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## INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE: A TOOL FOR NATIONAL HARMONY IN NIGERIA.

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### Abstract

*This paper intends to highlight the role indigenous language plays to enhance National harmony in Nigeria. Nigeria is a country with many ethnic groups where majority use their indigenous languages in communication, it is the most vital instrument of communication process and the orbit which man's social, political, economic and environment endeavor revolve. There are various forms of social ill behaviour in the country such as conflicts, kidnapping, harassment, abduction, violence, terrorism, disputes, armed robbery, ritual killings, land disputes, etc. in our country Nigeria today. The government at various levels took various measures to tackle the problems but it has yielded little or no result. All these constitute lack of harmony; therefore, this paper identifies the importance of Nigeria languages for National harmony and recommends among others the need for an enlightenment campaign as well as constituting a committee of language experts. Finally, the paper ended with conclusion and made some recommendations for boosting national harmony through indigenous language.*

**Keywords:** Language, Indigenous language and National Harmony.

## **Introduction**

Language plays vital role in the daily interaction by humans. Nigeria being a multilingual nation with Nationalistic need for unity in diversity, there is need for clarifying language to be used for national development. According to Olaoye (2007), Language is the central feature of culture of any community. It is reflection of thought the feelings, the values, beliefs and the experience of the community of speakers. He further says that language is a learned behaviour. There are about 400 languages in Nigeria and each language is unique and plays vital roles in the life of its speaker. Opoola (2010) in his view also asserts that language is the instrument of persuasion, aggression, felicitation, entertainment, fabrication, integration, and other things of life. We pray, curse or bless in our languages, the language of man is different from that of non-human beings. However, both creatures of God exchange pleasantries with one another through verbal and non-verbal means. Language touches every aspect of human life. This paper harnesses the resource of indigenous languages in order to ensure national harmony in Nigeria.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Concepts of key operational terms are considered for proper understanding of the study, and these include language, indigenous language and national harmony.

### **Concept of Language**

Language as a vital instrument of communication, is an invaluable medium through which people and nations of the world interacts in both its written and spoken forms. It is regarded as one of the most important aspects of the culture of any society past and present. Onwuchekwa (2008) posits that language is unique to man and no other species possess a truly symbolic means of communication. He added that language is a human property. It is language that sets human beings above other animals through effective communication and interaction. Also, Oworiho (2009) language has an inseparable relation with the culture of a society. It is medium for heritage cultural transition. For some culture heritage is expressed and transmitted verbally, musically and artistically.

According to Njemanze, (2010), in the past, Africans attached great value to the transmission of their values and norms to their younger generation. This is done through oral traditions, such as storytelling, songs, lullabies, plays and more. Language by definition is a means by which human beings have devised for communicating ideas, feelings, emotions, desires etc. through complex vocal or written symbols (Anogbogu, P.N, Mbah, B.M., Eme, C.A. 2010). Also, Ihezuonu (2013) defines language as any symbol of system for the storage and exchange of information, she further views languages as a means of communication and a subject taught at school which plays a pivotal role in education. In other words, Raji (2022) defined language as a fundamental issue that may be said to be inseparable from any society. It is because there is need for mutual interaction between two or more individuals in the society at large. Language is seen as the only instrument with which a community can unite and the tools for development.

### **Importance of language**

Language is the pivot around which every activity rotates hence it is unnecessary overemphasizing its importance. Aziza (1998), defines language as the most important tool with which society is organized and it is hardly possible to talk of national development without including the language with which the people formulate their thought, ideas and needs. Through language, social relationship can be maintained among people. According to Yusuf (2010), Women might gossip on their way to church or men boast about their imaginary exploits, people would talk politics or complain about their “boss”. He feels that in all these they might not mean any harm than expressing greetings. Such expressions that

depict phatic communication like ‘easy’, ‘take care’, etc, when someone missteps or sustains an injury is a way of strengthening bonds of social cohesion. Nigerian languages are used to inform, enlighten and mobilize the citizenry towards the development of textbooks and the educational materials (Obiora, 2010).

Language is a vehicle used to impart knowledge and services. It is a means through which social interactions, cultural thought and communication is passed from person to person. It is the most important factor in identifying who is who, where you come from, what you are made of, your culture tradition etc.

Another important of language is communication. According to Anozie (2007) language is to man what water is to life. The society will crumble without language. It is language that man uses for interaction in the society. It clears doubts and suspicious, smoothens all life activities and ensures understanding. There is no aspect of a man’s life that is unaffected.

Language is a distinctively human system of communication based on oral and written symbols. It is the vehicle through which people’s culture is transmitted. It is an extremely important aspect of a community. It is an index of identity which serves as a repository of a people’s culture is their mother tongue.

### **Concept of Indigenous Language**

The Federal Government began from the late 1970s onward to take official interest in and make policy pronouncements on the teaching of the indigenous languages in addition to English language. Indigenous language is considered language of one’s immediate environment or one’s mother tongue. People tend to be more at home and comfortable when they interact with their native language. According to Nwadike (2002) indigenous language aid people to know the literature, history, geography and civics of their community through stores, songs, dances, myths, legend, and through it, youths are guided towards achieving their ultimate expectations well as in life as well as that of the society indigenous languages are native to the environment in which they are spoken. By indigenous language, we mean the various native languages that are spoken in Nigeria. Indigenous languages are treasures of our culture and self-identity. In other words, it is the indicator of history and self-identification (Solanke, 2006).

There is an overwhelming number of over 400 indigenous languages, in Nigeria, three languages namely: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba were chosen to serve as major Nigerian languages as empowered by the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria while English language was adopted as the official language. Indigenous language according to Olaoye (2009) cited by Olaoye (2013), asserts that perform the following functions in child development:

**Instrumental function:** Mother tongue is used by the child for getting things done. He uses his MT to navigate life to maturity.

**Interactional function:** The child uses his MT to interact with his parents, siblings, neighbours, peer groups, classmates and the people the meets. He uses MT to carry out speech act illocution, such as persuading, requesting, dissuading, apologizing, commanding, directing, warning, tasting or mocking and even abusing and praising. All these have perlocutory effects on what he does. He achieves his goals through these speech acts. Even adults also use these speech behaviours to achieve interactional objectives. When the child interacts with speakers of his MT, he learns more about the rules of speaking or socio-linguistic norms in the speech community, including of course the sanctions which go with the breach of the rules of speaking. He grows in native wisdom, knowledge and

understanding. He learns societal ethos such as reciprocal respects for each other's opinions, humility, patience and other become a well-behaved, highly responsible, well-adjusted and disciplined citizen who shuns social vices like laziness, greed, avarice, corruption and other social vices. He thus becomes a man with high morality who can contribute positively to national development.

**Regulatory function:** indigenous language, particularly the child's mother tongue is used for controlling peoples' behavior, through the following:

- a. **Prohibition:** for instance, the child or even the adult says "don't take my pen" don't cheat me, don't steal, don't do that and don't forget me. For the adults we have don't urinate here, don't give bribe, don't engage in examination malpractice, don't commit crime, don't join bad groups. The child tells his parents don't beat me, don't abuse men, don't drink my tea. All these statements are to instill moral discipline or to mould people's behaviours. Mother tongue is being used as a law enforcement agency.
- b. **Threat of reprisal,** especially if behavior is not stopped. We hear parents say to their children or wards statements like "I will punish you if you do that again", I will seize your bicycle if you continue like this, I will stop you from following your sister if you don't stop cheating".
- c. **Disapproval of behaviour:** as in "that is bad", "No stop it", that is not done here.
- d. **Emotional black mail:** We hear people say Eh! You will kill your mum like that, you will give your father hypertension, stop that! Are you following your father's footsteps?
- e. **Categorization of behavior governed by rules and sanctions:** as in that is wrong, this is unacceptable. All these regulatory statements help the child and even the adults to develop a sense of responsibility and refinement in behavior.

**Child rearing function:** Indigenous languages are a powerful weapon or instrument for child-rearing practices. Through precepts, rules of speaking, the use of body language, socio-linguistic etiquette, the children are initiated into their parent's speech community. Through indigenous songs, folktales, proverbs, adages, literature, children learn age-old wisdom, adult conversational skills, moral lessons, how to engage in dialogue and constructive criticism. Bakare (2000) asserts that MT has the capacity to develop children's curiosity, manipulative ability, flexibility, initiative, industry, manual dexterity and mechanical comprehension, all leading to self-confidence, resourcefulness creative reasoning and all-round development.

Indigenous language in the course of this study, is language of the immediate environment and means by which a community builds and stores experiences and as well transmits the collective experiences from generation to generation. The child uses his mother tongue to interact with his parents, siblings, peers' groups, neighbours classmates and the people he meets. When the child interacts with speakers of his mother tongue, he learns more about the rules of speaking or socio-linguistic norms in the speech community. He ground in native wisdom knowledge and understanding.

### Concept of National Harmony

National harmony is closely linked with security and can also determine that nation development becomes the basis for the sustained prosperity of all. In Malaysia, citizens are required to play an active and positive role as an agent in reducing conflict among races on

one hand also promoting unity and harmony on the other. Today Malaysian is inhabited by over 27 million people, and is made up of ethnic groups of Malays, Chinese, Indians, indigenous and other minority races who live together in relative peace and harmony.

National harmony according to Akhil (2005) is the state in which people are living together peacefully rather than in constant fighting, struggling or at war. In addition, Zia-ur-Rehman and Faheem (2023) see National harmony as the feeling of oneness or belonging whereby all ethnic and religious identities become submissive to the national identity. It means that people have respect for one another, and take their ethnic or religious affiliation into consideration.

Harmony within diversity is the main agenda that has been the focus of the country's independence. Various slogans, mottos and programs have been forwarded to foster unity and relations among races through various policies that have been introduced. National harmony is very important in our country, to achieve this, patriotic attention, efforts have continued to be made by some scholars to develop an indigenous language that will serve as replacement to English language which has taken the place of mother tongue in Nigeria. To achieve national harmony, there is need for a search for indigenous language in a multi ethnic and cultural nation like Nigeria. A nation is a conglomerate, which comprises the economic, the social and the political structures, that together hold that notion tightly. Underscoring the importance of language to man, it would have been difficult to carry on governance, family life, complex society without some forms of language we speak.

### **Theoretical Framework**

There are theories that emphasizes on the necessity of promoting effective communication, peaceful co-existence and desirable language policy in a multilingual state. Some theories that can help us are briefly discussed here.

### **Communicative Competence Theory**

The theory states that great deal of harmony and mutual understanding will be achieved. If the language learners develop communicative competence in the languages they are learning (Canale and Swain, 1980).

**Language Contact Theory:** This theory emphasizes the role of language contact in shaping language harmony. It stresses that languages which come into contact influence each other and create new hybrid languages that represent the different languages of the community (Thomason and Kaufman, 1988).

**Language Acquisition Device (LAD):** This theory was propounded by Jean Piaget. The theory assumes that the complete act of thought follows a fairly common sequence in this order; arousal of intellectual interest, preliminary explanation of the problem, for mutation of ideas, (assessment) validation.

As observed by Crystal (1987), the child uses LAD to make sense of the utterance heard around it. This knowledge is then used to produce sentences that after a process of trial and error correspond to that of adult speech, it governing the way in which sentences are formed. This shows that language learning more from one stage to another in a systematic process, since a child is born with the same natural ability the child can learn other languages other than his mother tongue.

### **Indigenous languages as a tool for National Harmony.**

Indigenous language or mother tongue is the language in which the child first learns to love and respect the mental heritage of his people and culture. For us to achieve national

harmony in Nigeria, we need to start early in child rearing. Indigenous language is a powerful weapon or instrument for child-rearing practices. Through precepts, rules of speaking, the use of body language, the children are initiated into their parent's speech community through songs, folktales, stories, proverbs, moral lessons and how to engage in dialogue and constructive criticism. All these help the children to develop a sense of responsibility and refinement in behaviours thereby helping to bring harmony in the nation.

In order to achieve national harmony, we need qualitative education. According to UNESCO (2009) a quality education is defined by five elements: the learners outside experiences, learning environment, content of education, learning processes, and education outcomes. Qualitative education in any country is very important. Without education, culture cannot be maintained, preserved and passed to the younger generation. Nigeria recognizes the importance of mother tongue education. The federal government takes official interest in and makes policy pronouncements on the teaching of the indigenous languages in addition to English language. This policy first published in 1977, revised in 1981 and titled Federal Republic of Nigeria National Policy on Education (NPE), says that the language of instruction in the primary school which lasts six years should be initially in the child's mother tongue or the language of the immediate community. In Junior Secondary School (JSS), which is of three years, each child must study one of the three major indigenous language in the country, namely, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Then in Senior Secondary School (SSS), another three years, the child must study two languages, viz an indigenous language and English language. This means, that the child would be able to communicate his thoughts and ideas to the electorates effectively. The education he acquires through language will help him create an enabling environment for harmony in the nation.

In politics, indigenous language is considered language of one's immediate environment or one's mother tongue. For us to achieve nation harmony in Nigeria, government, Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) and other stakeholders in educational sector should do everything possible towards effective and maximal utilization of indigenous language during electioneering campaign and enlightenment programs especially at the grassroot campaign. People tend to be more at home and comfortable when they interact with their native language and when they respond to others. Indeed, when the native language is used during political rallies campaign large number of supporters are won. The language of politics is to persuade and win over the mind of the targeted masses; hence effective use of indigenous language by aspiring candidates for political positions can make a remarkable impact for the greater number of people thereby having the chances of winning. To achieve national harmony in Nigeria during election, the best language is the indigenous language to encourage the people to aspire and contest at the grassroot. It will also make more meaning to the illiterate masses, and will bring about political awareness which in turn will encourage participatory democracy which will reduce political apathy and when citizens eyes to their rights and privileges, are opened, there will be no chances of voter intimidation and rigging.

Another way to achieve national harmony is by developing our science and technology through our indigenous languages. Language is a vehicle of thought and the expression for culture. It expresses a people's way of life, their perception of things and their world view. This embodies their ideals and innovations which embrace respects for technological and scientific innovations (Ishiman, 2004). It is true that making the marvels of sciences and technology available in the indigenous language entails the rigor and cost of translating classical and standard scientific and technological work from their foreign

language original to the indigenous language version, but then it's a sacrifice that worth doing for national goals.

Most people, especially those in the academia, think that indigenous language lack words and expression for teaching and/or discussing science, and that is why they believe and use English instead of indigenous language. According to Opoola (2010), a lot of Nigerians are pessimistic on the issue of scientific invention and technological growth through indigenous language education. It is important to note that most technologically developed countries, Japan, France and Germany disseminate their technical and scientific knowledge among their people in their own indigenous languages. Science and technology can be acquired and better understood through the indigenous languages. The Japanese self-discipline in use of their indigenous language has yielded high technological development particularly in automobile international market. The secret is that these developed nations had favourably utilized their nation's heterogenous situation to develop better future with which they present and cope with the challenges of world economy today. For indigenous language to be used for teaching and learning science and technology as I have earlier said that, it is a sacrifice that is worth making in terms of national goals and harmony, these mother tongues need to be developed in terms of their orthographies, vocabulary and translation through the use of lexicographic strategies and the linguistic indigenization policy of borrowing, coinage and semantic extension.

### **Conclusion**

Language is a comprehensively domineering tool for national harmony and in this case sustainable enough, so tangible efforts by both government and other stakeholders should be adopt if we want our mothers' tongue to survive. The paper draws attention to the importance and centrality of language as an indispensable tool for ensuring peace and harmony. The author finds that indigenous languages plays a lot of role in terms of education, politics and science and technology, and can be used in maintaining national harmony. It is eventually suggested that indigenous languages should continue to play its unifying role for necessary national harmony so as not to destroy the beauty of our national gifts of language, if the measures we have enumerated are taken, indigenous languages will live on and will enable us to develop faster as a people and make our unique contribution to world civilization.

### **Recommendations**

1. Government should be serious in enforcing the study of Nigerian indigenous language in schools and make it compulsory for all pupils and students from kindergarten to tertiary level within the host communities.
2. Nigerian tertiary institutions should serve as beacon and guild by acting in a responsive manner regarding teaching and learning of indigenous languages.
3. Enlightenment campaign should be embarked upon by individuals, groups and various governments to educate the public on the need for indigenous language.
4. More indigenous language medium textbooks on different academic discipline should be published with new technical terms in these languages,
5. For indigenous language to be used for teaching and learning science and technology, there is need for the development of the orthography in all the indigenous languages.

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