

ETHNO-LINGUISTIC LOYALTY AND THE PARADOX OF SUSTAINABLE GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The success or failure of governance of a nation lies on the tone and collaborative capacity of language used. This work seeks to unveil ethno-linguistic loyalty and the paradox of language for sustainable development in a multi-ethnic Nigerian society. Drawing on social psychology theory of social identity and the concept of linguistic fragmentation, the theory examines how people define themselves and perceive others based on group membership, while the concept of linguistic fragmentation argues that language can create communication gaps and hinder effective governance in nation building. The framework is deemed proper for this study because it argues that extreme attachment to a people's linguistic group and language can lead to discrimination and tensions among different linguistic groups, making it challenging for a nation to work together towards common goals. Through analysis of various happenings and instances in Nigeria and other parts of the world, this study examines how language can impact on a sustainable national development. In furtherance, it discuss the challenges that arise from ethno-linguistic loyalty and lack of dialogue, as well as make recommendations for effectively managing and promoting linguistic diversity within a nation. Ultimately, the essay highlights the importance of embracing linguistic diversity while simultaneously fostering national identity.

Key words: Ethno-linguistic, Loyalty, Paradox, Language, Nation Building, Sustainable Development

Introduction

Language is a potent instrument of communication that has ability to penetrate into any known human society, either for positive or negative developments, (Inegbe, 2024). But however, the paradox of language lies in its dual nature, acting as both a unifying and dividing element in society. In Nigeria, ethno-linguistic loyalty has penetrated into the fabrics of governance either as a phenomenon of ethnic cohesion or as an obstacle to sustainable national development. This is because it has resources that can penetrate human realities, positively or negatively.

As observed in Inegbe (2024), language can foster national unity by promoting understanding, cohesion, shared cultural heritage, and can as well lead to conflicts, exclusion and even pose detrimental effects on a nation's development. But, as rightly pointed out in Mboho & Effiong, (2024), the output in nation building, in most cases are determined by the choice of linguistic codes adopted and used by the leaders of such nations. The language activities of leadership determine the future of any nation. Arthur Koestler, cited in Inegbe (2024) observes that "wars are not fought for territory, but for words, and that man's deadliest weapon is language. This is because; man is susceptible to being hypnotized by slogans, as he is to infectious diseases. And where there is an epidemic, the group mind takes over". This is an indication that language is used in diverse ways to achieve specific goals: positive or negative, depending on the choice of linguistic codes.

According to Isayev (1977), language is a nation's most important asset that drives the needed national integration for development to thrive. It can be deduced here that no nation survives without a common linguistic basis for citizens to express social identities. One of the major problems plaguing the sustainable governance, according to Ekpo, Nkanta and Effiong, (2023), is ethno-linguistic loyalty, which consistently impedes the integration of diverse communities, exacerbate intergroup tensions, and hinder social cohesion. Inegbe (2016) succinctly noted here, that language is a medium through which a people's times, dreams and condition, ideas, frustrations, lacks and needs are communicated. Nigeria is linguistically diverse with multiple languages spoken within its boundaries which had created communication gaps and hindered effective governance.

In view of the communication deficiency plaguing the nation, study seek to explore the role of identity formation and the paradox of language in the socio-political development in Nigerian-state.

Literature Review

Ethnic Identity Politics and Linguistic Loyalty

Ethno-linguistic loyalty refers strong and steadfast attachment and commitment which individuals have towards their languages and speech communities which sometimes viewed as ethnic identity politics (Mboho and Effiong 2024). The multilingual status of Nigeria has given tremendous rise to ethnic politics. At present, identification of an individual is done based on ethnic group and linguistic patterns, (Inegbe, 2024). This kind of ethnic group relations based on linguistic patterns signal a negative dimension to national development. This is because the linguistic diversity which supposed to be a reflection of a nation's rich cultural tapestry, showcasing the range of ethnicities, histories, and traditions within its borders is however, suspicion-laden, laced with fear and mutual hatred, and had sometimes become a source of tension and division. According to Enang, Urijzan and Udoka, (2012), the different languages spoken within the Nigerian nation have, unfortunately, created barriers, hindering effective communication and impeding the development of shared national discourse. This has constrained social mobility, limited economic opportunities, and perpetuated inequalities in the nation's polity. Linguistic loyalty, evident in speech communities in Nigeria, plays a significant role in shaping social dynamics and influencing the nation's development and economic growth, (Udoka, 2006).

Language, in the words of Enang, Eshiet and Udoka, (2013), also acts as a marker of identity, promoting cultural heritage and establishing a sense of belonging. Since linguistic loyalty is rooted in culture and identity of a linguistic group, adherence to a particular linguistic group often prioritize the needs of in-members over others. However, when this loyalty becomes extreme, it poses challenges and hinders a nation's development with ethnic consciousness superseding national values.

Ethnicity and Federal Character Policy

Ethno-linguistic loyalty is reflected in virtually all aspects of life and institutions in Nigeria, such as voting during election, banking, security agencies, education, issuance of license for the importation of goods, appointment into political offices, employment, and general government patronage by the citizens. Things are no longer done on the basis of merit; people in positions of authority choose to put their linguistic groups first, before considering other speech groups. This became worse with the Federal Government's establishment of what is referred to as the "Federal Character Commission (FCC)", a commission which has earned for itself the ignominious reputation of privileging mediocrity for merit, always sacrificing merit on the altar of mediocrity in the name of National Character. Various Nigerian communities now tend to associate with their fellow linguistic members, forgetting a sense of national unity and collective participation in national development. This act was "established by Act No. 34 of

1996 to implement and enforce the Federal Character Principle of Fairness and Equity in the distribution of Public Posts and Socio-Economic Infrastructures among the various Federating Units of the Federal Republic of Nigeria” (<http://federalcharacter.gov.ng>). A cardinal complaint against the Buhari-led administration was the lopsidedness in his various appointments to key positions at the national level, without much resistance, a trait which the Tinubu administration has equally been accused of without much spirited resistance. This leaves one to wonder if the Federal Character Commission is not a toothless bull-dog after all.

When ethno-linguistic loyalty takes precedence over national identity, it can result in social divisions. Exclusive linguistic groups may emerge, leading to discrimination and marginalization of individuals who do not share the same language. Such divisions hinder social cohesion and limit interaction among citizens, consequently stalling national development. For instance, the Nsukka Analyst (1994) observes that since 1970, the Igbos have been jointly marginalized by the Hausa-Fulani and the Yoruba linguistic communities. It illustrated graphically by stating that in 1989, out of 154 Officers of the rank of Brigadier and above in the Nigeria army, only 8 were Igbos, while 37 and 51 were Yorubas and Hausa-Fulanis respectively. Protests against marginalization have also been taken up by the Yoruba, who see the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election which was purportedly won by a Yoruba, as a product of marginalization by the Hausa-Fulani to maintain power by all means, hence, the explanation of Fawehinmi (2000) that “OPC came into being as a result of dastardly, illegal and immoral scuttling of the June 12, 1993 election”. Felbab-Brown (2020) in “Milicias (and Militancy in Nigeria’s North East: Not Going Away” states that “since 2009, an insurgency calling itself ‘The People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad... has caused devastating insecurity, impoverishment, displacement, and other sufferings in Nigeria’s poor and arid North-East zone. The group is better known to the World as Boko Haram...” And only of recent, August 2024, the Igbo in Nigeria decided not to take part in a national protest march, organized and christened “#ENDBADGOVERNANCE”, to protest bad governance in the nation, their reason being that they have never been carried along in the nation’s scheme of things in spite of their much truncated support for the project. These illustrations and various reactions are consequent upon a symbiotic relationship between ethno-communal, religious and linguistic associations.

Ethno-linguistic loyalty and Educational Development

Ethno-linguistic loyalty can also manifest in the educational sector. When a nation’s education system prioritizes a specific language, it can marginalize students who speak different languages, leading to educational disparities. Inadequate access to quality education for linguistic minorities can perpetuate inequality and become a hindrance to socio-economic development. According to Effiong, Ekanem and Ottong, (2023), promoting inclusive education can enhance social mobility and create equal opportunities for all citizens. For instance, in a multicultural and multilingual society, the lack of a common language for communication can impede the sharing of ideas, hinder policy-making processes, and limit opportunities for economic growth.

An illustration of the negative impact of linguistic loyalty on a nation’s development can be observed in Belgium: *“As a trilingual country with three official languages of Dutch, French, and German, the linguistic division in Belgium is primarily geographical. The northern part of the country consists, predominantly, of Dutch-speaking people. It includes the provinces of Antwerp, Limburg, East Flanders, Flemish Brabant, and West Flanders. The southern part of Belgium is mainly French-speaking. It includes*

the provinces of Hainaut, Liège, Luxembourg, Namur, Walloon Brabant, and the French Community of Brussels-Capital. A small region in the east of Belgium called the German-speaking community uses German as the official language. It consists of nine municipalities. There is a bilingual area known as Brussels-Capital Region, where both French and Dutch are official languages. It serves as the capital of both Belgium and the European Union". (https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/policy_areas/external_relations/constitutional).

The linguistic division within the country has led to political instability and difficulty in reaching consensus on important issues. It has also hindered economic progress due to conflicting interests and priorities. Every linguistic community derives its existence from the collective actions and contributions of its members. These collective actions and contributions come through dialogue which allows people of all ages the opportunity to participate in the suggestions and implementation of developmental processes. It cannot be ruled out that good communication is imperative for steady growth, development and prosperity of a nation. Failure on the leadership class to create opportunity for dialogue with its citizens represses the supportive potentials.

Aside unifying the nation, adopting a dialogue approach can serve as a powerful tool for a nation's development. Dialogue involves open and respectful communication between individuals with different perspectives, values, and languages. It encourages an exchange of ideas, promotes understanding, and facilitates collaborative problem-solving. By engaging in meaningful dialogue, nations can overcome linguistic barriers and foster a sense of unity and collective responsibility. For instance, Frederick Fasheun, the leader of the Oodua Peoples' Congress (OPC) laments the lack of potent means of communication to present the interests, needs and aspirations of his linguistic community that were not accommodated. According to Fasheun (1999): "all platforms for expressing social discontent were disrupted; the Nigerian Labour Congress was disrupted, the ASSU proscribed; NBA, NMA and so on. So we looked inward..."this, in a way, is Fasheun saying that the afore-mentioned are the only mouth-piece of the marginalized Nigerians, without which they resorted to tackling their ethnic issues through formation of the militia group, a way of sending a message and signal to the Nigerian government. Promoting multilingual dialogue forum can enhance social mobility and create equal opportunities for all citizens. An illustration of the positive impact of a dialogue approach can be seen in Switzerland. The country is: "multilingual, with four official languages: German, French, Italian, and Romansh. The linguistic division in Switzerland is predominantly based on cantons (states). The majority of the Swiss population speaks German and resides in the central, northern, and eastern parts of Switzerland. The largest cantons in this region include Zurich, Bern, Aargau, and Basel-Stadt. The western part of Switzerland is the French-speaking region. Major cantons in this area are Vaud, Geneva, Neuchâtel, and Jura. The southern part of Switzerland is predominantly Italian-speaking. Major cantons include Ticino and parts of Grisons (Graubünden). Romansh is less common official language and is mainly spoken in the south-eastern canton of Grisons (Graubünden)" (<https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/en/home/statistics/population/language-situation.html>).

The Swiss practice a culture of dialogue, where language barriers are often bridged by translation services and a commitment to multilingualism. This approach has contributed to political stability, effective governance, and a strong sense of national identity, which have facilitated Switzerland's development as a prosperous and harmonious nation.

National development

National development involves economic and sociopolitical changes that will have positive effects on its citizens. The conditions that lead to national development and nation building do not exist in a multilingual state like Nigeria. This is as a result of ethno-linguistic loyalty. There are significant factors

that identify a people. These include: language, class, dress code, religion, and belief system. Out of all these, language is the most significant. Nnoli (1978) affirms this declaration as he postulates that the most crucial variable in ethnic identity is language. Emenajo (1990) asserts that language, apart from being the most important vehicle of a people's culture, is the most distinctive of all the traits which separate human beings from any other. For instance, a person from any Yoruba kingdom owes allegiance to a Yoruba first, before any national consideration. This is also the case among the Igbo, Hausa, and many other linguistic communities in Nigeria; they all owe allegiance to their different linguistic groups. This deep attachment and loyalties to individuals' linguistic group, as a matter of fact, is a major clog in the wheel of national development. This is because they compete with the desired loyalty to national growth.

Ethno-linguistic loyalty and Political Development

Ethno-linguistic loyalty leads to primordial sentiments in multilingual societies. This is a kind of behaviour whereby a group of people look down on others and discriminate against them on the singular reason that they are not from the same linguistic group. This loyalty is seen in the allegiance which people pay to members of their linguistic groups rather than with the nationals. This behaviour encourages sentiments among citizens because individuals are more concerned with socio-economic and political development of their linguistic communities and not with the nation as a whole. This linguistic loyalty to an individual's linguistic group member has manifested itself in diverse ways in Nigeria. For instance, Crawford (1993) in his documentation of political parties formation in Nigeria made reference to sectional political parties formation from different ethnic groups in Nigeria due to dominance of national movements by petit-bourgeois middle class and perceived fear of socio-cultural domination from the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC) which had Nnamdi Azikiwe as the leader. Due to this logic the Yoruba group founded a political party named, The Action Group (AG) under Obafemi Awolowo; the Hausa-Fulani emirates of the North founded the Northern People's Congress (NPC) with Ahmadu Bello as the head. This pattern of political parties formation still continues till date in likes of All Progressive Grand Alliance meant for the Igbos; Congress for Progressive Change for the Hausas and Action Congress of Nigeria for the Yorubas (Hodgkin, 1961). This also signals ethno-linguistic loyalty and the preference to identify primarily with individual linguistic group.

Apart from strong ties to individual linguistic communities and marginalization, lack of dialogue has also led to the formation political development n of ethnic militia groups such as the Oodua Peoples' Congress (OPC), Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA), Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Niger Delta People Volunteer Force (NDPVF), Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND), Arewa Peoples' Congress (APC) (Agbu, 2004). The emergence of these militia groups according to Fawehinmi (2000) is also due to "the abysmal failure of the security agencies of government (that) have contributed to the strength and social acceptability of the ethnic militia organizations" while Danjuma (2002) adds that the formation and activities of ethnic militia are traceable to marginalization and neglect by government as he argues that "it is the neglect or a perception of it, which has resulted in the creation of Oodua Peoples' Congress (OPC), Egbesu Boys, Bakassi Boys, Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), and the Arewa Peoples' Congress among others" and, of course, the dreaded Boko-Haram activities in the North as well. This is also an indication that ethno-linguistic loyalties have been domesticated within various linguistic communities

in Nigeria. In fact, it is a salient factor in Nigerian politics today. However, these militia groups, although claim to represent their different linguistic communities' interest have adopted diverse strategies which include violence and defiantly motivated actions in the conduct of their activities which cannot aid sustainable development. Some of them have even become a threat to the nation's security; they have occasioned the destruction of life and property in their respective speech communities. With the activities of these groups, there will be no remarkable or cardinal economic and property development in the nation.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts social identity theory and the concept of linguistic fragmentation as analytical frameworks. Social identity theory is a psychological theory was formulated by British social psychologists Henri Tajfel and his student, John Turner in the 1970s and the 1980s. The theory examines how people define themselves and perceive others based on group membership. It suggests that individuals derive part of their self-concept and self-worth from the social groups to which they belong. According to the theory, people tend to identify themselves as part of certain social categories, such as ethnic groups, gender, religion, nationality, or occupation. This identification leads people to see themselves as part of an in-group, with positive feelings towards their own group and negative feelings towards out-groups. This tendency can be further exacerbated by presence of perceived intergroup conflict or competition.

The theory explains how individuals favour their ingroup, leading to favoritism, discrimination, and hostility towards out groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Translating these theories into practical terms, it is evident that when ethno-linguistic identities are valued above national identity, nation building efforts face significant challenges.

On the other hand, the concept of linguistic fragmentation proposes that as a language spreads and evolves within different communities, it become diversified and ultimately splits into distinct dialects or languages. It suggests that language becomes fragmented over time due to various factors, such as geographical separation, political boundaries, and cultural influences leading to segregation, mistrust, and tensions among different linguistic groups, making it challenging for a nation to work together towards achieving common goals. It argues that language can be a barrier to nation building, mostly when multiple languages spoken within its boundaries creates communication gaps and hinder effective governance. Thus, drawing on social identity theory and the concept of linguistic fragmentation, this study explores the role of identity formation in understanding ethno-linguistic loyalty and the paradox of language in nation building.

Conclusion

In conclusion, ethno-linguistic loyalty poses a significant challenge to nation building processes. This loyalty, when prioritized over national identity, leads to division, conflict, and hinders social cohesion. Language presents itself as a paradox in nation building and ultimate development; it can simultaneously unite and divide. Recognizing and managing linguistic diversity is vital for ensuring inclusive and cohesive societies. To address this issue, intercultural dialogue, and education on citizenship and national values are crucial. By embracing linguistic diversity, nations can tap into the cultural wealth and bring about social, economic, and political development. Overcoming ethno-

linguistic loyalty and the paradox of language require a commitment to inclusive policies, multilingual education, and the promotion of intercultural understanding. By so doing, nations can harness the potential that linguistic diversity holds and build stronger, more cohesive societies.

Recommendations

The predicament of many African countries, Nigeria in particular, should be blamed on lack of dialogue with its citizens. Many African leaders are in the habit of always taking decisions on behalf of its citizens without any form of public dialogue on sensitive issues. The socio-political flaws and economic woes in the continent are closely associated with this leadership style. For maximum change and physical progress, the dialogue approach should be embraced to encourage collective participation and for vision to be discovered.

Undoubtedly, the language of communication, in terms of dialogue, is a socio-political tool of change, vital tool for economic stability, and a paramount tool for human resource development. Lack of dialogue makes nation building and the needed development elusive. In Nigeria, for instance, political leaders offer little or no opportunities for deliberations, dialogue or discussions on sensitive issues that affect its citizens.

Communication in any human society is a continuum and it embraces the past, the present and the future. The problem of communication will certainly emerge if there is a disconnect between the past and the future. To resolve this problem, Nigeria must raise leaders who can connect with their citizens through dialogue to take decisions on sensitive national issues for the common good of all. The Dialogue approach to any national issue or crises is the “gin” in understanding and proffering resolutions for peace, unity, and development.

To address the paradox of language in nation building, it is necessary to adopt inclusive policies and strategies that recognize and embrace linguistic diversity. These policies should safeguard the rights of minorities, ensure equal opportunities for all citizens, and promote representation in political, economic, and social institutions. By addressing the concerns and needs of various groups, inclusive policies can help foster a sense of belonging to the nation as a whole. Language should be celebrated as a key element of national identity, rather than a source of division. Education systems should prioritize multilingualism, offering opportunities for citizens to learn multiple languages and foster respect for various linguistic traditions.

Education on citizenship and national values should be incorporated into the curriculum at all educational levels. By instilling a sense of national pride, shared history, and common destiny, the young generation can develop a strong attachment to the nation beyond their ethno-linguistic identities. Such education should emphasize the importance of unity, tolerance, respect for diversity, and peaceful co-existence. Intercultural dialogue should be encouraged between different ethnic and linguistic communities to reduce animosity and promote understanding. This dialogue should focus on promoting appreciation for diversity, addressing misconceptions, and finding a common ground for collaboration.

Additionally, public institutions and services should be accessible in multiple languages, ensuring that linguistic minorities are not marginalized. Furthermore, the media has a significant role in promoting linguistic diversity and breaking down language barriers. Broadcasting in various languages and providing subtitles or translations can increase inclusivity and encourage dialogue across linguistic communities. Moreover, cultural exchange programmes, festivals, and events can serve as platforms for promoting linguistic diversity and fostering intercultural understanding.

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