LANGUAGE RIGHTS AND THE CHALLENGE OF NATIONAL INTEGRATION: THE NIGERIA EXPERIENCE

[1]ADEBAYO OLATUNDE ODEWUMI, [2]SUNDAY ADEGUN

Ph.D Department of Yoruba Federal College of Education Pankshin, Plateau State, Nigeria
Department of English Federal College of Education Pankshin, Plateau State, Nigeria
E-mail: olatundeodewumi2@gmail.com

Abstract- Linguistic diversity is often regarded as posing great challenges to efforts at building a stable and properly integrated political community. It then becomes improbable for a country to adopt a benign approach to issues of its language resources, hence the legitimacy of one form of language policy and planning or the other. Not minding the veracity of the above claim, however, justifications for minority language rights tend to checkmate pragmatic efforts at language planning. This paper in the context of this quagmire explores this interplay of planning versus rights in the Nigerian context with the utmost intention of ascertaining the extent of social justice in this regard. In summation, the paper avers that language planning efforts in Nigeria cannot be held liable to any wide discrepancies with known international best practices.

Keywords- Linguistic diversity, National integration, Language policy and planning, Language rights.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a country of rich ethno-cultural diversity of over 350 distinct ethnic groups and over 500 indigenous languages with an estimated population of 170 million (NERDC, 2013 P.vi). Each ethnic group in the country lays claim to its tradition or myth of origin with distinct identity and world-view; hence the challenge of uniting the country into a nation. Nnoli (1978) sees language as being the most crucial dividing factor typical of ethnic rivalry in Africa.

It is often claimed that the major social and political problem that Nigeria faces in this century is ethnicity and its attendant threat to national integration. This may be described as ethnic nationalism, ethnocentrism, ethnic separatism or primordialism. All these point to the fact that various ethnic groups do not get along easily with each other (Marizu, 1998). The country as of now could be described as a comity of nations within one country. The national outlook within Nigeria is as diverse and fragmented as its ethno-linguistic landscape. This has resulted in a country with little or no national values but characterized by suspicion, prejudices, trepidations, and at worst fear of possible disintegration.

National integration subsumes national consciousness. Nation-building is an important aspect of political development and is therefore multidimensional (Narain, 1976). National integration is the awareness of a common identity amongst the citizens of a country. It means that though we belong to different castes, religions and regions and speak different languages, we recognize the fact that we are all one. This kind of integration is very important in building of a strong and prosperous nation.

Linguistic diversity is seen to complicate attempts to build a stable and cohesive political community. Hence, the challenge of integration is enormous in a multilingual country like Nigeria. While it is improbable for a country to leave its linguistic resources unplanned in a way to promote national integration, justification for minority language rights claims in relation to broader political theories of justice, freedom, equality and democracy tend to make this task herculean.

It is in light of this conflict that this paper reviews the Nigeria's language planning efforts at national integration and its attendant theatre of conflict. Efforts is made to explore international attempts at evolving normative principles of freedom and evaluate the position of the Nigerian language policy and planning in the light of evolving international conventions.

The Nigerian Language Policy in Education

The Nigerian Language Policy in Education (NPE), which anyone who has to deal with language policy or language planning legislation in Nigeria would refer to as basic document, up to date has six editions. It was first published in 1977 and has been revised subsequently in 1981, 1998, 2004, another draft in 2007 and the 2013 edition. Government in its introductory paragraph has stated in unequivocal terms its intention to adopt education as an instrument per excellence for effecting national development. By this, most of the obstacles to national development and growth are to be addressed via the route of sound educational planning. Part of the national problems that Government seeks to tackle through the route of education is the language problems. Then two crucial issues that the NPE seeks to address regarding the language questions in Nigeria are:

1) Language and national integration and unity; and
2) The medium of instruction in the education processes.

Out of all the language provisions in the NPE document, the section that has received the most vitriolic bashing in public discourses and scholarly gatherings is arguably the section dealings with national integration and unity. Little wonder why this section has received the most rampant modifications and re-rendering in most of the editions.

The NPE as received in 1981 discusses key elements of education and makes the following language provisions under its philosophy.

Section 1:8

In addition to appreciating the importance of language in the educational process, and as a means of preserving the people's culture, the Government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother tongue. In this connection, the Government considers the three major languages in Nigerian to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. (FRN, 1981:p9) (All bolds are mine for purposes of emphasis and later discussion).

The 1998 edition of the NPE contains a revision on this provision thus:

Government appreciates the importance of languages as a mean s of promoting social interaction and national cohesion and preserving cultures. Thus, every child shall learn the language of immediate environment. Furthermore, in the interest of national unity, it is expedient that every child shall be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. (FRN, 1998 :P. 9).

It is necessary to note a change in the force with which this provision has been rendered in the two documents above regarding the government's intention to promote the three languages of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba to national reckoning as heritage of national values and symbols of national unity. In the 1981 rendition, the promotion of the three languages to national reckoning is only 'considered to be in the interest of national unity'.

Whereas in the 1998 version, it is considered 'expedient' for national unity. Expediency connotes that the action just has to be done if unity must be achieved. This presupposed readiness to act on the part of government. Also, the 1981 edition expected that 'each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major language's, whereas the 1998 version makes it a requirement "that every child shall be required to learn one of the languages'. Requirement portends an official demand that something is done. This also is a sign of disposition to readiness for action on this provision.

Finally, 'the three major languages in Nigeria' in the 1981 edition has changed to 'the three Nigerian languages' in the 1998 edition. This seems a covert legislation of the three languages of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as the three recognized official national languages in Nigeria.

The desire to use the learning of the three Nigerian major languages of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as means of promoting national consciousness, national integration and national unity has not diminished even in the draft National policy on education in 2007.

Section 1:8(9) on philosophy and goals of education in Nigeria states that:

Every child shall learn the mother tongue and language of the immediate community. In addition, it is expected that every child shall learn one of these three languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. (Bolds mine).

It is worthy to state here that in no other words can the Nigerian education intention to promote multi-layered bilingualism in the hierarchy of mother-tongue in the most immediate community, a possible other language at the wider environment of interaction and yet a possible other language at the national level be better stated than in the form contained in 8(g) above. This is so, irrespective of the fact that the nomenclature given to the three languages of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba has changed from three major Nigerian languages' in 1981 and three Nigerian languages' in 1998 to 'these three languages' in 2007. However, the languages are not only known but listed even in the 2007 draft.

While the draft NPE (2007) was still in press, the 2013 edition was officially released which has in its foreword that the document was prepared to update the 2007 draft edition and in the process accommodate recent developments in the education industry. The revision and updating of the (2007) draft edition is said to have been necessitated by the need to address noticeable gaps in content and provisions that emerged in the course of implementation, maintain currency, relevance and to give adequate attention to new opportunities, issues and challenges.

One significant amendment in the language provisions is the deliberate avoidance of mentioning the names of the three major languages of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba by replacing them with an unspecified 'one Nigeria language'. In the light of this, section 8(g) of the 2013 edition, still maintaining the same section as in the 2007 (draft edition) is reviewed to read:

Every child shall be taught in the mother tongue or language of immediate community for the first four years of basic education. In addition, it is expected that every child shall learn one Nigerian language. (Bolds mine)

The politics of 'one of the three major languages, 'one of the three Nigerian languages' 'one of these

three languages' and 'one Nigerian language' throws up an interesting scenario in Nigeria's quest for sustainable language policy for national integration. The reason for these reviews may not be unconnected with the series of criticisms that have hitherto greeted the isolation of the three so called major languages for study out of over 500 Nigerian languages. Government could be seen to be on the consistent path of least resistance and conflict management.

Language policy and Language Rights

Will and Pattern (2003) lamented the little attention given to linguistic diversity by political theorists when compared with other diversities such as cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious plurality. Fortunately this gap is reported as currently being remedied. Some of these efforts are reviewed here under.

"Tolerance" and "Promotional-Oriented" Rights

Kloss (1977) made a distinction between "tolerance oriented" and "promotional-oriented" rights. Tolerance rights are regarded as protections individuals have against government interference with their private language choices. These are rights that permit individuals to speak whatever languages they like in their homes, associations, work places, and so on. Promotion oriented rights are rights that individuals have to the use of a particular language in public institutions – in courts, the legislative, public schools etc. In Kloss's view, immigrant languages should enjoy tolerance rights but not promotional rights. By contrast, long-standing national groups should enjoy promotion rights of all national groups in the polity.

The Norm and Accommodation Approach

This refers to two different ways in which the speakers of particular languages can be accommodated in public institutions. The first is called the 'norm' which involves the predominance of some normal language of public communication, typically the majority language of the jurisdiction concerned. Unless some special circumstances arise, this language is used in the courts and legislatures, in the delivery of public services, as the medium of public education, and so on.

Special accommodation is then made for people who lack sufficient proficiency in this normal language in the form of provision of interpreters, hiring of bilingual staff, the use of transitional bilingual and/or intensive educational programs to encourage rapid acquisition of the state language.

Charters and Declarations on Linguistic Right

Spolsky (2004) after giving a rundown of several charters and declaration on human rights that concern language concludes that linguistic right are to a large extent not distinct from other human rights which are by and large individual based. These are anchored on the principles of non-discrimination and freedom of expression. These are said to be straight forward enough when applied to the individual citizen. The problem by Spolsky arises when one moves from the right of an individual to use his or her own language to the requirement that the state both use and support the use of minority language.

Skuttnabb-Kangas (2002:183) quoted one of the most radical positions of minority rights in article 27 of the United Nations international covenant on civil rights and political rights, written in 1966 and in force when ratified ten years later with a follow up extension in 1994 that covers immigrants as follows:

In those states in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right in community with others own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or use their own language.

Thus, Spolsky (2004) concludes that in general, the language rights that have been accepted as suitable for international treaties and conventions are limited to protecting the right of citizens to make their own choices about language use.

Nigerian National Language Policy Experiments: Fair or Foul?

Having undergone a review of international practice and conventions on language policy formulation, the next endeavour of this paper is to assess the compliance of the Nigerian experiments at language planning to these international best practices.

On 'tolerance rights', no instance exists where any provision of the Nigerian language planning effort infringed on the right of any Nigerian citizen or immigrant resident in Nigerian to determine the nature of their private language choices. All citizens and residents of Nigeria are not influenced or inhabited in any way as to in what languages they so wish to communicate with or use in their homes, association, work places, and so on.

As concerned 'promotional rights', the norm and accommodation approach is adequately guaranteed in the Nigerian language provision. The three designated major languages are being accorded national recognition to complement the English language at the national public life while each dominant language at its domain, - either at the states level or a network of state - could perform the same function in its jurisdiction's public life such as in education, jurisprudence, legislature and other public services. This scenario is guaranteed by the three tiered multi-layered bilingualism arrangement of Mother tongue, Language of Immediate Environment and National Language arrangement.

A noticeable feature of Nigeria's language planning model is the adoption of stratified rationalization, whereby one or more majority languages are accorded special promotional status at federal, regional, state and local levels. For instance, while the three major languages are accorded special federal promotional recognition, each of the 36 states of the Federation that shares the attribute of heterogeneous ethno-linguistic nature also promotes

one or more dominant language(s) in official issues such as media broadcast, government functions, education etc. Along with this stratified rationale promotion of some form of endo-glossic bilingualism is the observation of civility in the 'tolerant' and 'accommodation' recognition of the right of other languages to exist and be developed.

CONCLUSION

Linguistic diversity, if properly and patriotically managed, could be enriching. Every language policy and planning effort in a multilingual state like Nigeria must responsibly and reasonably preserve ecological diversity of its polity while at the same time ensuring a proper integration of its co-operate existence as one entity. In line with the benefits of preserving the different languages for the preservation of group identity, preserving of history, profiting from diverse human knowledge and the intrinsic benefits inherent in different languages, Grin (1995) therefore preferred the argument for maintaining variety to the argument of fairness. This is because it appears to offer benefits to all and not just linguistic minorities themselves. It takes away the notion of us versus them. It is, however, necessary that government, if committed with renewed political will to the implementation of the language policy especially in its multi-language and multi-layered provision, the Nigeria integration drive will justifiably be on course.

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