LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND CULTURE IN

NIGERIA

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Chapter Twenty-One

Language, Culture and Local Government Administration in Nigeria
by
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ABSTRACT
This study describes the role of language as an agent of effective communication in local government affairs in Nigeria. First, the paper establishes the relationship between language and culture and describes language as the most vital but neglected tool for cultural development. Second, with a conception of the local government as a cultural, albeit politico-cultural institution in the Nigerian nation, the paper then describes the patterns of language choice for communication in local government affairs in Nigeria.

The paper specifies the domains of language use in local government affairs in Nigeria and observes the patterns and problems of language choice for effective communication in these domains. Then adopting some principles of bilingualism-biculturalism as a theoretical base, the paper suggests ways of promoting efficient language choices in order to enhance efficient local government administration.

The paper suggests that for external communication the English language should be used for local-local, local-state and local-federal intergovernmental interactions. However, at the internal level, the indigenous language(s) should be used for official and public functions, while the room is also created for alternation between languages in cosmopolitan areas. Furthermore, interpretation and translation are useful interlingual facilities that can enhance the projection and modernization of languages in external communication and also in cosmopolitan internal communication.

From the bilingual-bicultural perspective, it is observed that both the indigenous and second languages have vital roles to play in the evolvement of cultural identity at the local government level in Nigeria. However, the primacy of mother tongues must be recognized.

1. Introduction

Language is widely-recognised as an instrument of communication among human beings. Its role for individual and social development has never been in doubt. In developed countries of the world the capacities and potentials of language have been appropriately utilized in the exploration, discovery, possession and extension of knowledge. In contrast, most African nations have failed to appreciate the need to develop their languages and also utilize them for development. African governments have consistently failed to accord deserved attention to languages when formulating policies and programmes for national development. Yet, as the only creative property unique to human beings, the only road to thinking (Sapir 1921) and the key to the heart of people, their knowledge and treasures (Engholm 1965), language remains the universal endowment which human beings share for encoding, decoding and pooling together individual capacities for development (Afolayan 1994).

Meanwhile, language does not exist in a vacuum. It is as a vehicle of culture that language functions as an instrument of human development. Besides, a particular language is itself also an institution within a culture where it co-occurs with other institutions and activities shared by the people (Brosnahan 1962). Thus, a discussion on the development of African nations through their language resources has to incorporate language and other cultural resources such as politics, social life, arts and music, economics, education and science and technology before it can be of social relevance. In other words, linguistic and cultural development have a symbiotic relationship, whereby one cannot be pursued separately from the other, when discussing the (sociocultural) affairs of a nation.

Culture in a wide sense refers to the way of life of the people in a society (Harding and Riley 1986). It refers to the totality of the peoples's shared experiences in diverse areas of life, occupation, religion, politics and so on. Most aspects of culture are assimilated unconsciously, simply by living in a particular society, and most of them are directly related to language in some way. Since the key to a culture is language, it then becomes important to

know the language of a culture in order to understand the culture. Also, the knowledge of a language and of the culture itself will be required to tackle problems that arise from various aspects of a particular culture.

In this study we shall consider how language relates with an aspect of culture, viz. **Politics. Precisely, the political institution to be discussed is the local government.** Our objectives are (i) to identify some of the problems militating against the efficient use of language in local government administration in Nigeria and (ii) to suggest remedies to such problems. Based on the assumption that an integration of knowledge of the appropriate use(s) of language(s) with the knowledge of a substantial amount of people's thoughts, beliefs and experiences in local government affairs is crucial to effective local government management, an attempt is made to present a framework of language use for effective communication in local governments in Nigeria. By language use here, we mean the choice of a language or choices of languages for communication at different levels of interaction in the institution. We shall be concerned with the most general transactions that take place in local governments as autonomous units in a democratic system.

2. Domains of Language use in Local Government Administration

Obafemi Awolowo (cited by Adegbonmire 1978) describes the local government (LG) as serving the dual purposes of being the foundation on which the state and federal governments rest, and the agencies through which the state governments, and occasionally the federal government as well, touch the lives of the people most intimately. Awolowo (in Adegbonmire 1978:10) says more:

> The local government ward is --- small enough for *its entire membership* to *meet and confer* regularly, and for a conscientious *councillor* to have personal *contact with every man or woman, boy or girl*. Furthermore, local governments provide so many arenas for *training in public management* for and afford opportunities for *participation in public life* to, many more public-spirited citizens --- (Emphasis ours).

From the description and quotation above, the following domains of communication can be identified:
(i)   federal/state personnel touch people
(ii)   entire LG membership meets
(iii)   **councillor (LG personnel) contacts people**
(iv)   training (of public officers) in public management
(v)   citizens participate in public life.
For convenience, however, we shall classify the above contacts under two major subheadings thus:

a.   Inter-local governmental affairs, concerned with federal, state and inter-local governmental relations;

b.   Intra-local governmental affairs, concerned with communal, official and personal relations within each local government. The patterns of relations between people in the above contacts are described briefly below.

2.1 Federal, State and Local Governmental Relations

The overriding character of a democratic polity is emergence of a polycentric political order (Ostrom 1995, Olowu 1996). In this order power is not only divided horizontally between the executive, legislative and judicial arms, it is also divided vertically to regions and localities to reflect the character of a civil society. Olowu (1996) observes that in the course of Nigerian history, governmental institutions have undergone different forms of transition. In the pre-colonial times, the basic forms are those of either stateless societies (in which each community existed as a separate political entity) or societies with some form of centralized authority. In the colonial times the indirect system of government was practised in which local chieftains bore responsibilities for governing their people on behalf of the colonial government; but this later gave way to more democratic forms of federal, state and local divisions as the years went by. Although the military rulership of post-colonial Nigeria

introduced further reforms in local government administration (Gboyega · 1995), local governments operated more like the field administrators of an increasingly centralized federal government rather than self-governing structures. The political leadership of local governments under this arrangement paid allegiance to both the federal and state governments who controlled the revenue instead of people of the communities they served.

In his consideration of the political situation in Nigeria Adegbite (1999), from a bilingual-bicultural viewpoint, suggests two political levels of governance for Nigeria: the local government level which caters for community interests, and the federal level which links all local governments together within the nation. Although interactions may also take place voluntary between or among local governments, such should be left to the discretion of participating local governments. But the national government may find it convenient to have a limited number of administrative (non-political) centres to coordinate official activities between the nation and local governments. Such centres may be called states, regions or zones as the case may be. While enough local government territories should be created to satisfy the valid demands of communal groups, democratically-elected representatives of various local government areas are to form the national assembly, to legislate on national affairs.

2.2   Intra-local Governmental Relations

The local government is normally conceived as a sociological unit in which there is group solidarity. All citizens at this level have the opportunity to participate actively in the affairs of their communities, i.e legislative, executive, judicial, law enforcement, civil and citizenship. Broadly, three kinds of communication relations can be identified at the intra-local governmental level, viz-personal, communal and official.

The customs of many Nigerian people allow them to participate individually and collectively in public affairs, Thus there was no need for Western education or government propaganda to encourage them to take part in so far as they were permitted to do so. Margaret Peil (1976) writes, for example, that a citizen may participate in politics by finding out about government activities and discussing them with his/her friends. S/he may vote in national and /or local elections, contact government officers or take part in demonstrations in a direct attempt to influence government action. S/he may engage in violence because s/he sees no other way of making the government respond to his/her demands; or s/he may actually run for office himself/herself.

Communal communication events are inevitable in local government communities, and these take place whenever the need arises. At such events, e.g. during town or city celebrations, local festivals and ceremonies, at war time, and on other special occasions, traditional rulers are heads, while the local government chairmen, traditional chiefs and prominent citizens play leadership roles.

The constitutionally-recognized unit of official communication at the local government level is the secretariat. The major official transactions which take place under this unit include (i) the holding of board meetings, (ii) local-external governmental transactions, (iii) staff-staff transactions and (iv) staff-public transactions. Meanwhile, the staff of the local government is made up of both elected and appointed officers. Also, the 1989 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Section 8) requires traditional rulers to play advisory roles in council boards in their areas. In view of this, Aborisade and Mundt (1995:4) comment that "the presence of traditional authorities alongside institutions based on election and civil service appointment has introduced unique tensions and complexities into Nigerian local politics."

3.   Problems of Language Choice in LG Administration

The patterns of code choice in communication situations in Nigeria are determined by social factors pertaining to the topic, purpose, participants and setting (Fishman 1972, Mkilifi 1978 and Goke Pariola 1987). The findings of Goke- Pariola (1987) show that the attitudes of participants to the different languages in the nation's repertoire are responsible for the fluidity in the languages and dialects they use or will prefer to use on particular occasions. Although at the individual face-to-face level of communication, it is a healthy exercise for participants to choose languages or dialects to reflect participants relationship, topic, purpose and setting, inter-group (i.e. public, inter-ethnic and external) communication may be regulated from time to time based on changes in group attitudes and ideologies. In view of the current

nationalistic posture of Nigerians and their interest in evolving and promoting cultural identity in Nigeria, what changes in patterns of intergroup communication do we expect at the local government level in Nigeria?

Three major problems of code choice can be identified. First is the under-utilization of the mother tongue. Second is the 'outuse' of English; that is to use English when such is not necessary. Third is the under-use of code alternation and interpretation/ translation in public and official communication. The mother tongue is under-utilized if a person does not participate in public communication simply because the person cannot speak or write in English. The limited mass media further disenchant the monolingual speaker/writer from making contributions since the outlet for such contributions is limited. Also, for this reason, a person who is bilingual in a mother tongue and English may prefer to communicate publicly in the latter even if he/she is not as fluent in it as in the mother tongue. This ought not to be so.

English may be outused if for example a semi-literate person insists on speaking the language on a public occasion despite his/her inadequate mastery of it. Such an effort may be perceived by the speaker as status-boosting, whereas it is indeed a portrayal of ignorance. Mukoro (1996) comments that this farcical communicative behaviour alienates, instead of endearing, council, workers from the teeming masses they are to serve. In a like manner, a traditional ruler or chieftain who speaks English at a local gathering is a misnomer, irrespective of his or her bilingual competence in both languages. It is melodramatic for such a custodian of tradition in a heavy traditional attire, or even full regalia, to speak to his/her local people in a foreign language.

In a cosmopolitan community the use of code alternation and interpretation or translation is inevitable. Undoubtedly, the dominant mother tongue (s) in the community are more prominently used in public and official communication and even codes are alternated or switched when necessary. However, the use of interpretation/translation by selves or professionals has economic and social advantages. Indeed, the inability to utilize this interlingual facility has contributed to the failure of indigenous languages to modernize, despite their long existence side by side with English. Ihenacho (1981) observes, for Example, that the amount of interpreting work done in Nigeria grossly under-represents the need for it in such a multilingual nation. **Needless to say that translation is also not** adequately utilized as a tool of cultural transfer, adaptation and development.

4.   Bilingualism-biculturalism and Language Choice in LGA.
4.1   Some fundamental principles of bilingualism-biculturalism

Bilingualism-biculturalism is a terminology integrating language, and cultural experience in the resolution of socio-cultural problems. The term is, however, only one of three terms, the other two being monolingualism-monoculturalism and multilingualism-multiculturalism (Afolayan 1994, Adegbite 1998). In contrast to the other two varieties, bilingualism-biculturalism recognises the limitations of monolingual-multicultural experience which relies only on one predominant language and culture, regarded as mother tongue linguaculture, and multilingual-multicultural experience which relies on uncoordinated existence of several mother tongue, second and foreign languages and cultures.

The bilingual-bicultural variety can be effectively utilized for national or local governmental development for the following reasons:

a.   It recognizes the rich resources of indigenous languages which serve as mother tongues of communities in a nation;

b.   It recognises another functional linguaculture which complements the mother tongue lingua cultures above--this second linguaculture is identified as 'second language';

c.   It can, in view of its diglossic orientation, operate in a multidialectal monolingual community to properly assign roles to local and standard dialects; it can also in view of its integrative property operate in a multilingual society to pool resources of languages hitherto kept apart together;

d. Lastly, the variety is sufficient for national development, but it does not disallow the individual(s) from developing self (ves) through learning local adjacent and foreign languages other than their mother tongues and the second language.

In the direction of the second part of 'c' above a view that recognizes African countries as bilingual-bicultural, based on societal roles (Stewart 1968) which languages perform (e.g mother tongue--Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, etc-- and English in Nigeria), would seem more positive for development than that which recognizes the countries as multilingual-multicultural based on individual personal or ethnic roles.

As a corollary of the reasons above, the bilingual-bicultural variety operates on four principles, viz.

a. cultural tradition and originality, deriving mainly from mother tongue experience;

b. cultural modernity, deriving from wider experience gained through a second language of Western origin;

c. cultural elaboration, deriving from the integration of mother tongues experiences or mother tongue(s) and second language experiences.

The above principles would provide the basis for cultural development which, very briefly, here refers to the evolvement and promotion of cultural identity for a group or nation through the process of cultural origination, cultural modernity and cultural elaboration. How do the above principles apply to the choice of language(s) for efficient communication in local governments in Nigeria? We can see this from our suggestions below.

4.2 Language Choice for Efficient Communication in LGA

Two major levels of communication are suggested here for efficient communication at the local government level. These are the external and internal levels of communication. For external communication between the local and federal government, we suggest that the language of communication be English. It is thus expected that all LG representatives at the federal level and all officials connected with federal administration are efficient bilinguals in their mother tongue(s) and English.

The conditions above also apply to communication between local and state government, where the state is multilingual-multiethnic; and in inter-local governmental relations, where the LG citizens speak different mother tongues. However, communication between unilingual LGs or between LG and state in a unilingual state can be held in the mother tongue or English as participants may desire. Meanwhile, in exceptional cases, interpreting facilities should be made available to mother tongue monolinguals from local government communities who may want to contribute to national issues.

5. Conclusion

In our discussion in this paper, we have been able to suggest that a bilingual-bicultural principle should guide the choice of languages for efficient communication in local government administration in Nigeria. The study recognizes two basic levels: the external and internal. At the external level, the suggestion is made that English be used for LG-LG, LG-state and LG-federal interactions. At the internal level, the indigenous language(s) should be used for official and public functions, while the room is also created for alternation between languages in cosmopolitan areas. The paper also suggests that interpretation and translation are useful interlingual facilities that can enhance the projection and modernization of languages in external communication and also in cosmopolitan internal communication.

From the bilingual-bicultural perspective, it is observed that both the indigenous and second languages have vital roles to play in the evolvement of a cultural identity at the LG level in Nigeria. However, the primacy of mother tongues must be recognised.

In all forms of internal communication in the Nigeria. However, the primacy of mother tongues must be recognised.

In all forms of internal communication in the LG community we suggest that the mother tongue be used. Concessions can only be made in the event that non-speakers of

the mother tongue are around. Then, alternation of codes can be permitted while interpretation is made available as a code of mediation between participants.

There is no doubt that the mother tongue has great relevance for cultural development and stability in a local government. All hands must therefore be on deck to develop it through its consistent and efficient use in personal, public and official communication. In the meantime, both the LG administration and public-spirited individuals in a community have a duty to promote the use of their mother tongue through the creation of an effective educational system as well as constructive and progressive mass communication media.

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