

Language Attitudes among the Political Class in Nigeria: Implications for National Development

Wasiu Ademola Oyedokun-Alli¹

¹ Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University, Oye – Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria

Correspondence: Wasiu Ademola Oyedokun-Alli, Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University, Oye – Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria. E-mail: wasiu.oyedokun@fuoye.edu.ng or demolaoyedokun@gmail.com

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Abstract

It is an acknowledged fact that language plays pivotal roles in issues relating to national development. However, in most developing bilingual/multilingual societies, Nigeria inclusive, despite the claim to the contrary, people still cling to primordial sentiment over and above nationalistic ethos. This study seeks to examine language attitude among the political class in Nigeria, and these (attitudes) affect the country's attempt towards national integration and development. The thrust of the paper is that contrary to the widely-held view that economy and technology are the major (or main) indices of development, language issues are also of paramount importance in national growth and development. It recommends a much more proactive measure in tackling language issues in our national discourse.

Keywords: language attitudes, political class, national development

1. Introduction

All over the world, languages play vital roles in politics, economy, information, culture and education. The preponderance of language as an integral part of culture in a nation's life cannot be too strongly emphasized. This is why Nkosi (1999) submits that:

The relationship between language and national culture cannot be too strongly emphasized. Like other people black African possess a rich and living heritage in philosophy, ethics, religion and artistic creation, the deepest roots of which are embedded in the rich soil of African languages. To repossess that tradition means not only unlocking the caskets of syntax, disentangling metaphysics from poetry and proverbs, it also means extracting social philosophy, habit of moral thoughts from the rhythm, imagery...sometimes from the very circumlocution of the nature African speech.

From the foregoing, it becomes intuitively evident that, giving the stimulus-response theories of the behaviorists, and within the theoretical framework of behaviorism, Lyons (1981). Language attitude is seminal to any discourse in politics and administration, especially in developing countries, Nigeria inclusive. What is basic is that language is a means of communication for the purpose of human social intercourse and a major instrument of thought.

Dunmoye (1991) contends that it is misleading to equate "nation with state" or think that a nation is synonymous with a "country". In his analysis, a nation consists of a people, culturally distinct who share a common language, common customs and traditions, who occupy a fixed territory, entertain a sense of belonging, and also share the willingness and hope of living together in future". He defines a "state" as a political community, an organization which exercises coercive authority over all inhabitants of a territory from this analytical view point, one can rightly conclude that, Nigeria as it were is a multinational state.

1.1 Language Situation in Nigeria

Nigeria, like many countries of the world is a multilingual state. According to Lasisi (1989), citing the authority of Hansford (1971), the number of Nigerian languages is estimated between 390 and 400" of all these languages is Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba constitute the dominant languages and serve as the lingua franca in the erstwhile three regions of the country-North, East and West respectively. In yet another account it is established that "there are about 400 languages in Nigeria (Bamgbose, 1971; Osaji, 1979), many of them vernaculars, out of which only

three are recognized as major: Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa” (cited in Igboanusi, 2001). In Nigeria, the language situation is a reflection of the historical phases of colonialism and post-colonialism,

Ethnocentrism and fear of political domination have militated against the emergence of a national language in Nigeria. Nida and Wonderly (1971) summarize it thus:

In Nigeria, there is simply no politically neutral language. In fact, the division into three major regions reflects the three language poles: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. The political survival of Nigeria as a country would be even more threatened than it is if any one of these languages were promoted by the government as being the one national language.

This has necessitated the retention of the English language as the country’s official language. However, the point hardly needs be stressed that the English language has not succeeded in unifying the diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria, due largely to perennial political suspicious among the ethnic group.

1.2 Ethnicity as a Factor in Nigeria’s Political Landscape

Sodaro (2008) defines ethnicity as a form of group identification or distinctiveness, often based on a common biological ancestry in the distant past. In Nigeria’s political history, the issues of linguistic loyalty and primordial sentiments over and above nationalistic ethos have continued to reverberate. The first Nigeria Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ibadan- Professor Kenneth O. Dike has this to say to the graduating students (of the University) in his convocation address of 25th June, 1966:

It must be said to our shame that the Nigerian intellectual, far from being an influence for national integration is the greatest explorer of parochial and clannish sentiments...as you leave us, you are going into a Nigeria torn by tribal strive, a country in which deep suspicion exists between different sections...(Nnekwu, 2003).

The same ugly trend is observable in the universities in the Eastern and Northern parts of the country. In fact, General Yakubu Gowon, a former Nigeria Head of State, has alleged that “evidence available showed that the attempted secession by the former Eastern region from the federation of Nigeria was hatched mainly at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka”. He concluded that “most Nigerians tend to see the truth only as it affects themselves or their particular ethnic group, Otite (1990).

Also, at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nnekwu (2003) observes that “Northern opinion (sic) preferred the retention of a substantial and eventual replaceable expatriate cadre to a largely Nigerian staff that were mainly Southerner (sic) such as Yoruba, Igbo etc.

Further to this, Adewale Adeoye reports that “if an X-ray could reveal the concealed feelings of members of the National Assembly, it is doubtful if a true Nigerian without tribal bias would be discovered (Sunday Punch, August 15, 1999, p. 15). The paper concludes that the National Assembly cannot defend Nigerian interest because there is no Nigeria; that what the country has are mostly antagonistic ethnic groups and that a genuine national assembly can only emerge from a sovereign national conference (p. 15).

The political leadership is also actively enmeshed in the ethnic chauvinism. Anifowoshe (1999) sums up the various definition of politics as: “a process that determines who gets what, when and how; the authoritative allocation of values”. If we hold tenaciously to the Aristotelian conception of man “as a political animal”, it is apt to conclude that politics is ubiquitous; it exists on all social relationships, Fakayode (2011).

1.3 Statement of the Research Problem

This study seeks to examine language as a causative factor in the insidious trend towards favoring one’s language group over and above others. The trend has become an endemic malaise in the nation’s polity. To an extent language serves as symbol of group identity and loyalty, this perhaps explains the motivational factor in the letter written by Paul De Pre, a French settler in South Africa (1860-1913) to other French settlers in the cape.

The most scared possession a man can have ...is his native tongue. To steal this is to steal his soul. A Huguenot thinks differently from a Dutchman and expresses this thinking best in his native language. If we do not protect our glorious French in church, in law and in school, we must fight for our language as we would for our live, (Michener, 1980).

However, in a multilingual society, any attempt by a section of the country to hold tenaciously to parochial and clannish sentiments is bound to stifle the entire political and economic systems. According to Ogunsiji (2001):

The issue of a national language in Nigeria is a sensitive and controversial one. None of the indigenous languages as of now has either the linguistic spread or national acceptability to be accorded the status of a

national language. Even the mere political recognition of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as major languages is beset with resentment from the speakers of the other languages for fear of being linguistically marginalized. This should be expected because people will normally exhibit linguistic loyalty towards their languages (p.161).

This, in a nutshell, is the nature of the problem.

1.4 Research Questions

The following questions are germane to our study:

- (i) Does multilingualism engender ethnicity in Nigeria?
- (ii) Has the English language succeeded in unifying the heterogeneous language group in Nigeria?
- (iii) Is linguistic loyalty affecting the national polity?
- (iv) Have successive governments in Nigeria, especially at the centre made any attempts to foster unity among the various linguistic groups in Nigeria?

1.5 Justification for the Study

In view of the above discussion, there is need to analyze the political attitudes of Nigerian electorates as a pathway towards political stability and consolidation of governance in Nigeria, hence the importance of this study.

2. Methodology

This section contains the methodology used in carrying out the research. It sets out the data, the sample population, data collection instruments, sampling procedures, testing procedures and analytical procedures.

2.1 Sources of Data

The data from this study were selected from:

- a) Selected speeches of members of the political class, spanning the country's recognized six geo-political zones, namely northwest, northcentral, north east, southwest, south south, and south east.
- b) Guided discussions among the identified types of electorates
- c) Reports of conducts among the political class, especially at the two arms of the National Assembly.

2.2 Sample Population

Four groups of electorates provided the sample population for this study.

- a) The rational, stable and politically knowledgeable electorates.
- b) The confused and not well informed politically- those who have mixed feelings about politics.
- c) The irrational and ill-informed politically.
- d) The passive and silent electorates.

2.3 Data Collection Instruments

Each group of sample population was requested to listen to recorded material comprising topical, political issues that affect the national polity, especially on federal appointments, location of federal institutions, states allocation, and grants, to name a few. A total of sixty minutes was spent with each group. For the benefit of those who were not so literate in the English language, the materials were translated into Nigeria's three main indigenous languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

2.4 Sampling Procedure

The corpus materials, so recorded and translated, were chosen at random. This was in view of the fact that any of the recorded and translated material, could generally, serve to provide the data for or analysis. The responses to language attitude are mirrorically reflected in issues bordering on "sharing the national cake."

However, and not in this standing the randomness of our choice of the data, this study has effected some validation tests and ensured that thorough examination of the several sources were carried out before the final choice of the corpus material for our analysis.

The reliability accuracy of the translated material was verified by linguistic experts {who major in the three main indigenous Nigeria languages} at the University of Ibadan, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and University of Port Harcourt.

2.5 Analytical Procedure

This study adopts the “matched guide technique” formulated by Lambert {1967}. The main thrust of the research methodology, especially in “social psychology of bilingualism” involves the realization of biases and gravitational pull towards linguistic loyalty and primordial sentiments.

Table 1. Summary of language attitude among the political class in Nigeria

	ZONE A {NW}	ZONE B {NC}	ZONE C {NE}	ZONE D (SW)	ZONE E {SS}	ZONE F {SE}
GROUP A {S}	05	08	07	04	03	06
GROUP B {F}	01	01	01	02	02	
GROUP C {N}	01	01	–	03	02	–
GROUP D {P}	12	11	12	11	13	12

KEY: S {Stable}; F {floating}; N {Neutral} P {Partisan}

NW: North West

NC: North Central

NE: North East

SW: South West

SS: South South

SE: South East

3. Discussions

Despite the easily verifiable claims by linguists, such as Bamgbose (1971), Osaji (1979), Odunmu (1989), Akindele and Adegbite (2000), that English has become a Nigerian language and an invaluable legacy of the British, “which has provided Nigerians with yet another means of expressing their culture”, the language has not succeeded in wielding the different linguistic groups. The result of the analysis of the above data is quite representative of the inferences drawn from our study. The major observable inference is that of heavy tilt towards linguistic loyalty and primordial sentiments in issues bordering on “sharing national cake”. It is a classical case of “quibono”.

However, it is to be noted that the scale tilts higher among the north- west and south- south respondents. “Available records, Lasisi (1989), Fakayode (2011), and Adewuyi (2014), trace the root cause to the educational imbalance between the northern and southern Nigeria, the fear of domination and mutual suspicion, especially among the major ethnic groups. Even, the “floating group” expresses disenchantment with the political arrangements and is largely “undecided” on the subject matter.

Since the pre- independence era, political parties’ formation/alliances are based on ethnic, linguistic ties and cultural sentiments. For example, the Northern People’s Congress (NPC) which developed from the Jammarr Yarr Mutanen Arewa, “was a dominant party in the Northern Region. It represented the dominant in the Northern Region. It represented the dominant Hausa/Fulani ethnic tribe in the region. The Action Group (AG) emerged from the cultural movement “Egbe Omo Oduduwa”, and it represented the interests of the Yoruba majority ethnic group in the Western Region. The National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) which started originally as a trans- ethnic party soon became “a mere extension of Igbo Cultural Nationalism” Lasisi (1989).

With the collapse of the First Republic which came in the wake of the country’s first military coup of 15th January, 1966. the issue of linguistic loyalty and primordial sentiments became more preponderant. It has been argued in certain quarters that the philosophy behind the conception of the coup was regarded generally as nationalistic, but its execution left much to be desired, especially with regard to the lopsidedness in the killing of top political and military actors on the “other side” of the divide. Majority of the middle level officers who participated in the coup led by Major General Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu were of Igbo extraction.

Therefore, the fact that killings of top political and military officers were confined to the North and West rubbished any claim that the coup had nationalistic tendencies. And to confirm the fears, a counter coup was staged six months after, on July 29, 1966m which eventually planted a Northerner, Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon at the helm of the country’s affairs.

In the account of Lasisi (1989), it was the opposition of the mega- ethnic groups “to the emergence of those of the minority” into the arena of central political power that led military officers from the minority to mastermind a coup which toppled Gowon in 1975.

With the coming of the Second Republic (1979- 1983) party formation still followed linguistic and ethnic loyalty. In fact, the three dominant parties National Party of Nigeria (NPN), the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) and the Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP) were direct offshoots of the old regional- based NPC, AG and NCNC respectively.

Today, and one hundred years after the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates, Nigeria still “groan” under the joke of linguistic loyalty over and above national loyalty. Even after the on- going National Conference headed by the eminent jurist, Idris Legbo Kutigi, issues are raised mainly on linguistic and ethnic considerations. In its “*Democracy Column*” of 15 August, 1999, **The Sunday Punch** chronicles the linguistic and ethnic biases in debates in the National Assembly. In the account, titled “national or tribal assembly?” the paper reports that most legislators from the North supported Alhaji Salisu Buhari (the disgraced ex- speaker of the Federal House of Representatives) even there were overwhelmingly evidences against him on grounds of falsification of his age and academic credentials. The report goes further to say that the plan to relocate some Federal parastatals, like the Nigerian Maritime Authority, (NMA) which has most of its operational base in Lagos back to Lagos from Abuja drew the ark of Northern Lawmakers.

Similarly, in another story credited to **The Daily Champion**, November 4 1999, the plan to relocate the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and the Voice of Nigeria (VOA) back to Lagos has pitched Southern lawmakers against their Northern counterparts, opposing the plan. In fact, **The Sunday Punch** August 15, 1999 at page 15 argues that: “...the Senate and House of Representatives were factionalized along tribal lines. Battles were fought based on the color of the eyes and the language of the tongue. On daily basis, the media is awash with the news of communal clashes between Hausa/Fulani herdsmen and indigenous people in Benue, Plateau, Kaduna, Taraba and other parts of the North. There were reports of ethnic clashes in Warri, Shagamu, Kano, Ogoniland, Aguleri, Umuleri, and Ajegunle. This does not take account of the Boko Haram insurgency in the North East Nigeria.

Up till now, the country has not had a generally acceptable census figure. The results of the previous ones are still being contested in courts, based on ethnic, linguistic and clannish sentiments. This has continued to inhibit effective management of the country’s resources and the execution of national development plans.

3.1 Language Attitudes among the Political Class in Nigeria

Attitudes could be defined as an opinion or general feeling about a particular thing, Encarta Dictionary. To the psychologist, an attitude could be stable, floating, neutral or partisan, Alan (1985), cited in Adewuyi (2011). Adewuyi (2011) writes further;

Attitude refers to feelings, beliefs and reactions of an individual towards an event, phenomenon, object or person. Attitudes are not innate attributes of mankind, they are learned responses. No child is born with a ready-made behavior (Kaluger & Kaluger, 1994). Fisher and Aizer (1985) also remarked that attitude is concerned to be individualistic, an abstract entity, a kind of intervening variable imposed in order to explain regularities in behavioral responses (1).

From this viewpoint, it is crystal clear that attitude cannot be perceived in isolation but within the purview of certain variables. The pertinent question to ask is:

Do the political class, majority of who are holding high political posts in both party politics and government react to the attitude(s) of the electorates or fellow members of the political class? Fajinmi (2007) classified Nigeria electorates into categories:

- i. The rational, stable and politically knowledgeable electorates
- ii. The confused and not well informed politically. These are those that have mixed feelings about politics.
- iii. The irrational and ill-informed politically
- iv. The passive and salient electorates.

The rational, stable and politically knowledgeable electorates: These are Nigerians that grow in the knowledge of Nigerian politics and understand Nigerian voting system. They try to study party ideology program and policies. They are educated politically. They understand each of the political aspirants and can predict their performance. They are highly patristic and committed Nigerians. They can never be bought over by the tyrannical politicians and political leaders; examples of such electorates are Prof. Wole Soyinka and Chief GaniFawehinmi. This type of electorate has stable voting behavior and political attitudes.

Confused and not well informed politically electorates: These are the people that do not have enough information about party formation and procedure, political aspirants, the electoral commission and the government. They are interested in voting but are confused of whom to vote for and which party to form the

government. This generate to their floating political attitude. This group of electorates asks a lot of questions to authenticate their political ignorance. They are the type that shift to other political parties, they are never sure of themselves and what they are doing.

Irrational and ill- informed electorates: These are people that have the knowledge of only the political party they belong to. They could be called the party loyalists. If their party is the ruling party, the better, but if not, they become thorn in the flesh of the ruling party. They have developed negative and irrational thinking about other parties and they could cause or be used for political violence. They are majorly, the agent of election rigging and political corruption. If they gathered much political experience over years, they become “an institution” or “an island” and a thorn to any political government. Examples of such person are Late Adelabu and Adedibu of Ibadan, and Bola Ahmed Tinubu of Lagos state. Irrational and ill-formed electorate has partisan political attitudes and wants only his party to win at all cost.

Passive and salient electorates: These are people who refuse to discuss on politics, government, elections either on phone, or mail or verbally. Their opinion cannot be sorted for. They are passive political participants. They have neutral political attitude and voting behavior.

4. Conclusions

This paper discusses the central role played (and still being played) by linguistic loyalty and primordial sentiments over and above nationalistic ethos. It takes more than a cursory look at language attitudes among the country’s political class and how these attitudes have affected the country’s attempt at national integration and development. One major observable inference from the study is that these insidious trends have become almost endemic, since pre- colonial period.

To date, party formation and affiliation, voting patterns and jostling for political offices, headship of key government offices, to name a few, have been patterned and sought after along tribal, linguistic loyalties. Today, there exist plethora of community/ tribal association “attempting to secure amenities for their local areas” in fierce battle against others for ‘national cake’. In a nutshell, it is evident that the Nigeria political class still clings tenaciously to primordial sentiments in advancing personal aggrandizement, at the expense of nationalistic ethos.

Yet another inference from our study is the high level intolerance among the political class. In fact, the level of intolerance has heightened to outright hostility in certain quarters. The colonial policy of “divide- and- rule” further entrenched schism in the country’s polity, even till date.

The study proposes these recommendations as a way out of the quagmire:

- The process of national integration should begin by encouraging every school child to learn one Nigerian indigenous language other than his/ her own. Even though the policy has been suggested earlier than now, it has not been fully implemented because of deep mutual ethnic rivalry.
- The National Orientation Agency should be proactive in initiating programmes that are geared towards national integration.
- The National Youth Service Corps Scheme should be strengthened to materially and financially support youths getting married across tribal lines.
- Government at all levels should put in place legislations that will halt any form of discrimination against “non- indigenes” in form of higher school fees, tariffs etc
- Village Heads/ Chiefs and community leaders should be mandated to hold periodic meetings/ interactions with different sections of ‘non indigenes’ in their domains in order to foster a good rapport among Nigerians.

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