

Language and Communication as Instruments for the *Change Agenda* in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper views language and communication as veritable tools for actualizing the anticipated 'change agenda' of the present government in Nigeria. Prior to the 2015 general elections, the country suffered from tripod problems of corruption, insecurity and increasing poverty rate among the populace. This horrendous experience midwife Nigerians seek for change and reform which the present government promised during its campaign. However, a major challenge to the change agenda is the problem of effective communication and appropriate use of language(s) within Nigeria's multiethnic and multilingual environment. Using Roman Jakobson's functions of language and factors of communication as our theoretical guide, the paper establishes the indispensability of language and communication in the functioning of human society. It considers the prominence given to the use of English language over the indigenous languages in Nigeria as detrimental to the change agenda in a country where majority of the citizens cannot speak or write in English. The paper also notes lack of effective communication between government and the governed as another factor that may hinder the actualization of the anticipated change. It is in this regard that the paper recommends the re-designing of Nigeria's "multilingual" language policy to accommodate the use of more indigenous languages for participation of majority in the change process. Also, a participatory communication model should be adopted for use in governance in order to make communication more effective and all inclusive.

Key Words: *Change, transformation, indigenous languages, multilingualism, national development, language policy*

Introduction

Language and effective communication play vital roles on any issue relating to national transformation and change. As a purely human and non-instinctive method of communication, language serves as the foundation on which other national developmental projects are built. Language as an instrument of communication may be used to influence personality, to declare war, to oppose ideas, intentions and actions; to scatter, to condemn and generate violence. It could also be used to entertain, inspire, educate, establish cordial relationship, settle disputes and make peace with people or communities (Obuh and Omenogor, 2012). Communication provides the much needed platform to use language for harmonious existence among diverse groups in a society. Every society constantly requires changes that will transform the life of the people for better. Change, as a form of human desire, could occur in the political, economic, social or cultural life of the people in a society. However, change in human society often correlates with the ways language has been effectively used as a means of communication to achieve societal goals. Perhaps, that is why Obanya (1993) asserts that "communication through language is an instrument for empowering the individuals that constitute a nation to make positive contributions that enhance national development and cohesion. Human beings use language to achieve their daily needs, national goals and international aspirations.

The seemingly inexhaustible potentials of language and communication are continually explored by man to resolve issues of personal, group and national interest.

The quest to re-examine the use of language and communication in the Nigerian context becomes very crucial at this time in the nation's history when majority of the citizens wallow in abject poverty; when government can hardly meet its basic responsibility of providing security for its citizens; when essential social infrastructures such as good roads, pipe-borne water, electricity supply and health care facilities are epileptically provided or completely not available; when the country's educational system is lamentably in a depressed state. There are increasing activities of insurgents and pipeline vandalization in the North and South respectively. These social and economic problems mount in the face of state corruption and ineptitude. The masses are becoming more and more alienated, angry and bitter while the contending elites manipulate ethnic and religious cleavages in the struggle for power and deadly conflicts escalate in number and scale. Lives of a great number of the population are traumatic and dysfunctional. This underscores the urgent need for a socio-political and economic change in the country. The situation calls for a re-think towards a paradigm shift on new ways of exploring the use of language and communication in the society for the actualization of the anticipated change in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is Roman Jakobson's functions of language. In his work, Jakobson (1960) identifies six functions of language as well as six factors of communication. According to Jakobson, as cited in Adedeji (2013), each of the identified function of language has a corresponding factor or element of communication. These factors of communication are (1) context (the co-text, that is, the other verbal signs in the same message and the world in which the message takes place), (2) addresser (a sender or enunciator) (3) addressee (a receiver or enunciate), (4) contact (a contact between addresser and addressee), (5) common code and (6) message. The corresponding functions of language are in the following order: (1) referential (2) emotive (3) conative (4) phatic (5) metalingual and (6) poetic. Each factor is the focal point of an oriented relation, or function that operates between a function of language and the factor of communication.

The referential function of language is a denotative or cognitive function which is oriented toward the 'context' and used to show things or facts that are obvious. The emotive function also known as the expressive function focuses on the addresser. It is used when we want to express our emotions without expressively stating it as information. Interjections are employed in words or phrases to show surprise, pleasure or annoyance. The conative function is an orientation towards the addressee. The expression is used to make people carry out an instruction. It is usually expressed in vocative and imperative sentences. The phatic function is language for the sake of interaction and is therefore associated with the Contact factor. It is used to establish, prolong or discontinue communication. Metalingual function also called 'metalinguistic' or 'reflexive' function is the use of language (what Jakobson calls 'code') to discuss or describe itself. The poetic function is performed when language use focuses on the message and its content. This theory is relevant to our study because it incorporates language and communication as functionally essential in the society.

Language, Communication and Society

Language, communication and society are three different concepts but are intricately and functionally interwoven. In the words of Okoh (2006) 'any definition of language must first consider it as a means of communication, employed by *homo sapiens* to convey emotions, ideas and thoughts. It constitutes some kind of true mirror of how we think, see, perceive, and conceive of things'. Following suit is Osisanwo (2003) who defines language as 'human vocal noise or the arbitrary graphic representation of this noise, used systematically and conventionally by members of a speech community for purposes of communication'. Atolagbe (2004) considers human language as the most useful tool of communication to mankind. Every member of a linguistic community shares in a conventional, through arbitrary system of vocal-auditory symbols, speech sounds to be specific, which combine meaningfully to express thoughts, ideas, beliefs, needs, etc, and which ultimately contribute to the smooth running of that society'. One may safely conclude here that language is a combination of sound and meaning which serves as constructive component of human experiences.

On the other hand, the word "communication" is from the Latin word '*communicare*' which means 'to share'. We communicate to share our point of view within or between families, friends, colleagues and strangers at every level in society. This core human trait involves an exchange of information with a shared symbols or codes for understanding of message(s) by interactants. In the words of Oyewo (2004), 'communication is the process of transmitting, receiving and acting upon messages, information, thoughts, ideas, attitudes and feelings through mutually agreed, understandable codes or symbols'.

Communication may be verbal or non-verbal and requires a two-way interactive exchange of information: giving and receiving information. The four basic skills of language (speaking, listening, reading and writing) are equally integral part of communication. In other words, the conception of language is that of communication, and whenever communication is thought of, the language of communication is considered.

However, the two concepts (language and communication) cannot thrive without the society where they are both functionally utilized. Discussing the link between language and society, Adeyanju (2002:527) asserts that:

Language cannot exist without society; neither can society exist without language. Language is part of society as the existence of society invariably necessitates the existence of language with which members of the society interacts.

People use language to communicate. Language users construct meaning from language events on the basis of previous knowledge, their sense of history, social experience and knowledge of facts surrounding events. According to Ingraham (1930) as presented in Osisanwo (2003), every society needs language: to direct superfluous nervous energy, to direct motion in others, both men and animals, to communicate ideas, as a means of expression, to set matter in motion, as an instrument of thinking; and lastly to give delight merely as sound

The fabric of civil society is woven around communication and exchange of information between and among people – through interpersonal, informal and cultural processes as well as through formal institutions and official channels. A country needs a healthy civil society which is characterized by the vibrancy and quality of communication networks between individuals, groups, institutions and organizations. Information and communication are of inestimable value to national progress. As a matter of fact, positive change is much more likely to occur in a society where people are involved in discussions on issues that affect them.

Moreover, in a diverse society like Nigeria, communication serves an integrative function. It is used to foster meaningful dialogue among different sectors of the society. Nigeria, as nation, consists of individuals with diverse groups and needs, bound together by a common dream. However, this common dream can only be actualized if there is unity among the diverse ethno-linguistic groups. This integrative function is a bond that brings a nation together with respects for multiplicity of cultures and perspectives. Communication is used to nurture a shared vision for the country's future and to harness its human and natural resources for development.

Communication also lies at the heart of good governance. Governments must be open, accountable and responsive to their citizens – there must be free flow of information so that civil society can monitor government performances. Good governance requires transparency and regular information on the state and public services. Through communication, citizens are enlightened about their obligations to government and government is also regularly reminded about its duties to citizens. This will ensure mutual trust and understanding between government and the governed.

The divergent propositions of scholars on functions of language and communication converged on the general acceptance that they are essentially functional in all areas of human activities in the society. In fact, it is difficult to imagine any meaningful development without both playing essential roles. Thus, it becomes imperative that in order to bring about the anticipated change in the Nigerian society, the issues of language use and method of communication must be adequately addressed.

Conceptualizing the *Change Agenda* in Nigeria's Socio-Political Context

Change is indispensable in any society, particularly in that which strives to provide human needs. The Cambridge English Dictionary (online) defines change as “to make become different”, “to form a new opinion or make a new decision about something that is different from your old one”, “to improve the bad part of your behavior”. Dike (2000) citing Lauer (1982) defines change as ‘a significant alteration of social structures’. Social structures here mean the ‘pattern of social action and interaction which include norms, values, and cultural phenomena. This variations or modifications in any aspect of social process, pattern, or form changes established patterns of social actions and interactions; a significant shift from old paradigm and ways of life to a new one.

Change is synonymous with transformation and development. Transformation, according to The Longman Dictionary of English means “a complete change in the appearance or character of something or someone or someone, especially so that thing or person is improved”.

Development is the freedom and ability of human being to create modalities that sustain his existence and bring positive transformation to his life in the society. Okere (2004) regards development as ‘the qualitative changes in economic want, goods, incentives, institutions, productivity and knowledge, leading to the upward movement of the entire social system’. It is the appreciable amelioration in the economic, social, technological, physical and cultural aspects of life of a people. Communication is needed for national development. Anaeto et al (2012) define communication for development as ‘a researched and planned process crucial for social transformation’. National development improves the social welfare of the people e.g. by providing social amenities such as the quality of education, portable water, transportation infrastructure, medical care and many more. Development is desired universally and that is why developed countries desire to get better while developing countries aspire to be developed.

The government of President Muhammadu Buhari won the 2015 general elections in Nigeria because it promised change in the life of the people. The manifesto of the ruling party APC (All Peoples Congress) revolved around change. Change in this socio-political context is inseparable from good governance which requires setting, disseminating, monitoring and enforcing laws, rules and regulations; ensuring government policies are put into practice effectively, transparently and honestly; delivering public services efficiently in ways that meet people’s needs; creating conditions for investment and trade; promoting growth in jobs and incomes; allocating resources and distributing wealth to cater for all members of the society. It is essential for sustainable socio-economic and political reform.

Prior to the 2015 elections, Nigerians were already tired of the ruling party-PDP (Peoples Democratic Party), a party that had ruled for 16 years, and whose members were alleged of high level corruption that condemned majority of the citizens into abject poverty. The nation was bedeviled with high level corruption, increasing poverty rate among the masses coupled with increasing activities of kidnappers and Boko Haram terrorist group. As a result, Nigerians got disillusioned and started clamouring for change, after years of unfulfilled dreams and dashed hopes from the political office holders. The rate of corruption in Nigeria was so high that any resources appropriated to the development of any project is either embezzled or misused. It is never used for the purpose it was to serve. While majority of the citizens live below poverty line, very few minority in government convert national wealth to personal use. The attainment of the lofty ideals of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the year 2015, and even” Vision 20:2020” are gradually being extinguished. The point here is that communication helps to address inefficient systems, processes, or modes of production and distribution within a society.

With series of problems facing the nation coupled with government ineptitude, Nigerians became more worried and agitated about their condition of living, and that of course, brought about the change agenda: change from bribery and corruption, change from the present state of insecurity, change from poor electricity supply, change from high unemployment rate; change from hunger and poverty; change from poor health care services; change from poor attention given to education; and change from all other forms of social, economic and political vices. However, to achieve these series of change in the society, effective communication with appropriate use of languages in a multilingual Nigeria is required for maximal participation of citizens. Without paying adequate attention to language and effective communication, achieving national change and development may remain elusive.

Problems of Communicating Change

Change is sometimes difficult: the truth remains that people only change when their perceptions and mental paradigms shift. The process of communicating change in knowledge, attitudes, behavior and practices requires collective efforts. In discussing how to communicate change, some questions readily come to mind such as: How do we change the orientation of the people? Which language should be used to communicate change? Many Nigerians are expecting change mainly from the part of the government. They are oblivious of the fact that all sectors of the nation, government and the governed need a change in attitude and belief for genuine national transformation. We cannot change Nigeria without first changing Nigerians and a reformed system would soon be polluted by unreformed people. Corroborating this position is President Muhammadu Buhari, in the concluding part of his 55th Independence Day broadcast when he said:

change does not just happen, you and I and all of us must appreciate that we all have our part to play if we want to bring about change. We must change our lawless habits, our attitude to public office and public trust. We must change our unruly behavior in schools, hospitals, market places, motor parks, on the roads, in homes and offices...

The implication of this is that transformation requires that people rise above the present circumstances and contribute to seek and exhibit relevant habit, knowledge and practices that will change the society for good. There is the need for re-orientation of people through proper communication and information. As a nation, we cannot change Nigeria without changing Nigerians and neither can we have a reformed system without first reforming the people because a reformed system will be undermined by unreformed minds.

Another problem of communicating change is the language of communication in Nigeria. As noted earlier, which of the languages is to be used to mobilize people for change. Is it the English language or the indigenous languages? For years, prominence has been given to the English language over the indigenous ones. According to Igboanusi (2002):

English has continued to play many roles in Nigeria. It is today the language of education and administration, commerce and journalism, legislative debate and international gathering, a means of communication between individual from different ethnic backgrounds and the medium of literature.

The 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the National Policy on Education (NPE 1977, revised in 1981, 1998 and 2004) have the following provisions that favour the use of English against the indigenous languages in Nigeria.

The business of the national assembly shall be conducted in English and in Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made therefore. (Section 55, of the 1999 constitution)

The same thing goes for the state houses of assembly:

The business of the house of assembly shall be conducted in English, but the house may in addition to English conduct the business of the house in one or more other languages spoken in the state as the house may by resolution approve. (Section 97 of the 1999 constitution)

The National Policy on Education (NPE 1977 revised 1981, 1998 and 2004) contains the following provisions.

Government will see to it that the medium of instruction In the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community, and at a later stage, English (NPE, paragraph 15(4)).

The language component of the Junior Secondary Curriculum reads thus:

In selecting the Nigerian languages, students should study the language of their own area in addition to any of the three main Nigerian Languages, Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba, subject to availability of teachers.

The underlined provisions above show government's continued interest in promoting the use of English language over the indigenous languages. Even the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria is written in English without recourse to publish it in any of the three major indigenous languages for those who could neither speak nor read the English language. The UNICEF Report of 2012 puts adult literacy rate in Nigeria at 51%. What happens to the remaining 49% in this era of change? Alebiosu (2013) reflected on this lamentable state when he said, "Policy on language which is meant to affect the life of people in all ramifications was unfortunately put together in the language (English) that most people do not understand. He stated further that there cannot be any effective policy formulation and implementation especially the one that impact greatly on the lives of Nigerian people without proper development and utilization of the indigenous languages. The poor attention given to language by policy makers and implementers has usually predisposes such policies to failure (Alyebo 2012).

Furthermore, there is the problem of inadequate information. There exists a communication gap between the government and the governed. Communication provides information and lack of it may inadvertently lead to ignorance and entropy. When there is lack of adequate information, even the best policy may fail to achieve the desired objective. A policy that does not inform the people on its *modus-operandi* is doomed to failure *ab-initio*. Most times, policies are formulated and implemented without the citizens being adequately informed. This may constitute another hindrance to the much anticipated change.

Finally, the long-standing ethno-linguistic prejudice in a multilingual and multi-ethnic Nigeria has also been a major hindrance to communicating change. The country is divided along ethno-linguistic line. Everyone sees his language as superior to others. No one wants to lose his identity by losing his language or have it demoted. That is why the constitutional provision of learning one of the three major languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) has not been successful till date. Some Nigerians see them as mere “Linguistic imposition”. According to Chief Anthony Enahoro’s statement as cited in Maledo (2012):

As one who comes from a minority tribe, I deplore the continuing evidence in this country that people wish to impose their customs, their languages, and even more their way of life upon smaller tribes...My people have a language, and that language was handed down through a thousand years of tradition and custom ...How can they now, because the British brought us together, wish to impose their language on us? We have not fought the imperialist in order to establish a new imperialism in this country (162)

Since the indigenous languages are still at logger heads and the English language is yet to be a language generally understood by all Nigerians, there is an obvious need to revisit the problem in this era of change in order to maximally utilize the language resources in the country’s linguistic arsenal to engineer national development.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From our discussions so far, we can summarise that language and effective communication are arguably the most crucial in the functioning of any society. In this present climate of political and socio-economic reform, both will be instrumental for the anticipated national change and transformation. Moreover, as the nation moves towards greater democracy and national development, conditions are becoming necessary for people to start steering their own course of change in such a way that will conform to national goals. In other words, there is the need to stimulate people’s awareness, participation and capabilities through language and effective communication. This will encourage men and women to provide information and knowledge as the basis for change and innovation; take decisions concerning their own livelihood and thereby increase their overall involvement in nation building. There is no doubt that the future shape, pace, stability, sustainability and ultimate direction for change and development in Nigeria will be determined by people. It is on this note that we make the following recommendations that are considered necessary for the actualization and sustainability of the anticipated change in the country:

1. The Federal government should positively review the current language policy by adopting a mixed (multilingual) language approach whereby more indigenous languages can be used equally and harmoniously with the English language at all levels of political participation. These newly recognized languages may be classified as “major minority” languages. They may include Ibibio, Efik, Edo, Igala and others spoken by people residing in that part of the country where the three major languages are not understood at all.
2. All policies formulated and implemented in all spheres of Nigerian life must consider their language implications for them to be properly recognized, cognitively perceived, widely disseminated and massively supported. The policy statements must be implemented, monitored and regularly evaluated
3. Information dissemination is highly important in order to curb corrupt practices and encourage accountability. Information on declaration of assets of public office holders should be made public. The implementation of the Right of Information Bill or Freedom of Information Act 2011 should be strictly adhered to.
4. The role of the media is very important in the actualization of the anticipated change. A vibrant media is needed to act as a watchdog over government and individual activities.

5. Communicative language teaching should be emphasized in our schools in both English and the indigenous languages. The aim of teaching in our schools should be to attain communicative competence in the four basic skills of language. This will improve the level of communication in the society.
6. The use of literature text books is also relevant in bringing about the anticipated change. One of the functions of literature is to teach moral values. Literature mirrors the society; showing the socio-economic and political vices and how to correct them. It must, however, be written in both English and the indigenous languages.
7. Lastly, the participatory approach to communication should be encouraged. Participatory communication is similar to participatory development; everybody is involved in the process of development. The participatory communication is underpinned by dialogue and expression of voice. It is concerned with promoting and facilitating social change through communication tools. Feedback is encouraged in the process in order to evaluate situations and plan future actions.

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