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Author 1	NWOKOLO, Basil O.
Author 2	
Author 3	
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OBSTACLES TO THE USE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AS A MEANS OF ACHIEVING NATIONAL STABILITY

BASIL O NWOKOLO,

ABSTRACT

As a vehicle for communicating ideas, values and attitudes, language makes socio-political interaction and stability possible by building bridges of trust and understanding across individual and socio-cultural differences.

The English language has the same capacity to help Nigerians achieve overall national stability, and it has indeed contributed to the existing measure of stability in the country. However, many factors are seriously undermining the effectiveness of English as an instrument of stability. They include faulty national language policy, the use of English by only an educated minority class, and the incongruity between the actions and pronouncements of the government. As regards the third factor above, the paper underscores how the interplay of language, thought and action impinges upon stability.

The paper, therefore, critically examines the above factors, among others, and suggests measures that will make English a veritable instrument of national stability.

INTRODUCTION

Language is a concept which embraces the entire semiotic system adopted by man as a means of communication. Language, thus, refers to such means of communication as body language, pictures, figures and other signs and symbols. However, language is most commonly used in reference to patterned and meaningful spoken and written sounds. This is because the word language is derived from the Latin *lingua*, meaning tongue. Language, as spoken words, is also referred to as natural language, and it is the focus of attention in this discourse. Specifically, the paper focuses on the use and position of the English Language in Nigeria, and analyzes the issue of national stability and the problem of national instability from the perspective of the language.

FUNCTIONS OF LANGUAGE

The very importance of language lies in communication. With language, cordial inter-personal and inter-group interactions, including self-communication, are possible. For Crystal (1987:1), language is a "means of understanding ourselves and our society and of resolving some of the problems and tensions that arise from human interaction". He goes further to categorize the functions of language into four, namely communication and exchange of ideas, facts and opinion; expression of emotion and "nervous energy"; social interaction and the building of rapport among people; and expression of identity. Allerton (1979:15) recognizes that "the utterances of language have three principal functions", which are not mutually exclusive. These are communicative, role-affirming or gestural, and expressive functions. The role-affirming or gestural function refers to the use of language for purely social interaction or the use of language to perform "Conventionalized social acts" akin to shaking of hands and waving. Such language acts include utterances like, "Good day"; "you are back already"; "you are welcome". Malinewski (1949), as quoted by Allerton (1979:15), labelled such utterances as "phatic communion", and asserts that "phatic communion or social solidarity" is the original purpose of language while communication is a derived function.

Whichever way the function of language is viewed and categorized, "the primary purpose of language is communication among persons" (Chapman, 1994). All other functions could be regarded as indirect, and one of such indirect functions is the structuring and strengthening of national stability. Language can play this social role in two ways. First, a language confers identity to any group that owns it. Crystal (1987: 34) describes this kind of identity as "ethnolinguistic identity".

This means that people who share the same indigenous language see one another as brothers, and in most cases inhabit the same geographical environment. Sometimes, there might be dichotomies within a group, but even at that, the dichotomies are usually along dialectal lines. The dichotomies notwithstanding, the group is always conscious of its collective identity and political status. In this way, a language becomes a bond of unity and oneness, a bond which also embraces strangers who, by association, can speak the language.

Secondly, a language indirectly serves as an instrument of stability and social cohesion in the process of performing its basic communicative function. In this regard, language becomes a mere vehicle with which proper and desirable ideas, beliefs, attitudes, values and emotions are communicated to the people and passed on from one generation to another. When and where these proper ideas, beliefs, etc are successfully inculcated into members of a community, there is bound to be unity of purpose, thought and action which consequently results in stability. In other words, democratic principles which form the bedrock of all stable societies can largely be implanted in the hearts of the citizens of a community through the instrumentality of a language.

THE CASE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

The English language has a great capacity for stabilizing Nigeria in the two ways described above if the language actually becomes the first language of the nation and the second language of each ethnolinguistic groups in Nigeria.

Although, according to Egonu (1988:61), English was super-imposed on Nigeria through conquest, domination and colonization, Nigeria is lucky to have come in contact with such modern international language. There is a lot to benefit from this contact because, as a language of business in the United Nations'

Organization and the Commonwealth of Nations, and as the most widely spoken and used language around the globe, English is slowly but surely rising to the status of world language. Crystal (1987: 438) has estimated that between 300 and 1,400 million people speak English in the USA, Canada, UK, Australia, New Zealand, parts of Asia and Africa, in addition to many other countries where it is used as a second or foreign language.

Apart from its international prestige, English has distinguishing, inherent characteristics which enable it to fit into strange local situations. The first is the accumulation of a large word-stock which is estimated to be over one million. Added to that is the adaptable and flexible nature of the language. The language adapts to new environments by adopting local words. As regards flexibility, the language provided different possibilities for the expression of a single thought. With the large vocabulary, virtually every thought can be expressed, every situation described and every feeling communicated. With these characteristics, the language can make useful contributions towards enduring stability in Nigeria.

No one can deny the contributions already made by the language to the existing measure of stability in the country, in the sense that the diverse ethnic nationalities in Nigeria have been able to co-exist for nearly four decades. With English, governance has been possible, as government officials from different ethnolinguistic groups interact harmoniously to carry out the business of government. Interaction among individuals from disparate ethnic groups at social, cultural and economic levels has also been feasible. Some understanding and social cohesion have, consequently, developed. However, no one sees the socio-political situation that has existed since independence as **stable** in the real sense of the word. There has not been stability to the degree that can accelerate national growth and development. The so-called unity in the country has been a loose nexus sustained by every set of political leaders for the achievement of obscure interests other than genuine unity and stability. The achievement of real stability has been elusive because of the lack of fertile ground for the language to strike root and become firmly implanted in the minds of the people. Apparently, some specific overlapping factors are responsible for weakening this linguistic instrument of stability.

FACTORS AFFECTING THE USE OF ENGLISH AS AN INSTRUMENT OF STABILITY IN NIGERIA

FAULTY LANGUAGE POLICY: The prime factor responsible for the ineffectiveness of English as an instrument of national stability is the faulty national language policy as enshrined in the National Policy on Education (1981). The policy stipulates that the medium of instruction in pre-primary schools should be a local language. For primary education the policy recommends the initial use of the mother-tongue and the introduction of English later. However, in secondary education, English is listed as a core subject alongside Nigerian language. Also in secondary education, each child is expected to study one other Nigerian tongue other than his mother-tongue.

Some serious issues emanate from these policy statements. First, there is undue emphasis on the local languages, and this is divisive because the emphasis encourages ethno-linguistic sentiments to the detriment of national consciousness. The policy failed to give clear recognition and support to the all-important role English is playing in the life of the nation in respect of unifying the various ethnic groups and in the formal education of Nigerians. Schools are set up to instill socio-cultural values to the young and by this means perpetuate these value. Nigeria, as a geographical and political entity, and as a plural - ethnolinguistic society has one conspicuous aspect of culture, and that culture is the English language. By not giving English pride of place in the life of every Nigerian child, government is undermining the only common culture that builds stable bridges of common understanding across and between ethnic differences.

The second serious issue emanating from the policy is that the policy runs counter to the natural process of language acquisition. This accounts for the reason why English has not taken root and might not take root in our communities. Researches and observations have supported the conclusion that language is a habit which is developed in early childhood and strengthened in adulthood. Abercrombie (1956: 19) posits that spoken and written language should be mastered as "early as possible in the learner's career, so that they may recede into the background and become automatic and unconscious". Billows (1961:20) agrees that "the mind loses the resilience or plasticity which makes the learning of the essentials of a language child's play before the age of ten". In a more recent research, Tomlison-Keasey, (1985:319) concludes that children acquire the complexities of their native language without much difficulty during the years from one to five.

These opinions emphasize the existence of a "sensitive period for language acquisition". The sensitive period relates to the child's innate ability to learn languages. A child can learn different languages in an environment since each child has what is called Universal Grammar, which provides the child with a menu of possibilities (Jackendoff, 1993:205). Tomlison-Keasey (1985:356) observes that if a child is faced with two languages simultaneously during the sensitive period, both languages will be well integrated. The meaning is that the child will equally be fluent in them as long as the child is exposed to both languages equally. This type of language situation leads to bilingualism.

Many Nigerians are already bilingual while a few others are multilingual in the local languages. Examples of such people abound. Children born to Yoruba parents living in Igbo land speak Igbo and Yoruba fluently. There are also Igbo children born and reared in some parts of northern Nigeria who fluently speak Hausa, Tiv, and Jukun, in addition to Igbo. The indication here is that a child reared in a bilingual or multilingual environment is bound to be bilingual or a polyglot. That such persons exist in Nigeria substantiates the claim that all Nigerians can successfully learn both English and their mother-tongue if they are equally and adequately exposed to both languages in early childhood. It is, therefore, baffling that the Nigerian education system has recommended the introduction of English to the children at a period when the study of a second language is slower, "more compartmentalized", less successful and frustrating. This policy which is religiously practised in all rural community schools has been responsible for the very low percentage of Nigerians who are competent in English. The true position of the language in our rural communities is that of a foreign language, not of a second, since the children study it for the purpose of passing it in school examinations. The language policy has, therefore, destroyed the basis which would have conferred common identity to many Nigerians.

ENGLISH: THE LANGUAGE OF A MINORITY GROUP IN NIGERIA:

Another factor is that the English language is the language of a minority group of educated Nigerians. According to Egonu (1988:64), "it is estimated that less than 20 per cent of the population of any African country has access to colonial language in use in the country." The situation in this country is partly a consequence of the language policy and largely the result of the ineffective education system. Vis-a-vis the paucity of competent users of English, one can rightly say that English is a second language to the educated class and a foreign language to the teeming illiterate class. Egonu (1988:64) also observes that "a language situation which excludes the vast majority of the population from effective participation in the economic, political and cultural life of the nation cannot lead to a desired economic development. By inference, a language situation of this type cannot promote political stability on which stability in other sectors hinges. It is simple to comprehend how the paucity of speakers of English in a multilingual environment as Nigeria can hamper efforts to achieve stability. English remains the only effective vehicle with which the ingredients of stability, namely democratic principles, the rule of law and cultural similarities can be communicated to, and engraved in, the hearts of all Nigerians. The concepts of democracy, the rule of law and many other related concepts are exotic to many Nigerian cultures and cannot be easily comprehended or better explicated in the local languages. Moreover, problems are solved with words; in our circumstance it must be words familiar to all. If, on the other hand, the greater proportion of Nigerians cannot be reached and educated in order to imbibe democratic ideas and ideals, and understand the concepts and practice of the rule of law, there cannot be real stability. As long as the access to the full awareness of the rights pertaining to citizenship are barricaded by the lack of knowledge of English, political stability might continue to be elusive because the people can never appreciate the sweetness and beauty of democracy and the rule of law.

LACK OF LANGUAGE - ACQUISITION FACILITATORS IN THE EARLY STAGE:

The third obstacle is the lack of competent teachers of the language. This obstacle is also a consequence of the wishy-washy education system which only succeeds in making a small proportion of Nigerians literate. In language acquisition, two sets of teachers can be identified: the primary and the secondary. The primary teachers comprise parents and other members of the family while the school, text books and language laboratories constitute the secondary teachers. The primary teachers are of paramount importance because if the acquisition of a language fails at this level, a child will certainly have a torturing period in the school. In a real second language environment, a child should attain some level of communicative competence in the home before going to school to perfect his grammar. One can easily observe this in the families of very well-educated Nigerians.

Most children do not have the privilege to pick the language in their homes because most families are illiterate or half-educated. As such, English is never introduced to most Nigerian children during the sensitive period for language acquisition. A child can only hear very few motherese and sentences uttered by visitors and people from nearby families, but these do not present enough stimuli to make the child codify and develop them as a separate language from his mother tongue. When the child finally begins to attend school, his problem is aggravated by the lack of enough and qualified English language teachers, including language laboratories. The problem is worsened if the school is a rural one, as the child might continuously be taught throughout the period of his primary education in his local tongue. Eventually the child becomes frustrated in the secondary school and develops ill-feeling for the language and for those who speak it better.

BREAKDOWN IN COMMUNICATION BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND THE PEOPLE:

The fourth major obstacle is the apparent breakdown in communication between the government and the people. In any communicative situation, communication is said to have taken place only when the message reaches the receiver and produces the intended response in him (Little, 1977:11). Otherwise, there is communication breakdown. The communication breakdown being discussed is not necessarily as a result of the lack of the knowledge of English as a medium of communication, although very many Nigerians lack the knowledge, nor the consequence of poor transmission, for the signal senders, namely, the political leaders, belong to the privileged and educated class, whose efficiency and dexterity in using the language are unrivalled.

The language, by and large, belongs to the government as it is its main medium of information dissemination. Why the government has failed to utilize the language as a means of communicating political stability is a question that deserves attention.

As has been observed, the language code is not the cause of the problem: the cause remains the conspicuous lack of harmony between the words and actions of government. The evidence is overwhelming and the list endless. First, many Nigerians suffer the denial of certain rights and privileges even though these are enshrined in the Nigerian Constitutions. Secondly, some prominent Nigerians and political leaders often violate the laws of the land and go unpunished. Thirdly, programmes have been articulately enunciated but never carried out. Also, there has been much talk about the fight against indiscipline and corruption but no sincere and sustained measure has ever accompanied such talk. Instead, the vice continues to multiply among government officials and their agents. Shall one not talk and think about some proven cases of injustice which the government did not do anything about?

These actions and attitudes communicate meanings, perceptions, understanding and intentions different from the ones conveyed by official pronouncements, and consequently produce deviant actions and attitudes among the people. It is so because "words", as Odumegwu-Ojukwu (1989:39) points out, "are a mere vehicle, at best inadequate, for conveying sense" which can only be concretized by action. Lack of proper actions to match official statements of peace and unity results in apathy towards government programmes, and in widespread distrust. Government actions, thus amount to subversion of the people's will and desire to imbibe and live by policies and principles that promote stability. The breakdown in communication is, therefore, a simple refusal to accept ideas and information put forward by government and live by it. That is why the massive propaganda of the past and present governments has not been able to move the majority of the people in one direction.

All this strongly suggest that our actions are the real mirror and reflection of the exact thoughts, ideas, views, intentions and feelings in our hearts. The language code is, undoubtedly, a vehicle for conveying good ideas to the mind, but sometimes such ideas are encoded and transmitted for the mere sake of doing so in order to hoodwink the people to whom the ideas are intended into believing that something real and serious is happening. This is supported by the common saying that lies are better told in English because the people will not see through it. But it takes only few actions to discover the truth. A situation as this amounts to desecration of language which has the power to engender faith and trust in, and commitment to, ideas of great value. It is important to state, at this juncture, that a country is doomed whenever its citizens begin to doubt the sincerity and genuineness of the spirit behind official statements of government and whenever such statements lack the force to inspire and motivate the citizens to a collective response or action. This has been the lot of Nigeria for a long time now.

SUMMARY AND SUGGESTIONS

So far, the observations and arguments have been to achieve the following:

1. To support the view that English, as a modern and international language, has the capacity to assist Nigerians to achieve all-round stability if it can have a firm foothold in the cultures of the land.
2. To discover and describe those factors responsible for the ineffectiveness of English as an instrument of national stability. Such factors as the government's language policy, the paucity of the speakers of English in a multilingual and populous nation like Nigeria, lack of competent teachers of the language, and the communication breakdown between the government and the people have all been identified and discussed. As long as these factors remain unchecked, the mastery of English to the level of using it to achieve stability will always be aborted.

Measures must, therefore, be taken to check or eliminate these obstacles. The following measures are suggested.

1. The government should revise the English language education policy to accord with the natural principles and processes of language acquisition.
2. Massive education should be vigorously pursued so as to ensure total literacy for all Nigerian children, starting with the children of the present generation. This is one of the ways to ensure that future Nigerian parents will be educated, so that they can efficiently play their role as facilitators in their children's English Language acquisition process.

3. Government should make the acquisition of communicative competence in English the first qualification to teach in nursery, kindergarten and primary schools. This measure will be of help to both children from English-speaking families and illiterate families.
4. Nigerians need leaders whose words and actions should synchronize to communicate the desired democratic ideals and the principles of the rule of law to the hearts of the people. The pronouncement of a sincere leader will certainly run through the veins of all Nigerians and elicit the same response in them. As Achebe (1983:1) has noted, "the trouble with Nigeria" (including the problem of socio-political and economic instability) "is simply and squarely a failure of leadership". A good leader can, in a twinkling of an eye sway Nigerians to the path of stability by his simple words that are accompanied by firm actions.
5. Government should officially declare the English language as Nigeria's lingua franca and take all other necessary measures to ensure that it takes pride of place in every home.

CONCLUSION

Finally, if all Nigerians become completely bilingual in both the English language and their respective mother tongues, they would have established a basis for a common identity that would minimise ethnolinguistic dichotomy. Second, if Nigerians acquired communicative and grammatical competence in English, they would be able to discover and appreciate the unequalled beauty and benefits of democracy and the rule of law upon which genuine stability rests.

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Basil O. Nwokolo lectures at the School of General and Remedial studies, Federal University of Agriculture, Umudike.