

## Language, a Vehicle for Sustainable Development in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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**Abstract:** Language is a vehicle for social change, social mobilization, social reconstruction and national development. Language is the identity of a people. Thus language provides an important medium for understanding of the people. Language permeates every aspect of life and harmony and disharmony in life derives from proper use or misuse of language. A languageless society would therefore really be a meaningless and underdeveloped society devoid of meaningful existence, a society of disorder, anarchy, hopelessness and helplessness. With the new order of things in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, language is the most essential tool that can bring development in the economic, social and environmental life of the people of any nation. Language defines the path of socio-economic construction and as such language is central to any discussion of development. This paper presents language as a vehicle for sustainable development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Keywords: Language, Vehicle, Sustainable development, 21<sup>st</sup> century and National development

**Key words:** Language • Development and identity

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### INTRODUCTION

Language is the major means of communication among a people. It provides a critical rallying point as well as an unmistakable form of identity for its users. In the world of today, language can serve as a vehicle through which nations can rise to global recognition. This is because, for wider communication in the global world that has virtually become a global village, we have come to realize that language will not only facilitate, but also enhance and promote cross-cultural activities.

The general assumption of most literature on natural development in 1960's and early 1970's was based on economic growth or expansion of industrial production. Economists, sociologists tried to examine and draw attention to people's own conception of their lifestyle, life chances and motivation in order to see how they respond to apparent development opportunities.

Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the United Nations Secretary General's High level panel on global sustainability recently wrote that <<sustainable development is not a destination, but a dynamic process of adaptation, learning and action. It is about recognizing, understanding and acting on interconnections- above all between the economy, society and the natural environment.>> So, today, << development has got to do with improving the well-being of the majority of the population, ensuring people's freedom and increasing their economic security>>. [1]. The key to the achievement of all these is language.

Again, over the years men have tried to live harmoniously with other human beings but because of the multiplicity of language at times meaningful co-operation becomes impossible. And when people are not living a co-operative life, it becomes difficult for them to come together and plan for meaningful development. In fact, any country that wants to

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develop must work as one, plan things together and speak with one voice. Language is then presented as an important means of human communication, a social tool which man uses for very many purposes in order to properly inform, educate, incite, influence and conscientize the community, state and the larger society for development purposes.

In light of the foregoing this paper posits that development depends upon the successful interaction of the material resources of a given geographical area with the human resources available in the area. When development occurs, new materials and products are manufactured while new roles become possible for the individuals of that given area.

**Nature of Language:** Language is the vehicle of expression; a living embodiment of the thought pattern and attitude that molded them. For instance, the Igbo proverbs, folklore, storytelling and legends provide valuable insights into the culture and brotherhood, hard work and team work, among others, for which the Igbos are known. These are known indices for sustainable development. As such, language constitutes a critical foundation for sustainable development in the life of any people or nation. This is to say that language can be used effectively to galvanize the populace into participating in national development through the adoption of a level of language intelligible to the majority of the people.

Language as a tool for communication has attracted a lot of definitions from different experts and linguists. Each writer defines language depending on his area of endeavour.

Emeka- Nwobia, 2015, [2], states that language is the key that is capable of bring about the development of a people. Continuing, she notes that the development can come in form of economic, technological development, social development, etc. All of these developments as she says are initiated, executed, conveyed and achieved by means of language.

According to Brooks and Naldman as quoted in Huxley and Ingram (1971), [3], Brooks defines language as <<a learned systematic, symbolic vocal behavior and a culturally acquired and exclusive mark of man>>. Naldman, on the other hand, is of the opinion that language is a <<system of articulated sounds organized by human thoughts and used by a group of humans for purposes of communication>>.

From these definitions, one can easily see that human beings cannot do without language. Language performs a variety of functions to man.

It is through language that the basic need of human interaction at both individual and collective levels is satisfied. Man has come to term that no one is an island and this implies that people have been compelled by nature to interact on a regular basis with one another. The right connection is good education through language. Thus, education and training in whatever form it may take requires importing knowledge and skills as well as awakening and developing the intellectual potential of the learner. This can be done only through language. The role of language used as medium of instruction in the educational process is very important because the effectiveness of the educational or training program depends (among other things) on whether effective communication has taken place between the teacher and the learner or not. Thus, education by means of an appropriate language medium provides the knowledge, skills and values necessary for man to become effective agent of change.

From the foregoing, we make bold to state that language lives and dwells with the people and the perception of the real world is construed by the language habit of the people or group of speakers. Language is then one of the indispensable resources of man, necessary for his day to day transaction and activities.

**Sustainable Development:** Development has got to do with improving the well-being of the majority of the population, ensuring people's freedom and increasing their economic security. [4]. The key to the achievement of all these is language.

Development can also said to simply mean providing qualitative improvement in the lives of people or providing greater quality of life for humans. Development also means the act or process of bringing to a more advanced state, growth or progress; or progressed state or form.

There are different forms of development which include: social, political, economic, educational, environmental, cultural, green development and so on. So development can also be described as: material progress or economic growth or reformation of social institutions and infrastructures.

The primary objective of all types of development is to promote authentic human development. Catherine Walsh agrees with this by stating that development has recently shifted from economic progress towards a more humanistic view focused on the individual and the quality of life which is often referred to as “integral and sustainable human development” (n. page). This focuses on the inter-connectedness of economics with political, socio-cultural and environmental spheres, as well as the necessities, capacities and potentialities of human beings.

Sustainable development could therefore probably be otherwise called “equitable and balanced” [4]. This means that, in order for development to continue indefinitely, it should balance the interests of different groups of people, within the same generation and among generations and do so simultaneously in three major interrelated areas: economic, social, environmental and so on.

Sustainable development is also defined by the Bundtland commission as “a development which meets the need of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs” (n. page). The United Nations 2005 World summit outcome document refers to the interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable development as economic development, social development and environmental development. Another dimension was added to it by UNESCO which is cultural development. Sustainable development therefore means a pattern of resource use that aims to meet human needs while preserving the environment so that these needs can be met not only in the present, but also for generations to come [1].

Therefore, for any meaningful development to take place and be sustained there must be a medium through which the members of the community or any nation can be made to participate in the programs which will bring positive results. Language is the only means by which members can be conscientized and positive attitudes inculcated into them. This is because language has a central and rather crucial role to play in the mobilization of the rural population for specific national development programs eg. Agriculture, timber exploitation, fishing, etc. Language can make useful contributions in providing the skills needed for rural development projects as well as other aspects of life in a modern society in the following areas: health, education, family planning, child welfare, home craft, literacy, road safety, alcoholism, drugs, etc. Everything considered, it is clear that when the appropriate language (aimed at the total mobilization of rural communities) is used, the people will naturally be drawn into being totally involved in government policies and once the community members are captured, the states and the nations will benefit and societal ills will be corrected thereby achieving a high rate of development. Language has therefore become a viable weapon for sustainable development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Language and Sustainable Development:** Language, like the people who use it has much to emit (conceive and express) to its environment. Perhaps, the biblical story in Genesis 11:1-9 illustrates, in clear terms, the role that language plays in national development. The building of the tower went on smoothly because the people spoke one language and thus understood each other. However, the anti-climax came when there was confusion in language, thus leading to the breakdown in communication. The outcome was the abrupt stoppage of work on the monumental project. The message is clear. While people constitute the soul of development in any society or nation, language constitutes the soul of communication among the people who execute sustainable development. So, like good education the proper use of language provides the knowledge, skills and values necessary for man to become an effective agent of change.

Okoh Routledge (1998), [5], adds a more interesting aspect of language by emphasizing the communication as well as the unifying nature of language:

In Babel, as in our day, the role of language as a powerful  
Weapon in the hands of man for cohesion has by no  
Means diminished. Man has continued to use it as an  
Important tool for forging unity (2)

Thus, when people are able to understand each other and speak with one voice, development is often one of the surest beneficiaries. This brings us to the issue of multilingualism.

**The Concept of Multilingualism:** Multilingualism is a concept that implies a situation where more than two languages are in use in a nation or where so many languages represent so many cultures. The consequence is that one of the languages or even a neutral one is often declared the official language. This phenomenon causes among others, ethnocentrism, marginalization, hatred and fear of domination. Those are not good for the desired level of development in any nation. So efforts should be made to achieve tolerance, linguistic equality and cultural understanding of the beliefs, norms, jokes and dislikes of each language group. This will foster peace among the various groups and also improve the interaction among the different language groups while fostering unity and diffusing some myths surrounding the groups. This will definitely bring more development since development can only thrive in a peaceful environment.

**Multilingualism: the Nigerian Situation:** Nigeria has been described as a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic group wielded together for the benefit of colonial administration. Bamgbose posits that there are over 400 languages spoken in this country and not less than 250 ethnic groups make up the polity. Nigeria is therefore a nation with a conglomeration of cultural and linguistically differing groups. These differing groups have metamorphosed into ethnic groups due to the political unification by her colonizers. This unwholesome marriage of the different groups has led to each of the groups trying to either assert itself or to being marginalized. The quest for ethnic identity has resulted in politics being based on ethnic lines. It is not strange in Nigeria to classify the citizens as Igbo-Nigerian, Yoruba-Nigerian, etc as stated by Nwosu (2001), [6], "Nigerians now refer to themselves as an Igbo-Nigerian, Yoruba-Nigerian, Hausa-Nigerian, Edo-Nigerian, etc. This feels like ethnicity, one of the consequences of multilingualism in a nation. Because of the differences in culture and language, conflicts arise among the ethnic groups [7]. Those conflicts often degenerate into violent clashes that have claimed human lives and destroyed properties. This situation destabilizes the polity and thus hampers development. Development cannot thrive under such conditions. This raises the issue of security. Many multi-national companies who were based in this country before have relocated because of insecurity. Foreign and local investors who would have helped to develop the economy of this nation are scared away. No sensible individual or group would invest in a country that is crisis-ridden and prone to violence, a country where security of life and property cannot be guaranteed. The government of the federal republic of Nigeria realizing the importance of language in a multicultural setting decided to make a policy statement encouraging ethnic groups to study at least one other Nigerian language. This is expressed as part of the philosophy of Nigerian education in the "National policy on Education" Government also considers it to be an interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother-tongue. In this line of thought, the government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba. This declaration sounds good but does not actually solve the problem of multilingualism since it made some ethnic groups feel cheated and the fact that Nigeria has so many languages as Olubunmi (1998: 219), [8], states "the number of languages in Nigeria cannot be arrived at with mathematical accuracy due to the multi-ethnic nature of the nation". This makes it most difficult as Kloss (1967), [9], notes while commenting on the idea of deliberately subjecting language to policy making that this is only possible in a situation where there exists two or, at least three languages.

Looking at the Nigerian situation, one can easily see that the situation is a bit impossible because all the language groups want to be relevant and therefore assert their importance and resist any effort to impose any other indigenous language on them. Therefore, in order to promote linguistic equality, tolerance and social interaction in a multicultural country like Nigeria, there is need for people to understand one another, to achieve the level and quality of development needed in the country.

## CONCLUSION

We have been able to establish in our work that language serves as a catalyst in national and sustainable development. This means that for any country to succeed in terms of development in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is not enough to just formulate policies and programs. It is even more important for government to be able to transfer and interpret such policies, findings

and technology to the end users- the masses. This is to ensure that they (the masses) understand what is being transmitted to avoid misunderstanding the information and to get them committed to the policies and programs for developmental purposes.

Thus, language helps to develop the mind, assess, appraise, evaluate and understand both self, government and the governed where need be. From all that has been said, it is clear that language in its nature and function is all embracing in life and the all-encompassing nature of language and her expressivity have good promises if well applied.

Finally, every conceivable human activity revolves around language and as Cruse (1990) notes: “.....language is unique in being able to express virtually anything that is conceivable. (140)

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