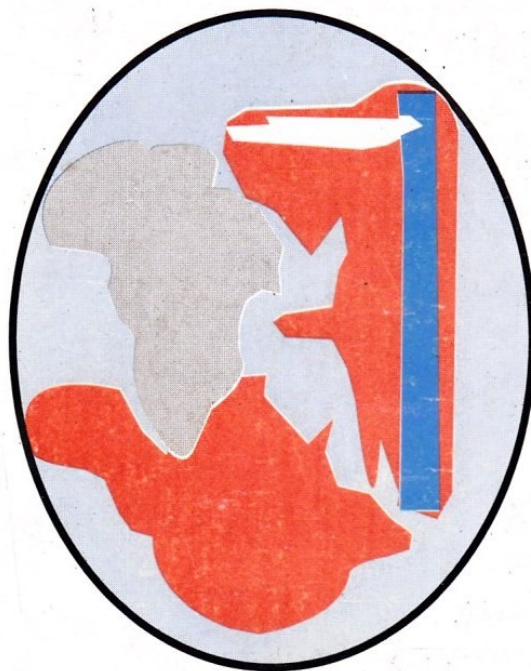


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# LANGUAGE & LITERACY IN SUSTAINABLE GRASSROOTS GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

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## Abstract

*Thoughts, convictions and feelings have to be exchanged, either orally or in writing before they could be used to improve or develop any given society. The knowledge and attitudes required for the smooth-running of government at the grassroots (and at other levels) are communicated and shared by members of the society through the medium of language. Literacy enhances positive use of language as a means of communication. This paper discusses language and literacy as vital ingredients in the smooth-running of the local government administration, pointing out the need for correct and careful use of language in order to avoid strife and attain set objectives.*

## 1. Introduction

The importance of language, and by extension literacy, in governance to guarantee sustained socio-economic growth cannot be over-emphasized. Linguists have stressed the facilitatory role of language in thought, description, analysis and argumentation which are crucial in development (cf Essien 2003; 25). Yet, this facilitatory role of language in development, and therefore in governance (at all levels), is often taken for granted by all, including those directly involved in the art of governance. To begin with, no major development programmes can be carried out successfully without justifications and rationalizations through awareness campaigns. This is more so where the economic, social and cultural lives of the people in the community are likely to be impacted one way or the other. A vivid example is the airport project at Okobo/Uruan communities in Akwa Ibom State which is facing stiff opposition from the communities which were apparently not adequately sensitized. Awareness campaigns require language as a means of communication to transmit information to the people, and the needs of the people to the government. Effective grassroots governance and by extension, sustained rural development require effective community participation attainable only in a literate society.

In this paper, we shall show how language and literacy constitute vital ingredients in the smooth-running of the local government administration which, in our present democratic dispensation, is the closest level of governance to the local environment – the grassroots.

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## II. Language

It is pertinent to take a look at the key words of our topic, beginning with language. The French language in its lexicon has two words for the concept of language – “le langage”, the innate capacity of man to communicate with a fellow man by means of vocal signs that can combine with one another in an infinite number of ways to form sentences, and “la langue”, the various types of these vocal signs understood only by the members of a particular linguistic community who use it as a means of communication. In other words, while every man has the capacity of speech, all men do not use the same vocal signs to communicate (Dubois & Lagane, 1973:8).

Language as an organised system of vocal symbols is what distinguishes man from animals. Language is thus God’s greatest gift to man. It has a unifying function which is clearly highlighted in the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel. Those who built the Tower of Babel did so because they understood each other, but when God caused them to speak different languages; they could no longer understand each other and so could not continue with the project because of this total break in communication.

There are many definitions of language, but for our purpose in this paper, we would like to adopt Okonkwo’s (2003) definition according to which language

*...Is the social point of departure for individual thinking and collective endeavour leading to social development and conveys not only the experiences and knowledge of past generations to individuals but also communicates the new achievements of individual and collective thinking as social products (particularly in terms of technical, scientific, technological and cultural discoveries and conventions) (Okonkwo, 2003: 139)*

From the above definition, language can be said to be a major factor in social evolution as it constitutes that system of communication which is necessary for the existence of a human group. According to Hakuta and Cancino (1977), language provides one of the most readily accessible windows into the nature of the human mind. This system by which human beings communicate with one another by means of arbitrary vocal or written symbols can be used positively to teach, express positive things and values, explain, inform, direct, enlighten, praise, pray, please, etc or negatively to cheat, deceive, lie, mistreat, misinform, misdirect, deride, insult, annoy, antagonize, confuse, etc. (Essien, 2003:23). So, language can build or destroy. It can aid governance if appropriately used or can mar it if inappropriately used.



### III. Literacy

Literacy is generally viewed as the ability to read, write and compute. Many Nigerians have the ability to read and write, but hardly ever do so effectively since they are not in the school system either to teach or read to pass examinations. To many, one reads to pass examinations and not just for pleasure or for the purpose of gathering information for self-improvement or for the betterment of the society. This is why in the literature on literacy there are such terms as Initial Literacy, Basic Literacy, Functional Literacy, Advanced Literacy, Permanent Literacy, Occupational Literacy, Micro-And Macro-Literacy, etc. (Orisawayi, 2004:140). There are therefore various levels of literacy. According to Orisawayi (2004:140), micro-literacy embodies initial or basic literacy and functional literacy derivable from basic education while macro-literacy is equated to good balanced education of the individual which enables him or her to attain self-fulfilment and self-actualization, and thereby full integration into the society. Macro-literacy is thus more advantageous to sustainable grassroots governance as it guarantees the overall literacy of the society in general. In other words, the level of literacy needed for sustained governance is, to borrow the words of Scott Walter as cited in Orisawayi (2004:140)

*not just the acquisition but the retention of literacy skills, with an emphasis on learning not as a passive taking in of information but as an active, critical process that serves democratic citizenship, decision-making, creative problem-solving and overall economic and social development.*

It is only the above stated level of literacy that is good enough to produce broad-minded and informed citizens who, according to Nwosu (2003:58) are better equipped to appreciate the values of peace and harmony – conditions necessary for progress. It is important to state here that literacy makes effective use of language.

### IV. Grassroots Governance

The history of grassroots governance in Nigeria goes back to the era of colonial administration which has over the decades undergone reforms based on several theories of local administration. For our purposes here, governance is the application of the power of the national, state and local governmental apparatus to redistribute resources to benefit the poor and the rich. It involves the use of governmental legal systems to promote legal equity and increase the political capacity of the rural poor people (Oji, 2002:284). Grassroots governance, therefore, refers to the lowest level of administration in the three-tier level of government that provides opportunities for the local people to participate in their governance through their elected representatives who



help them in policy decisions and executions that are intended to affect them positively, thereby enhancing national development and growth.

Egonmwan (2002:13) outlines the basic mission of local government at the grassroots as follows:

1. To decongest government at the centre and thereby freeing national leaders from onerous details and unnecessary involvement in local issues;
2. To increase the people's understanding and support for social and economic activities;
3. To make programmes to foster social and economic betterment at the local level more realistic and lasting;
4. To train people in the art of self-government;
5. To strengthen national unity.

The above stated mission is good and ideal for the growth and development of the people, but this could only be achieved through effective use of language and literacy in the sense that these thoughts, feelings and convictions can only be conveyed to the people through the medium of language. Literacy would enhance language manipulation (careful communication, careful choice of words) and proper manipulation of language can go a long way in ensuring peace and harmony which are vital ingredients for growth and development in any given society.

## **V. Interplay between Language, Literacy and Sustainable Grassroots Governance**

What then is the relationship between language, literacy and sustainable grassroots governance? Language and literacy are at the service of sustainable grassroots governance. According to Akinola (2000) as cited in Oji (2002: 284-5) one of the key elements of good governance in any modern society is responsiveness to the public needs. A case study in the United States of America as cited in Egonmwan (2002:29-30) serves as illustration here. Some people in the small town of Evanston North of Chicago wanted their children to be taught French at the secondary school level and they started agitating for this with their local council. The council responded that there was no budgetary provision for such a programme but that it could work out the cost implication. The conclusion was reached that if they would allow the council to increase their property rate by 0.001 percent, schools would be able to teach French. The matter was put into referendum and those who wanted French taught carried the day. The council in this case was responsive to the needs of the people. It was responsive because it was made up of literate people, people literate beyond mere being able to read and write people with enlightened and creative minds who could judge and appreciate



the needs of the people instead of telling them to go to hell. The governed too were literate. They possessed the kind of literacy that changed their mentality and gave them a positive attitude towards their civil responsibilities. Their enlightened minds convinced them that it was a good thing to pay a little more and get a better and desirable education for the children instead of wanting the council to do it all. I would like to believe that the council in Evanston made judicious use of the 0.001 percent increase in property rate because of their level of literacy which made them see the need to be accountable to those whose interest they were representing in the council. The interaction between the council and the people of Evanston was done through the medium of language. It is highly likely that both parties, in the process of communicating their thoughts and ideas to one another, had chosen words that appealed to the sense of responsibility and commitment.

Many Local Governments in this country do not perform their functions effectively enough to be able to positively transform the rural populace/landscape. This is because they lack the relevant manpower, equipped with the appropriate language and appropriate level of literacy, among other credentials. Again, we shall illustrate this point with an episode that took place in a Local Government office in Nigeria not too long ago. A Nigerian who has lived in America for quite some time had visited home with some ideas which he wanted to share with the Chairman of his Local Government Area. At the reception desk of the Local Government headquarters, he filled the necessary forms to enable him to see the Chairman. The message got back to him that the Chairman had asked him to wait if he would be able to. When, in his reaction to the Chairman's message the visitor replied, "I don't mind", the receptionist/messenger got infuriated, taking "I don't mind" to mean "I don't care". He went and reported same to the Chairman who also became infuriated and antagonized the visitor. In frustration the visitor left, his mission not accomplished.

The point we are making here is that there was a communication barrier, arising from inadequate knowledge of the language of communication in the context between the visitor and the Local Government personnel, which resulted in the Local Government not benefiting from whatever largesse the visitor had for it. The level of literacy of the Local Government personnel was not such that could have caused them to show courtesy even in the face of an apparent insult. The problem with our Local Governments (as in other sectors) is that election/appointment is not done by merit; hence mediocre leaders are most often selected to man the affairs of the Local Government Councils.

The selection of mediocre people is even more appalling in the constitution of the "task force". In most cases, this set of Local Government employees are semi-illiterate party members who must be compensated for



their loyalty to the incumbent chairman. They are fond of harassing motorists simply because they cannot tell the difference between “No stopping” and “No parking”. Any unfortunate motorist who stops the car without switching off the engine even for one second where there is a “No parking” sign cannot escape being mercilessly bullied. And the bullies must extort money from the motorist – money which never gets to the coffers of the Local Government council. Such unethical behaviour comes from uncultured minds (illiteracy) for, as Ebong (2002:411) puts it, “...it is the human mind which drives the human body to their different goals in life.” And language cannot be divorced from this notion because the human mind or brain is the seat of language and every cognitive activity involves language. Whether one is dreaming, praying or reading even silently, or writing or thinking, one is doing so in a language (Essien 2003a:18). Again in this unpleasant case in question, inadequate knowledge of the language of communication is a factor.

Clearly, literacy is associated with the ordinary everyday activities of the people. The populace must be literate in the real sense of the word to be able to keep high environmental standards such as providing, as a matter of necessity, toilet facilities and refuse bins in their places of residence/business, not dumping refuse indiscriminately or in unauthorized places and not allowing their domestic animals to stray and cause harm to other people's plants. In other words, literacy creates awareness of the dangers of a filthy environment and certain environmental practices that are inimical to health. Literacy is important for the citizens to be able to read road signs and sign posts and above all, appreciate their importance. As a matter of fact, people who hawk in areas not designated for that purpose can and do read the “no hawking” sign, but because of their level of literacy, they cannot see the reason why they should not hawk in such places. It is literacy that will change the negative attitude of the people towards payments of tax and rates, traffic regulations and certain laws and regulations laid down by government for the improvement of the socio-economic status of the society. Erukoha (2002:519) opines that the first stage in tackling the problems of adult poverty is the eradication of illiteracy, or at least improving the literacy level of the poor. And what type of literacy can solve the problem of the poor? Erukoha advocates a “functional and humanizing literacy”, the type that “equips one with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes necessary to fight and conquer his/her environment”, the type that “truly makes one to realize his or her humanity... that makes one truly critical of his/her existential realities... the type that is truly liberating... the type that is work-oriented” (Erukoha 2002:519). This type of literacy is bound to give the local populace a broader outlook and better perception of developmental projects. Literacy enables one to read and gain ideas from what is written in language, in the language he/she understands. Reading (and what one reads is always written



in language) broadens one's outlook and perspective and creates the awareness necessary to change certain negative attitudes and create positive ones. Another dimension of language in governance which must be mentioned here is the use of language rooted in the culture of the people. Where the English language restricts sections of the community's population from active participation and full enjoyment of the benefits of governance, the mother-tongue of the people should be used, for, the essence of interacting through the medium of language is to understand and be understood.

## **VI. Recommendations and Conclusion**

As rightly pointed out by Uya (2002: 4-10), local administration is the cornerstone of people-centred democracy every where in the world. It is an instrument for the achievement of rural development. Therefore, grass root, governance, or Local Government, should not be left to mediocre people if the basic mission of local government administration is to be attained. A major malady of Local Government (and indeed other levels of government) is bribery and corruption. If people were literate in the sense of being aware of their humanity, if they had enlightened minds, they would be able to adopt a more responsible attitude towards spending public funds. The educated ones, especially those who have already "made their money" and can effectively manipulate language to appeal to the people's sense of responsibility, are encouraged to contest in Local Government elections and not look down at Local government administration as something for First School Leaving Certificate holders.

There is also need for the local community to be literate in the sense of being able to read and write not only in English, but also in their local languages. Nigerians are very much interested in reading and writing in their own languages, for the mother tongue makes a difference as it expresses better human thoughts and emotions. Indeed, our local languages, whether major or minor, play significant and strategic roles in our daily communication needs (cf. Okon & Akpan 2003) and thus in sustainable grassroots governance for purposeful development. Once the populace is literate, Local Governments could produce newsletters and /or bulletins (whether in the local language or in English) through which to educate it (the local populace) on the activities of the council. When the people are carried along, there is bound to be less conflict between them and the council.

The Reading Association of Nigeria (RAN) should not relent in its effort at promoting literacy and reading through organizing workshops on adult literacy and vacation reading programmes for children and the production of textual materials for reading in order to encourage the Nigerian populace to meet the diverse literacy demands of a fast-changing and modern



world. The role of language is pertinent here, as whatever textual material produced is bound to use language.

There is need to train and retrain Local Government employees so that they could be efficient and effective and meet the demand of the modern society. A strong language component (perhaps language for special purposes) should form part of their training and retraining programmes to enable them to understand and use their languages of communication (especially English language in our own case) appropriately (cf. Okon 2004: 284-293)

In conclusion, language is the very instrument for articulating the process of governance at the grassroots and other levels of government. Language empowers and literacy awakens consciousness in grassroots governance to bring positive changes in the lives of the rural communities, changes made consistent with present as well as future needs (sustainability).

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