

The Role and Effect of Language and Ethnicity in Nigerians' Political Climate

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Abstract: Language play an unavoidable role in human existence. Language and society are usually in unism. The relationship between the two is deeply rooted in antiquity and so if one does not exist the other will also extinct. Nothing has ever influenced the human race either positively or negatively as language has done. This is so because language is the cardinal vehicle for human interaction and integration in all sphere of endeavor. One such aspect is Politics. The intrinsic link between language and politics has long been recognized by Aristotle who wrote that “man is more of a political animal than bees or any other gregarious animal. Nature as it is often said makes nothing in vain, and man is the only animal whom she endowed with the gift of speech”. It is therefore the cardinal aim of this paper to explicate the impeccable role of language in politics, and the effect of language on politics and social reality. Lastly, a cursory consideration of the influence of language and politics in national development, unity and cohesion will be x-rayed.

Keywords: Language, Political Climate, Ethnicity, Political Cohesion, National Unity.

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Introduction

Language plays an innumerable role in the political space of any nation and thus contribute to national development and cohesion. Since language is the portrait of human thinking. It reflects thought generated.

According to Alexander Caviedes, “the survival of a nation and success of its drives toward nation- state status is predicted on the existence of a language that its people can speak and more importantly, read and write. The diverse functions of language may be classified into distinct functions which include social cultural communication, government decisions, political debate media etc. There is also a close relationship between language and national identity.

Accordingly, Ortmann posits that National Identity is an instrument in a political sense, but it is also regarded as an instrument of domestic policy which allows building and maintaining a consolidated society. It involves loyalty towards the nation or state. Every government needs

the support of public opinion to generate this sense of loyalty. And this can be done only by the existence of an acceptable code of communication which is, language, which will serve as a source of national consciousness.

No doubt, language plays an inestimable role in national growth, development and integration. However, the use of language can either cause cohesion or division among a people, nation or state. It is on this premise that the term language will be x-rayed.

Language Defined

According to Osita, Language is a system of verbalized symbols by which human beings interact. It involves the use of interpretative schemes to comprehend not only what others say but also what they mean. Accordingly, vocal gestures and other human behaviors linked with them provide the basis of human interaction.

Sapir in his serviceable definition of language posited that language is purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, notions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols which are in the first instance auditory.

A critical look at the definition of Sapir shows that it focused critically on the communicative role of language.

Bloch and Trager hinged their definition of language on the social functions of language, when they tersely defined language as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates.

Cooperation in this context can be interpreted to mean communicate, while vocal can replace Sapir's 'auditory'. Therefore, both definitions suggest language as being both homid and vocalized.

Chomsky defined language as a set of (finite or infinite) sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements.

This definition is in tandem with Robins contention that languages are definitely extendable and modified to the changing needs and conditions of the speaker.

It is trite to say that, it is essentially through language that the soul of man comprehends things with the intellect and inspire the mind with desire to articulate, act and to philosophize. It is therefore not in doubt that language has been indispensable in human inventions and we perceive only that for which we have the words.

It is therefore submitted that language is a living and dynamic phenomenon through which people have always found ways of expressing their thoughts.

Language as It Correlates with Nation Building and Power

One cardinal importance of language is that it is a vehicle for nation building. Nation-Building which is the process of constructing a national identity, using the power of state. A process aimed at the unification of the people within the stage so that it remains politically stable and viable in the long run. Nation building can involve the use of propaganda and economic growth. And it is only language that serves as the veritable tool for its achievement.

Language is a powerful human acquisition that combines and require the utilization of more than one of the basic human senses. This shows that language is a complex phenomenon that brings to bear a tremendous power. This power is so strong that it can be demonstrated that language can actually influence the way people think. George Orwell in his novel titled 1984 gave an example of the influence of language on thought, when he used the term ‘double speak’ in representation of language that deliberately disguise, distort, or reverse the meaning of words.....in effect changing what we think about a given subject or thought form.

Language is a veritable tool which engender change, such a change can either be a positive change or a negative one.

Language can be used as a weapon to conquer a nation and can be used also to serve as inspiration for untold billions of people, on wonder the popular linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf did say that language itself shapes a man’s basic ideas.

Knowles (1999) outlined the correlation between language and power. When he noted that “Language is an important factor in the maintenance of power, and an understanding of power relations is important in tracing the history of a language.

The power of language does not only mean language in the service of power, language can also undermine power. Language among other things possesses in itself power of a very special kind. The relationship between language and power is ambivalent.

The ‘phrase power of language’ can be inversed to state “the language of Power which means that all power must utilize language to find expression. Without language the content of power cannot be conveyed. That is command, obedience and sanctions.

Accordingly, it has been posited that in a narrower context, the power of language is used to refer to the instrumentalization of language for the purpose of exercising power. That is the mastery of language itself becomes the source of power.

Dr. Johannes and Thomas stated that ‘the command of language itself becomes a means of power: as political rhetoric and demagogy, as ideology and bedazzlement, as seduction through words, as persuasion. This power of language extends from large political context, from the manner of speaking and also of thinking that dictatorship and totalitarian orders force upon dominated people, to small scenes of everyday life, to the act of seduction of advertising.’

The power of language can also be used to decipher the temperament of a leader since the language of political demagogues and tyrants can be seen through their language. For language is used to transport the power of violence or domination.

This therefore suggest that language used during political campaigns has untold effect on the voting populace.

The Interrelationship between Language and Politics

The relationship between language and politics is of great antiquity and can be traced to the era of great philosophers like Aristotle. Accordingly, Aristotle noted that “persuasion may come through the hearers, when the speech stirs their emotions.” Such can only be possible with the existence of language. The role of language in politics is not novel since many

scholars of immense repute had examined political rhetoric since the era of Aristotle till this date.

This paper will undertake a cursory look at the affective effect of language in politics in this subsection.

Commenting on the affective effect of language generally, Schlesinger noted “we infer the spirit of the nation in great measure from language. Hence world over politicians may use different types of languages and speak about different things in their public comments. Incumbents and challengers alike also differ in the content of their language. Incumbents focuses more on optimism and commonality while challengers are more patriotic and ideological.

A survey of many blogs conducted in the United States of America reveals that newer forms of media, political blogs were found to provide more emotionally driven content especially on the comment section.

Accordingly, Stephen M noted that analysis of the responses to German elections on twitter it was found out that a large amount of the messages posted about the parties competing in the elections included both positive and negative affective response.

In Nigeria, the 2015 election campaigns in Nigeria for the presidential elections employed social media platforms as a veritable means of campaigns. A critical study of the language used reveal that there was both positive and negative responses.

Therefore, it is keenly argued that to achieve a positive affective response the right language must be used and in the right context and environment.

Language is the most ancient persuasive device. The ability to use linguistic resources in accordance with the requirement of each communication type and situation is immeasurable in achieving personal or public goals. To a very large degree our well-being depends directly upon words and gestures if the proper words of greeting are not forth coming we are annoyed, the intention must be exactly right also. This is true even in our mother tongues.

The proper use of language cannot be over emphasized because, it is stated that when occult knowledge is involved, proper words are expected to swing open the door of understanding.

Therefore, it is submitted that to reach the heart of an audience, accurate use of language is no doubt necessary hence it is agreed that if you must connect with your customers and electorates one needs to speak their language and not yours.

Persuasive language is used for many reasons, for example to help to sell products or services to people to accept a view or idea. Politicians often use persuasive techniques to get their audience to agree with their view in a particular topic. Persuasive language is a very powerful tool in getting what one wants.

Many linguists have directed their attention to the study and analysis of the techniques and kinds of language used by politicians to reinforce ideologies in the masses and obtain objectives. Language power may also influence persuasion when ability is relatively high, not as a relevant argument, but by biasing an audience’s evaluation of relevant arguments. This is

because language power is enmeshed in the actual message content. There are few obvious perceptual differences between the style and substance of the message. This makes it more difficult for message recipients to separate the effects of the former from the latter, resulting in a biasing influence.

Several studies have seen that powerless language creates in the audience that the speaker lacks confidence in his or her own argument. This therefore means that attitudes will be less favorable when a speaker uses powerless language. The reverse will then be the case where powerful language is used.

It is noted that elections are very important to the practice of democracy all over the world. This is obvious because it is argued by experts that elections could be best considered as one procedure of aggravating preferences of a particular kind, as it offers choice to the electorates who choose between two or several alternatives. Similarly, elections confer a whole lot of legitimacy on those elected, as such process of political recruitment reflects the wishes and aspiration of the people.

One basic component of electioneering is political campaigns. And usually all political campaigns are hinged on language. Language is the first unavoidable tool deployed for political campaigns.

According to Longe, there are two types of language varieties: dialect and diatype (register). He defines register as “the variety of language according to the use in situations such as the language of advertisement, the language of religious worship, the language of political campaigns. The language of political campaign is usually persuasive and convincing. Szanto, G.H. noted that the language of politics is a lexicon of conflict and drama, of ridicules and reproach, pleading and persuasion, color and biter permeated. A language designed to valor men, destroy some and change the mind of others.” Therefore, the language of politics is multifaceted, and a speaker is expected to pay attention to various aspects of his language such as gender, race, ethnicity, ideology etc.

It is on this premise that it is submitted that for language to perform its persuasive function the language deployed and the content of the message must be convincing and generally acceptable. It must be noted that a campaign message is an important and potent tool that politicians use to express views and feelings to the public with the intention of redirecting and reshaping the electorates opinion to align with theirs. Therefore, the appropriate use of language becomes inevitable and unavoidable.

A critical evaluation of the appropriateness of the political language deployed by politicians in Nigeria reveal that many politicians have deviated from the acceptable standard political language.

According to Emmanuel O. Akubor “instead of political actors sensitizing the political community in relation to making the community consider them as potential and better representatives of the people, they engage more in hate speeches. Thus, in the nation’s political arena, hate speech is fast becoming so pervasive that it is doubtful if there are many Nigerians that are completely from the vice.

Hate speech has espoused by Wikipedia “is a speech that attacks a person or group on the basis of attributes such as gender, ethnic group, religion, race, disability or sexual orientation.

Therefore, it is submitted that hate speech is any expression of discriminatory hate towards people. It does not necessarily entail a particular consequence.

It is clear that there is a nexus between tainted political language now considered as hate speech and electoral conflicts in Nigeria which has in turn fueled ethnic and religious crises and this is fast eroding our national unity.

In addition to the inflammatory speeches during electioneering is the recent clamor by separatist groups and the language deployed toward achieving such ends have indeed eroded national unity. This ugly trend must be nipped on the bud in order to prevent this entity called Nigeria from sliding into extinction.

The Relationship between Language and National Development

One cardinal function of language is that it is the vehicle of thought. Without language thinking cannot take place. All humans' achievements are the direct product of conscious critical thinking. No nation can attain the positive national development without think-tanks. The success and failure of any society is premised on effectiveness of its think-tanks. And the only medium available for this important aspect of man's activity is through language. Therefore, the limit of any language is also the limit of thought. The implication of this is that human thought is only able to think those things which have only been fashioned by language. We recognize the term, national development as product of human thought. However, following our understanding that no thought is possible without language, national development is at the same time the product of language. Thus, the formulation of the term, national development, is made possible simply because as human beings we have the capacity to use language. This point should stand as the first proof of the relationship between language and national development, where language is seen as giving birth to the term, national development. This implies that our understanding of national development rests on language, without whose intervention, the term, national development will be an empty sound signifying nothing.

Language is also the instrumentality for communicating the objectives a nation tends to achieve as national development to the populace. Language is again the medium used to advance to the citizenry the best possible reasons in support of such objectives, projecting in the best possible manner the gains which we expect to draw from the national development objectives. It is also a vehicle for reporting progress made on the national development objectives to the citizenry.

Also, the process of criticizing and assessing of national development are done with the instrumentality of language.

Language and National Unity the Nigerian Question

It is a fact not in dispute that the term national unity is a concept that is not capable of a terse definition. Many scholars have attempted varying forms of definitions. This is so because the term is ambiguous and perceived from diverse points of view by different people.

National unity is defined as solidarity within citizens of a nation, with minimum sectorial practices and close adherence to law and order. National unity however, do not imply homogeneity. It advocates rather, a "community of communities" which respect diversity and share values, experiences and geographical relativity.

National unity is the collective spirit and will of the people that makes a nation. This is essential to the governance and action on behalf of everyone in the nation.

This means that National Unity is a concept that emphasizes, religious, ethnic racial and social diversity.

Putting the Nigerian national unity question in perspective, Mmaduabuchi noted that “National Unity in the Nigerian context is the acceptance of other ethnic components of Nigeria into the nationhood of Nigeria. It emphasizes on the Nigerian dream, agenda and proponents. National Unity in Nigeria talks about being in one accord. Understanding the gains to achieve the unity of Nigeria. It is being able to accept other ethnic groups as one people, irrespective of religion, status, culture and geographical location. One Nigeria means being as one people and making sure everyone shares the true identity of one nation.”

Nigeria is a diverse country with multiplicity of ethnic groups, language, religion, etc. These factors at times tend to constitute divisive elements in the country. But despite the existence of these factors a united Nigeria is a possibility. This is achievable through emphasizing the things that unite rather than the ones that divide. A unified Nigeria is quite important if all citizens are to co-operate towards building a vibrant, strong and self-reliant nation.

In other to achieve this feat language is critical and instrumental in this respect. This is because language is a vehicle for integration and the Nigerian situation attest to this fact. English helped in promoting, nurturing and uniting the Nigerian nation over the years and even now. English can be said to be the language of integration in Nigeria. Amidst the compounding complexity of Nigeria especially in relation to the language question, the only language that indexes the spirit of togetherness is English. More often than not, activities conducted in indigenous languages are reprobated as being ethnic or tribal, except in cultural celebrations or entertainment displays. Therefore, it is submitted to language especially the English language as promoted national unity and cohesion in Nigeria.

Conclusion

From the foregoing the instrumentality of language as it permeates all aspects of human endeavor cannot be over emphasized. Language in no small measure is very important because it can either make a nation or mar it. It serves as an unavoidable variable in national development, integration and cohesion in all spheres of national life without which, our nation and any other nation on the surface of planet earth will extinct. It is therefore, submitted that more needs to be done in promoting language learning to ensure effective use and mastery by all.

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