

## LANGUAGE AND LEADERSHIP PROBLEM IN A MULTILINGUAL NATION: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

**Aghaegbuna Haroldson Uwaezuoke, Ph.D**

Department of Linguistics,  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka,  
Anambra State.

[uwaezuokeha@gmail.com](mailto:uwaezuokeha@gmail.com); 07038590552;07088853967

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.21448.03842

### **Abstract**

*The issue of multilingualism is usually bedevilled with language and leadership problems. This paper examines language and leadership situation in a multilingual nation, with particular attention to Nigeria. It seeks to find out the best way of harnessing Nigeria's multilingual nature for the good and progress of the country. It first discusses the importance of language and the problems associated with its multiplicity. It goes further to look at the issues of ethnicity and leadership. The paper associates the problems of language and leadership in Nigeria to the country's multilingual nature/multiplicity of ethnic groups. It advocates the recognition of all the Nigerian indigenous languages as equal. Government should consider restructuring Nigeria and making the regions or states to be more powerful and to manage their resources; while the central government handles national security issue and few other issues. The paper also recommends establishment of an Institute to be saddled with the responsibility of promoting indigenous Nigerian languages and ensuring that every language is given equal opportunity to develop. With these measures, the 'minority languages' would feel a sense of belonging, while the attachment of various languages and the country's leadership to ethnicity would be reduced to the barest minimum.*

**Keywords:** language, leadership, ethnicity, multilingualism, indigenous languages.

### **Introduction**

Multilingualism no doubt has been a cog in the wheel of progress of many countries in Africa, including Nigeria. Most often, it becomes difficult to decide on a language of national unity with the resultant effect of adopting English or any other European language as the nation's official language. With this policy, education and government businesses are conducted in the official language, thus, neglecting the indigenous languages. To worsen the situation is the fact that majority of those who reside in the rural areas are not literate in the use of the official language. Uwaezuoke (2018) identifies the subjugation of the indigenous languages of the diverse ethnic nationalities as a major hindrance towards achieving national integration. This, he points out, makes majority of

the citizens to be alienated from government activities, thereby drastically reducing their level of awareness and mobilization for national integration and national development.

Apart from the problem of choosing a language of national unity, multilingualism also leads to leadership problem. This is so because of the affinity of different indigenous languages to the diverse ethnic nationalities, which has often led to mutual distrust among the ethnic nationalities. Sometimes, it looks as if it is an opportunity for anyone in a position of authority to better the lots of his ethnic nationality, even at the detriment of others. In Nigeria, for example, once a member of an ethnic enclave gets into power, whatever policy being instituted is usually critically viewed by people of other ethnic groups to ensure that it does not undermine their existence. Most often, government policies and appointments are viewed as favouring a particular ethnic group, and this has in the past resulted into various agitations from members of other ethnic groups not in power, as a way of attracting government's attention.

This paper discusses the language situation in Nigeria and how it has affected the leadership of the country. It aims at finding out how Nigeria's multilingual nature could be harnessed for the good and progress of the country. It looks at issue of language and its associated problems in a multilingual situation. It also treats issues of leadership and ethnicity. Finally, the paper proffers solution to the language and leadership problems in Nigeria, which are considered an aftermath of the country's multilingualism.

### **Language**

Language is an integral part of every society. It is a means by which ideas and views of people of a society are expressed either verbally or written by the means of symbols. Through language, different individuals converse with one another. The language of a group of people binds them together and there is mutual intelligibility irrespective of the number of varieties of the language. A nation can be described as monolingual when its people speak only one language, bilingual when they can operate in two languages, and multilingual when there exist many languages.

In a multilingual nation, there are many indigenous languages, which are native to certain regions and spoken by indigenous people (Obi, 2017; Ugochukwu and Ogwudile, 2017). The indigenous languages, in addition to being native to their speakers, have ethnic affiliation and cultural nuances that members of the ethnic nationality grow-up with (Uwaezuoke, 2018). What this

suggests is a link between language and ethnicity, and the fact that different languages have varied cultural attachments. Some indigenous languages gain popularity due to some factors, such as: government language policy, the level of development of the language, exposure of the speakers of the language, and the numerical strength of the speakers. This is the case with the Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba languages, which are regarded as majority languages in Nigeria by the National Policy on Education (NPE) (Uwaezuoke, 2018).

The problem associated with multiplicity of language has made some scholars, like Akande (2008) and Akata (2013) to advocate for the use of the English language as the only language of instruction and for communication in Nigeria due to the strides the language has made in the country. This view is, however, opposed by Uwaezuoke (2018) on the grounds that more problems would be created as majority of Nigerians are not literate in the use of English and, therefore, would be alienated. Kateregga (2011), has earlier averred that as long as there is a communication gap between the elite and the masses, African masses cannot be mobilized. Kalu (1987) has also earlier canvassed for a national integration process that must be grounded on a new structure in which a substantial proportion of the people are involved, while Onuko (2011) and Ezeani (2015) opine that national unity and development will be promoted in Nigeria when Nigerian languages are well harnessed. Since the problem of language and leadership in Nigeria with issue of ethnicity, the next section discusses ethnicity.

### **Ethnicity**

Ethnicity, according to Wan and Vanderwerf (2009), is a very recent term used interchangeably with 'tribe', 'race', 'nation', or 'minority group'. Nnoli (1980) defines ethnicity as a social group within a cultural and social system that claims or is accorded special status on the basis of complex, often variable traits including religious, linguistic, ancestral or physical characteristics. To Irukwe (1996), it is a belief in superiority of one's cultural group and corresponding hatred or misunderstanding among the differing cultural groups. This suggests that ethnicity breeds seeds of competition for superiority and hatred/misunderstanding among the different groups.

Irukwe agrees with Osaghae (1995:11), who had earlier defined ethnicity as "the employment or mobilization of ethnic identity and difference to gain advantage in situations of competition, conflict or cooperation." The interesting aspect of this definition lies in its linking of ethnicity with ethnic groups and its painting of a picture of ethnicity as something that strives in an environment of competition, conflict or cooperation. Ethnicity entails an ethnic group having a

common identity and differing from other groups. That is why Horowitz (1985) earlier presents ethnicity as a term that designates a sense of collective belonging, which could be based on common descent, language, history, culture, race, or religion (or some combination of these).

Ukiwe (2005) does not differ from Osaghae (1995) on the link between ethnicity and ethnic groups, but the scholar further elucidates on ethnic group as groups with ascribed membership, usually but not always based on claims or myths of common history, ancestry, language, race, religion, culture and territory. He avers that an ethnic group might not have all these variables, but it is characterized or categorized by its common identity which distinguishes it from others (see also Brubaker, Loveman and Stamatov, 2004:31-32).

The foregoing validate Burgess's (1978) view on ethnicity, where he regards it as

the character, quality or condition of ethnic group membership, based on an identity with and or a consciousness of group belonging that is differentiated from others by a symbolic 'markers' (including cultural, biological, or territorial), and is rooted in bonds to a shared past and perceived ethnic interest.

Ethnicity is 'a distinct collective group' of the population within the larger society whose culture is different from the mainstream culture (Wan and Vanderwerf, 2009). In the opinion of Mbalisi (2017), ethnicity is a social phenomenon which involves interactions among members of a social group who are distinguished by communal character of their boundaries. He notes that culturally, ethnic groups are not necessarily homogenous entities. Four issues are raised in Mbalisi's view on ethnicity: First, it is a social phenomenon; secondly, it involves interactions of a social group (referring to ethnic setting); thirdly, it has a communal character; and lastly, the ethnic groups are not always homogenous. One may conclude from this view that ethnicity refers to an ethnic group with common identity, the same social setting with the same or minor differing cultural traits. For example, the Igbo people of Nigeria are members of the same communal setting within which are minor differences that result into different varieties of the Igbo language and minor variations on Igbo culture. Likewise, other ethnic groups in the country, such as the Hausa, Yoruba, Efik, Ijaw, and so on. Members of the same ethnic group are bonded by a common ancestry, language, belief system and they tend to present a common front in struggling for the well-being of members of the group.

Conflicts are bound to occur in an ethnically plural society (Varshney, 2009). For example, in Indonesia where, by 1998, the SARA policy which forbids mobilisation or discussion of ethnic differences in the public realm lost its legitimacy giving room for horrendous group violence that took place on ethno-communal lines (Bertrand, 2004); Yugoslavia, where there are ethnic and national identities with ethnic rivalries that so hobbled the Balkans in the first half of the twentieth century (Varshney, 2009). Although it is usually the case for ethnicity to portray negative effect, if it is properly managed, it leads to positive development. India is an example of a very ethnically diverse country with ethnically tied languages recognized by the government. However, despite these diversities, India's ethnicity has been 'managed' through the use of 'accommodationistic' approach and they never come into conflict (Manor, 1996). Ezeani (2015) might have had this kind of approach in mind where he points out the importance of peaceful co-existence to successful evolution of the state and also suggests that a nation without social harmony cannot develop beyond the level of her disunity, acrimony and instability. On the Nigerian experience before 1970s, Achebe (2012:51) has this to say:

The structure of the country was such that there was an inbuilt power struggle among the ethnic groups, and of course those who were in power wanted to stay in power. The easiest and simplest way to retain it, even in a limited area, was to appeal to tribal sentiments, so they were egregiously exploited in the 1950's and 1960's.

Ethnicity scenario in Nigeria is characterized by disharmonious relationship and mutual suspicions, which has become a cog in the wheel of progress of Nigeria. The period of 1967-1970 saw the Nigeria/Biafra war - a war of the Igbos for self-realization. The question is, does the problem of ethnicity subsist today? Nigeria till today is characterized by serious agitations by members of different ethnic nationalities through various organizations, such as: MASSOB (Movement for Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra), IPOB (Indigenous People of Biafra), IPM (Ijaw Peoples Movement). There is also the menace of the Boko Haram sect in Nigeria, and the herdsmen's attack on some villages and displacing them from their ancestral homes and farmland. The activities of the Niger-Delta militants in Nigeria cannot be easily forgotten. Many of the numerous ethnic groups seem to have so much lost confidence in the entity called Nigeria that they have continued to clamour for the restructuring of Nigeria if they must remain a member of the Nigerian nation. In the light of all these suggests a serious need for inputs on how to solve the language and leadership problems in Nigeria.

### **Leadership**

Nigerian leaders may be described as non-nationalists, and that suggests why they are not bothered with how to unify the country and bring about the needed development. Nigeria is blessed with abundant human and mineral resources, yet it refuses to develop. Rather, Nigeria is addressed 'the giant of Africa' without anything to show for it. The leaders seem to be so myopic and bedevilled with ethnic sentiment that they cannot harness these human and mineral resources for the good of the country. There is much hunger in the land and the citizens find it hard to eke a living. If Nigerian leaders cease to think along ethnic line, they would be able to unite the human capitals for sustainable national consciousness and development. But just as Akamadu (2013) rightly notes, most Nigerian leaders would rather *keep Nigeria together* than *promote national unity among the ethnic nationalities*. Akamadu avers that keeping Nigeria together can never be the same as promoting peace among its people. Such attitude, in the opinion of Ezeani (2015), hinders nationhood and integration. That is why Kalu (1987) earlier canvassed for the leadership at the national level to be marked by competence for integrating diverse groups into a coherent national entity denominated in national consciousness.

Integration, to Bakari (2017), refers to the extent to which parts interact and complement each other in order to constitute viable whole. He further says that national integration involves a process of holding tightly together the various nationalist or ethnic groups and institution in a dovetailed manner through the bonds of contrived structure, norm and values. In his opinion, national integration calls for action of collective responsibility to swim and sink together in a genuine spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood. How then can the diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria be integrated for the good and progress of the country?

### **The Way Forward**

To solve the leadership problem in Nigeria, there is the need to solve the problem of language. This is because problem of leadership somehow is hinged on the problem of language due to affiliation of different Nigerian languages to various ethnic groups. Uwaezuoke (2015; 2018) had suggested the use of the indigenous languages of Nigeria for information dissemination at the grassroots, through translation of government policies and programmes into these indigenous languages, as a way of engendering effective grassroots mobilization for national integration and national development. This recommendation, though okay, may not to a large extent solve the problems of ethnicity and leadership in Nigeria as people of different nationalities would still struggle for political power.

This paper, therefore, recommends a more formidable measure. It considers the recognition of all the Nigerian indigenous languages as being equal, and that any of them is capable of serving as a language of national unity. However, because of the problem of selecting a particular language for the entire nation owing to the multiplicity of languages and their attachment to numerous ethnic groups, it is also recommended that every language in Nigeria should be encouraged by government to develop.

In this regard, government should consider the clamour for restructuring of Nigeria. Through restructuring, the regions/states should be made more powerful than the central and to control their resources; while the central should handle the issue of national security and few other issues to be reserved for it. This will make every region to manage their resources and develop at their own pace as well as give room for competition. In a region where more than one language exists, it is possible and easier to get speakers of some other languages to adopt a dominant language of the region and promote it, especially in addition to promoting other languages of the region. Through this, speakers of the so called 'minority languages' would have a sense of belonging. There should also be an Institute for the promotion of indigenous Nigerian languages, which should be saddled with the responsibility of promoting all the indigenous Nigerian languages and ensuring that every language is given equal opportunity to develop. This view had earlier been canvassed by Ezeuko (2008), where he solicits giving top priority to language modernization by government as a way of ensuring the survival of the indigenous languages for the effective role they are expected to play in the modern Nigerian society. This, he suggests, would be possible when government establishes language academies just as France, which established a special ministry responsible for creating 'Sci-tech' terms and ensuring their standardization.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

In this paper, issue of language and leadership problem associated with multilingual nature of Nigeria and its multi-ethnic groups was discussed. Unlike some countries that successfully managed their multilingualism, such as India, Nigeria's multilingualism has hindered development in the country as a result of the attachment of languages to diverse ethnic groups with the attendant consequences. The paper has recommended the recognition of all the Nigeria's indigenous languages as equal, with each being capable of serving as a language of national unity. Government should consider restructuring Nigeria and making the regions/states to be more powerful and to manage their resources, while the central government handles national security issue and few other issues. An Institute for the promotion of indigenous Nigerian

languages should be established and saddled with the responsibility of promoting all the indigenous Nigerian languages and ensuring that every language is given equal opportunity to develop. By so doing, the 'minority languages' would feel a sense of belonging, and the attachment of various languages and leadership issue to ethnicity would be reduced to barest minimum.

## References

- Achebe, Chinua. (2012). *There was a country – A personal history of Biafra*. Great Britain: Allen Lane.
- Akamadu, Chuks. (2013). Laughable quest for nationhood. *The Guardian (Nigeria) Newspaper*. Monday September 2. p 65.
- Akande, G. B. (2008). Straight for English as a medium of education in Nigeria: Towards enhancing quality and national development. *Awka Journal of Linguistics and Languages*. 4. 60-66.
- Akata, Sordum Owen. (2013). Towards the era of using English as the only language for communication in Nigeria. *Journal of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria*. 16. 1 & 2. 43 – 61.
- Bakari, Salihu. (2017). National integration in humanities and development: The way forward. *Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 18i2. 358 – 374.
- Bertrand, J. (2004). *Nationalism and ethnic conflict in Indonesia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brubaker, R., M. Loveman and P. Stamatov. (2004). Ethnicity and cognition. *Theory and Society*. Vol. 33. 31 – 64.
- Burgess, M. Elaine. (1978). The resurgence of ethnicity: Myth or reality? In *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 1. 270.
- Ezeani, Emmanuel O. (2015). Language and culture: Pragmatic instrument for national cohesion. In Linda C. Nkamigbo and Felicia O. Asadu. Eds. *Current Issues in Linguistics, Language and Culture Studies: A Festschrift in Honour of Professor Cecilia Amaoge Eme @ 50*. Pp.178-187. Nkpor: Brystevand Publishers.
- Ezeuko, Romanus O. (2008). The problem of translating foreign concepts into the Igbo language. *Awka Journal of Linguistics and Languages (AJILL)*. 4. 74-80.
- Horowitz, D. L. (1985). *Ethnic groups in conflict*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Irukwe, J. O. (1996). *Nigeria: The case for a better society*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Company Ltd.
- Kalu, Viktor Eke. (1987). *The Nigerian condition – Arthur Nwankwo's viewpoints and blueprints*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Company Ltd.

- Kateregga, Abubakar. (2011). The human resources paradigm as a tool for sustainable development in Africa: Assessing the indigenous language factor. *Journal of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria*. 14. 2. 297 – 309.
- Manor, James. (1996). Ethnicity and politics in India. *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*. Vol. 72, No 3. pp. 459 – 475.
- Mbalisi, Chinedu N. (2017). Challenge of ethnicity, politics by identity and prebendalism to security and social stability in Nigeria, 1999 to 2015. *Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. 18. 3. 70 – 97.
- Nnoli, Okwudiba. (1980). *Ethnic politics in Nigeria*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Company Ltd.
- Obi, Nonyelum M. (2017). Literature in indigenous language: Its relevance to human development. *Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 18i2. 297–309.
- Onuko, Theodora. (2011). Multilingual education for nation building: The case for French language. *Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 12. 1. 90 – 101.
- Osaghae, E. E. (1995). *Structural adjustment and ethnicity in Nigeria*. Uppsala: Nordic African Institute.
- Ugochukwu, Chinweude N. and Christian E. C. Ogwudile. (2017). The role of indigenous languages in successful change management: The Igbo language example. *The Creative Artist*. 13. 2. 488 – 500.
- Ukiwe, Ukoha. (2005). On the study of ethnicity in Nigeria. *CRISE: Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Society and Ethnicity*. Working Paper No. 2. Oxford: CRISE.
- Uwaezuoke, Haroldson Aghaegbuna. (2015). An experimental survey of the impact of translation to information dissemination at the grassroots. In Linda C. Nkamigbo and Felicia O. Asadu. Eds. *Current Issues in Linguistics, Language and Culture Studies: A Festschrift in Honour of Professor Cecilia Amaoge Eme @ 50*. pp. 235–244. Nkpor: Brystevand Publishers.
- Uwaezuoke, Aghaegbuna Haroldson. (2018). Ethnicity and national integration in Nigeria: Towards the use of indigenous language option for information dissemination at the grassroots. *UNIZIK Journal of Arts and Humanity*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v19i2.3>
- Varshney, Ashutosh. (2009). Ethnicity and ethnic conflict. In Carles Boix and Susan C. Stokes. Eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*. pp. 274–294. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Published online in September, 2009. [ashutoshvarshney.net>files\\_mf>vrshn...](http://ashutoshvarshney.net/files_mf/vrshn...) (Assessed on 18/5/18).

Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development. ISSN: 2630-7065

(Print) 2630-7073 (e). Vol. 4 No. 2. 2021

Association for the Promotion of African Studies

Wan, Enoch and Mark Vanderwerf. (2009). A review of the literature of ethnicity, national identity and related missiological studies. [www.GlobalMissiology.org](http://www.GlobalMissiology.org). (Assessed on 17/5/18).