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Language of Politics in Multilingual and Multi-Ethnic Nations: The Nigerian Example

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Abstract: Multilingual countries are characterized by ethnocentric/hegemonic tendencies when the language employed during political engagements in such countries seek to divide rather than unite the diverse language groups in the country. The focus of this paper is to present to the fore the inevitable need of employing the potency of language in alleviating the various challenges that have been caused by hitherto what the author considers to be negligence for the use of language as a viable means to dousing a riotous and an over-heated polity. This paper also takes a closer look at the language of political interactions as used by politicians to loyal party fans and the public in general. The researcher shall adopt the qualitative research approach and data shall be gotten from major print and broadcast media. The data gotten will be analyzed using the content analysis approach. The results to be gotten from the study is expected to show the role language has played in the politics of multilingual countries.

Keywords: Language, Politics, Ethnocentrism, Multilingualism and Nigeria.

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INTRODUCTION

Language is an integral part of human existence and association. With language, one can better harness the potentials and resources found in one's social and physical environment. Multilingual nations are nations that recognize the usage of more than two language codes for communication. These nations are also multi-ethnic and multicultural. Hence, it is factual to aver that the same socio-political challenges faced by multi ethnic and multicultural societies bedevil multi-lingual nations. Every linguistic group is marked out by the peculiarity of their language. Language is, not only a means of communication, but also a means of purveying an identity, a culture and the persona of the user. Language is without doubt, one of the unique and most complex creation of God, it is all about what we do with it, how we use it to communicate and understand comfort, criticize and manipulate each other. Language is an immensely complicated tool for doing all these things and more.

As Akindele & Adegbite (2005) submit, due to the existence of various ethnic groups in Nigeria with over 400 languages, Nigeria is therefore a multilingual and multicultural speech community where diverse languages and cultures compete. It is also a speech community with not only the indigenous languages but also foreign languages which compete with the indigenous languages and cultures. English is used to

perform official and national functions, while the various indigenous languages are used for interaction in their respective domain.

In the world and in the Nigerian society specifically, the desire for political power is obvious, with every ethnic group clamoring for elective as well as appointed positions in government. To some reasonable extent, the prerogative to appoint lies in the hands of the elected authorities; president, governors, senators, members of the House of Representatives etc. hence the enormous interest to occupy elective offices.

In this paper, the researcher makes a case for the use of language as a veritable tool to ensure tranquility, cohesion and unity across socio-political and ethnic divides during electioneering activities as well as in the reins of governance.

LANGUAGE: MEANING AND FUNCTIONS

Language has been defined variously as the means of human communication. Greenberg (1956) defines language as a set of signals conforming to the rules which constitutes its grammar, or a set of culturally transmitted behavior patterns shared by a group of individuals.

Hall (1968) defines language as the institution whereby human communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral auditory symbols.

Onuoha (2017) defined language as a means by which humans communicate ideas, desires emotions... through complex vocal or written symbols which speakers have acquired.

Track (1995) also observes that language is a tool for showcasing and maintaining identity. In his words, 'Every person needs to maintain an individual identity. One of the most important aspect of that identity is membership of a group, and language provides a powerful way of maintaining and demonstrating group membership. For instance, when one uses the word "Ndewo" to greet an acquaintance in a meeting or gathering, the acquaintance being igbo, automatically assumes the greeter to be a member of the Igbo ethnic group. Same goes for "Sannu" for Hausa and "Eku-ise" for Yoruba it therefore means that language aside functioning communicatively can be used for various reasons such as identity expression, solidarity and peace making (Onuoha, 2012).

Although it has been impossible for linguists to come to a generally acceptable definition of language, one re-assuring factor is that language is the key for human interaction and association as Onuoha (2017) points it, language is indispensable to man. Aside the communicative function of language, it is also a veritable means for human socialization i.e transmission of culture. As captured in the definition of Bloch & Trager (1942).

Jakobson (1960) identifies five functions of language according to which an effective act or verbal communication can be described. They are thus:

- The referential function which corresponds to the factor of context and describes a situation, object or mental state. The descriptive statements of the referential function can consist of both definite description deictic words, example; " the autumn leaves have all fallen now"
- The poetic function which focuses on "the message for its own sake". (the code itself and how it is use) and is the operative function in poetry as well as slogans.
- The Emotive or Expressive function which relate to the addresser (sender) and is best exemplified by interjections and other sound changes that do not alter the denotative or basic meaning of an utterance but do add information about the Addresser's (speaker's) internal state, e.g " Wow, what a view".
- The Conative function which engages the addressee (receiver) directly and its best illustrated by vocatives and imperatives. Example "Tom! Come inside and eat!
- The Phatic function: This is a language for the sake of interaction and is therefore associated with the

others. The phatic function can be observed in greeting and casual discussions of the weather, particular with strangers. It also provides the keys to open, maintain, verify or close the communication channel. "Example "Hello?" "ok?" Hymn" "Bye".

Omoniyi (2012) posits that at the societal level, language functions appear to be more fixed ... especially in multilingual contexts. It includes roles relating to official use of languages being used as a national language, media language (language for wider communication)..., national identity, solidarity and for cohesiveness of citizens.

It is therefore important to note that language, if not properly harnessed, also has ability to destabilize a people. Language can make or destroy a people, group or a nation at large. For instance, in Nigeria, language is one of the major reasons determining the behavior of different people in the political affairs of the country. Some languages sometimes regarded as "major languages" are rated above others, such that it is believed that the leadership of Nigeria should only come from such specific ethnic groups and the others regarded as "minority languages" should be only be follower. Language can be a tool for unification as well as diversification. It can be used to calm tension, as well cause chaos. Language is a two-edged sword. Its impact is determined by the user

Politics

The term 'politics' like 'language', has no generally acceptable definition. This, according to (Modebadze, 2010), makes politics a loaded term. There are many definitions of politics.

Heywood (2007) conceptualizes politics as follows:

- **Politics as Art of Government:** Here, politics is the activity of making and enforcing collective decisions. The enforcement is done through state structures and officers. The state has the monopoly of power to compel reactions. In these circumstances, it was natural to understand politics as the study of the state. Until the Second World War, the state served as the chief organizing idea of politics.
- **Politics as Public Affairs:** The meaning of politics can be stretched beyond the narrow realm of government to a broader conception of 'public life' or 'public affairs', because of its 'public' character.
- **Politics as Compromise & Consensus (Study of Interaction among Interest Groups):** According to this, politics is seen as an act of conflict and cooperation among individuals and various groups in the society to secure values like liberty, equality, justice, welfare etc., and to organize and use a public power for this purpose. Politics is therefore an interaction between man & society in resolving conflicts through conciliation and negotiation

instead of violence. Both the liberal and Marxist views of politics study it as a part of this social process. As a result of this, non-formal institutions like pressure groups, public opinion, interest groups, political parties etc. became the subjects of politics.

- **Politics as The Study of Power:** After rejecting politics as the study of state as insufficient, modern thinkers tried to find the axis of politics and they found it in the concept of power. The new understanding of politics was that it is a struggle to share or influence the distribution of power, whether between states or among the groups within the state. There are two advantages to study politics from the point of view of power- firstly, it focuses attention on process rather than on legal abstractions of the state. Secondly, this approach pays greater attention to man as the basic unit of analysis. Politics became directly concerned with the needs, interests and goals of men that give rise to power-relationship among them and ultimately lead to a public policy.

This paper corroborates the view of Heywood (2007) in conceptualizing politics as the study of power.

Ethno-Centric Politics in Nigeria: History and Overview

It is very possible to interpret Nigerian politics in ethnic terms. Nnoli (1980) aver that ethnocentrism is attitudinal in form and perceptual in context. It represents the subjective dimension of ethnic behavior. The members of a group are ethnocentric when they are proud and consequently are inward looking. The ethnocentric bias in Nigeria politics is not new.

From the cradle stage of politics in Nigeria, every ethnic group desired to create a platform from which they can lay claims and fight for power. This, I believe is occasioned by the fact that prior to the coming of the colonial masters, every ethnic group (in their various clusters) was led by an indigenous person; one that is from their ethnic group. Being subject to someone other than a member of their ethnic group becomes more like a herculean, if not impossible task.

Eyo Ita (1945), while analyzing the unsavory trend of ethnic fixated politics posits that “the greatest need of Nigerians today is to become a community ... to evolve a national selfhood.” In his view, to be able to take power from the colonial masters, the different ethnic groups must unite and do away with their “clannish” sentiments.

Although one cannot lay claims on the level of ethnocentrism before the coming of the colonial masters, it is pertinent to say that politics in Nigeria ushered in a high level of ethnic intolerance among the indigenous ethnic groups. The aim of this sub is to as much as possible, trace the occurrence of ethnocentrism and ethnic animosity in Nigerian politics.

In 1922, the members of the legislative council were to be elected and not nominated. This was made possible by the constitution introduced by Sir High Clifford, the then Governor General of Nigeria. On this new development, Herbert Macaulay formed the first political party in Nigeria, the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP). In 1938 elections, the NNDP was defeated by the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM), a nationalist movement that was formed in 1936. Branches of the movement were opened in key cities and location across Nigeria, giving rise to over 10,000 members and nearly 20 provincial branches. Notwithstanding the good intentions of the movement, it was struck by the inevitable arrow of clannishness. Nnamdi Azikiwe, an executive member and Ernest Ikoli, a founding member of the NYM had a clash of what can be described as economic and professional interest, leading to the resignation of Nnamdi Azikiwe from the executive of the NYM.

After the resignation of Nnamdi Azikiwe from the NYM, a tussle for presidency of the movement ensued between Ernest Ikoli, the then president and Samuel Akinsanya, the then Vice president of the Movement. Ernest Ikoli emerged victorious and the defeated Akinsanya joined forces with Nnamdi Azikiwe. On this ground, many Igbo people resigned their membership of the movement and consequently, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) was formed. Many scholars of political history believe that the quarrel between the major political figures. Nnamdi Azikiwe of the NCNC and Chief Obafemi Awolowo of the NYM was the beginning of irreconcilable problems in Nigeria.

The Awolowo – Azikiwe fight led to the metamorphosis of the EOO (Egbe Omo Oduduwa) group into full-fledged political group, Action Group (AG) in 1948. Before now the EOO was a Yoruba cultural group established in 1945. It is no hidden fact that the primary aim of the Action group (AG) led by Awolowo was to ensure that Azikiwe and his party, NCNC, did not take control of political power in the western region.

Northern Politicians seeing the outcome of the recent trends in politics in the country and for the fact that in 1950, a draft of the new constitution was expected in 1951, they also wanted to be prepared to handle power. Therefore, they also transformed the 1949-established cultural group JMA (Jamiyyar Mutannen Arewa) to a political party known as Northern Peoples’ Congress (NPC).

With this on ground, the three major ethnic nationalities had political structures to help those lay claims and to hold to political power.

According to Iheonu (2011), ethnicity was fully entrenched in the Nigerian socio political landscape when members of the western house of assembly who won their elections using the NCNC platform, decamped

to the Action Group (AG), a political party under which they now feel will protect their interest more. This cross-carpeting reduced the number of NCNC representatives, and made it impossible for Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe to become leader of the house.

One major cue one can find in the ethno-political issue is the seeming comfort politicians find in political parties formed by politicians from their linguistic or ethnic extraction. This situation of politics being played among ethnocentric lines is very much valid in today’s Nigerian political terrain, where politicians defect from one political party to another. APGA (All Progressive Grand Attained) is seen as a pro-Igbo party with over 70% membership from the Igbo speaking extraction and the APC (All Progressive Change) party is mostly comprised of Hausa and Yoruba speaking politicians.

Multi-Ethnicity, Multilingualism and Multiculturalism

It is very unlikely, if not impossible to talk about a multiethnic society without being faced with the concepts of multilingualism and multiculturalism. A society is said to be multiethnic when it comprises of several ethnic groups. Most African nations, Nigeria especially, perfectly fits into this mold of a multiethnic, multilingual and a multicultural nation. Although we cannot draw a one-to-one relationship between language and ethnicity in terms of the number of ethnic groups being equal to the number of languages (for instance, Nigeria has over 450 languages and over 300 ethnic groups), it is at the same time factual that there is always a coincidence between language and ethnicity.

Wolf (2002) explains that “by their language behavior, speakers identify themselves as members of the same group as much as they are identified by others as belonging to a different ethnic group. This view is

corroborated by Ndimele (2008) who avers that people from different ethnic backgrounds often speak different languages or varieties of languages, making a language a reliable criterion for ethnic identity.

Multilingualism refers to a linguistic situation whereby more than two languages exist in a speech community. This speech community may be a group of people, state or a country. Crystal (2011) agrees that it is a term used in sociolinguistic to refer to a speech community which makes use of two or more languages, and then to the individual speakers who have this ability in contrasts to monolingual situation.

POLITICS AS DOMAIN IN LANGUAGE USE

In multilingual societies languages are often said to occupy different domains. Domains are social constructs that affect and determine the use of language. The participants and setting form a major criteria for determining the domain and the language to be used. The concept of domains was introduced by Fishman in the 1970s and has been influential in the study of multilingual societies. According to Fishman (1972), domains are “*institutional contexts and their congruent behavioral occurrences*”. These contexts, or domains, are differentiated by the types of interactions that occur in them and by the interlocutors who participate in them.

Ndimele (2008) explains that every language is characterized by social dimensions. For her, these social dimensions (domains) form the basis for the use of language in a society. She describes the setting for language use to be either official or unofficial. Below is her table for the domains of language use, especially, in Nigeria (with some inputs made by me).

Table 1. Domains of language use. (Italicized words are my inputs)

Domains	Participants	Setting	Languages
Family	<i>Nuclear and extended family members</i>	Homes	MT, ENG, LIE
Friendship	Peer groups, friends	Homes, Streets, Sports ground etc.	MT, NP
Religion	Priests, Imams, Worshippers	Churches, Mosques, <i>Shrines</i>	MT, ENG, ARB
Education	Teachers, Students	Schools	ENG, LIE
Business/workplace	Traders, workers, <i>customers, employers and employees</i>	Markets, Shops, Offices	MT, LIE, NP

Culled from Ndimele (2008)

Key: MT: Mother Tongue, NP: Nigerian Pidgin, ENG: English Language. LIE: Language of Immediate Environment. ARB: Arabic

She further asserts that at the societal level, domains become more encompassing and can basically be viewed from three points which are intra group, inter group and international communication.

Looking at the submissions made above, one is inclined to agree that politics is a social construct that affects the peculiarity of the language adopted in. Akinwotu (2018) agrees that like every domain of language use, the language of political discourse is unique. It is characterized by specific features that

distinguish it from other domains of language use such as law and religion.

Drawing insights from the schema provided by Ndimele (2008) above, we can as well have the following:

Domains	Participants	Setting	Languages
politics	Politicians, party loyalists, electorates, journalists (general public)	Campaigns, media briefs, party conventions	ENG, NPE, LIE, MT.

The next sub, an analysis of the language of political engagements will be done to further establish the consideration.

Style, Content and Delivery of Political Speeches

The Nigerian political landscape is fraught with dynamics in style of political speech presentation. Every politician uses language in a style that not only helps him convey a particular bias to his loyalists, but also, reflects a sense of responsibility to the members of the society. Another major key that necessitates the language used by politicians is the need to elicit the necessary *empathy* from their voters (the general public). Our stand corroborates the view of Akinwotu (2018) who avers that politicians employ a number of strategies in communicating their intentions to the electorate. While some are propagandistic in nature, others are purely stylistic and persuasive. Language presents its users with a wide variety of linguistic options from which they can make choices to effectively communicate their intentions. Such choices are distinct and describable from the style of a particular language user.

It is important to how ever note that the major data drawn in this study is gotten from campaign speeches of politicians. This is because campaigns form the major basis and avenue where politicians meet with the members of the society directly. And they, by their use of language influence the electorates to *dance to their tune*. The language of political campaign as a variety of language use is intended to pass the needed information to the electorate with a view to convincing or appealing to them. It is usually laden with emotion and has the effect of causing the electorate to have a change of mind on an issue (Omozuwa & Ezejideaku, 2008).

Some major themes derivable from the campaign speeches of politicians include:

Empathy

The use of empathy is replete in the language used by politicians. Politicians use their different backgrounds as a tool to elicit apathy from their listeners. This is so because the average Nigerian tends to relate the past of one’s life as a yardstick to measure if such one can easily understand the plight of the common man. They narrate stories of how they suffered as children in poverty. The excerpt below is culled from the speech given by Atiku Abubakar, a former Vice President, Federal Republic of Nigeria, on the 24th of September, 2014 on the occasion of his Declaration of Intent to seek

the Nomination of the All Progressive Congress (APC) to Contest the 2015 Presidential Election, at the Yar’Adua Centre, Abuja.

“My story is similar to the story of many of my generation. I was born in a southern Adamawa village to a nomadic trader and his wife who was a farmer. I grew up as a shepherd and a farm boy. I was the only child of my parents. My father had to be imprisoned by Local Council authorities before he could allow me to go to school. At 11, I lost my father and my whole world fell apart. With the help of my mother, other relatives and friends of my father, I pulled myself up from this doldrums and despair. I faced the future with uncommon confidence, hope and faith in God. I am where I am today because I did not give up. I struggled to acquire a good education because the opportunity was made available.”

He adopts the same pattern on the 19th of November, 2018, while officially launching his policy document on social media as the PDP Presidential candidate. Below is the excerpt of his speech:

“I started out as an orphan selling firewood on the streets of Jada in Adamawa, but God, through the Nigerian state, invested in me and here I am today. If Nigeria worked for me, I owe it as my duty to make sure that Nigeria also works for you, your family and your friends”

The same story to draw empathy from the public was also narrated by Goodluck Ebele Jonathan in his 2010 while declaring his intentions to run for the office of the President. It is fro this speech that the popular “president without shoes” slogan started. Below is an excerpt of his speech.

“I was not born rich, and in my youth, I never imagined that I would be where I am today, but not once did I ever give up. Not once did I imagine that a child from Otuoke, a small village in the Niger Delta, will one day rise to the position of President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. I was raised by my mother and father with just enough money to meet our daily needs. In my early days in school, I had no shoes, no school bags. I carried my books in my hands but never despaired; no car to take me to school but I never despaired. There were days I had only one meal but I never despaired. I walked miles

and crossed rivers to school every day but I never despaired. Didn't have power, didn't have generators, studied with lanterns but I never despaired.

In spite of these, I finished secondary school, attended the University of Port Harcourt, and now hold a doctorate degree”

The following is another example of the use of one's poor background to elicit empathy. It was said by Chris Okotie, a Presidential candidate of the Fresh Party. *“You know say my papa no be rich man, my papa no get money, and I no how him struggle take send me go school, and now when I don go school and you know say I sabi oyibo well well. When I become president everybody for Ajegunle go fit go school. Una no say una be my own people”* (Sunday Punch March 11, 2007, 14).

Assurance

Politicians use statements that assure the public of their resolve to make a better society out of the present. Just like their counterparts in other countries, this theme seems to be the major content of their speech. These assurances are made in the form of promises to the electorates. The following excerpts are statements that bear hope and assurance to the public of the willingness of the politicians to change the narrative of the polity. In Goodluck Ebele Jonathan's speech, while addressing Nigerians in Lagos, he promised them saying:

“I will build universities for you, I will build secondary schools for you, I will build primary schools for you.”

Atiku Abubakar used the same assurances in his 2014 campaign speech, saying,

“I have what it takes to bring people together and turn things around for the better... We will create a country that will truly be the pride of the black race. We will create a new Nigeria for all Nigerians.”

In 2018, he repeated same saying

“Atiku Abubakar is 100% for 100% of Nigerians, 100% of the time... If elected President, I will be pro-active in attracting investments and supporting the 50 million small and medium-scale enterprises across Nigeria ... I will also give the opportunity for anyone in Nigeria to have their say on national television ... I appeal to you to join me on this journey towards a better life for all Nigerians”.

Threats

The fear to lose the election is one that can make politicians do the unexpected. In 2014, the presidential candidate of the APC, Muhammadu Buhari was quoted to have made inflammatory statement when he said that:

“If what happened in 2011 (alleged rigging) should again happen in 2015, by the grace of God, the dog and the baboon would all be soaked in blood.”

CONCLUSION

The value of language in human association and engagements cannot be overemphasized. Language avails humans with the possibility of communicating ideas, transmitting values and beliefs, feelings and goals from one person to another and from one generation to another. In the Nigerian political terrain, the desire and need for power by different ethnic groups and the attendant consequences creates tension in the polity. This study concerned itself with the way politicians now exploit the divisive tendencies of these ethnic nationalities, employing language that arouse ethnic sentiments rather than unite the different entities. It is obvious that the difference in languages have further encouraged the uprising of linguistically based groups which have more personal goals than the national goal for unity, cohesion and development. This paper establishes that language is imperative to achieving stability, interethnic tolerance, peaceful and mutual co-existence, depending on how language is employed and used.

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