without considering the masses and for reasons best known to them. This is why Achebe (1) states that the trouble with Nigeria is ... "a failure of leadership", so it is with development in Nigeria.

Consequently, most people in Nigerian states live in abject poverty, this has made diseases and starvation to crop into the fabrics of the states thereby constituting a hydra headed monster for them to grapple with. In addition, due to abject poverty and misinformation, some communities in Nigeria do not send their wards to school. This has constituted a big problem for the development of the societies and communities in Nigeria. In Nigeria today, unemployment is in the increase. This has brought feelings of frustration, breed hatred, mistrust and anger. These psychological monsters led to a loss of faith in the system, alienation and hopelessness. It is observed that at the stage of hopelessness, there is a progressive, psychological diminution of the value of life, which eventually leads to a point of indifference between life and death. In this kind of situation, development will be hindered among the people involved. These problems are supposed to be nipped on the board so as to allow development to thrive in Nigeria.

Imperative of Language in Solving the Problems in Nigeria

According to Uche (1) "language is used by people for numerous reasons and activities in the society". Similarly, language according to Ahmed is the "medium in which societies interact, it therefore becomes imperative to use the medium very well". As a tool, it can be used to curb the problems in Nigeria. "We all know that human societies

could only understand one another through the use of language (Adesina, 2001). Our leaders should not be greedy, they should come together to discuss on the resources given to them for the development of the states. After their discussion through the use of language, they should use the resources well in order to create way for development. In situations where language is supposed to be used, mild words that should foster love, peace and harmony should be used in addressing the people. Furthermore, in writing sign posts, speeches, letters and other viable instructions, mild words should be used. Sentences which might trigger civil unrest and conflicts should not be used at all. If Nigeria is to grow to greater heights, the leaders should apply languages that could bring harmony among the states involved. The role of Language in the development of Nigeria must be brought to prominence today and in the future. The power of language to teach us in its oral and written forms must be brought to the awareness of the Nigeria states and its people.

Discussion of Findings

From the discussion so far, it follows that language plays an important role in the development of Nigeria. This is because this article reveals that in our day-to-day interaction, language is used to express or feelings, emotions, ideas and complex thoughts. People also share their experiences through the use of language.

Recommendations

The researcher recommends that:

1. The study of language must be taken as a core issue by providing all language instruments that could make language study interesting.
2. Our students must be trained on the basics of language especially from the nursery schools so that before they could get to the secondary school they must have had a good knowledge of language study. This can lead to massive input of knowledge and can also promote scholarship with all honesty and enthrone a system of rewards for scholarship to encourage those who actually achieve breakthroughs in the language study.
3. The curriculum for language should be designed with new ideas, studies and subjects that will add and expand the horizon of the people's knowledge.
4. Nigerian academics, intellectuals or professors should be committed to help the learners of language achieve excellence so as to advance development. There is also need to uphold standards and values in our disciplines.
5. Similarly, only earned progress and elevation in language should be venerated and promoted in order to make for quick development in Nigeria.
6. Those in the academics should make things change, let there be new orientation to be cultivated in our youths. What is happening today in Nigeria was cultivated by our forefathers, may we be able to cultivate a better legacy for our own children so that they should be motivated, informed and reformed. May we be able to teach our children our language so that they too should be able to use their knowledge of it to advance development in Nigeria.

Conclusion

There can be no end to the ways in which language can contribute to development in Nigeria. The world is calling on individuals and groups who can use language intelligently to come up with innovative ideas that could help to create comfort for

people and nations in the world. Nigeria should not be left behind in the race for scientific and technological progress in the area of language. There should be enough room for workshops and seminars for learners that will help to develop their horizon of knowledge. Furthermore, scholars should write quality articles and books that will help learners to get standard materials in their research work. Let every language learner reposition himself/herself to meet up with the new trends in language learning. All hands must be on deck to make a development in Nigeria.

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