



FEARLESS

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THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN MULTILINGUAL SOCIETY: THE CASE OF AKWA IBOM STATE

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1.0 Introduction

“Behold, the people is one and they have all one language.....let us go down, and there confound their language that they may not understand one another’s speech“, King James Version, Gen. 11 : 6-7.

The Phenomenon of multilingualism has its creation and history from the early days of man as documented in the Bible. Based on the quotation above, we have seen that language is the most fundamental means of communication. Language can be defined as “purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires ...”. This quotation is most apt because in every society, we communicate through the use of language and it serves as a means of integration. We wish to observe that language is a form of cultural behaviour through which members of a social group, for example Federated Akwa Ibom Women Association (FAIWA) interact, and transmit their culture from one generation to another.

Multilingualism on the other hand, is a linguistic feature found in most societies of the world. Multilingualism is a situation where an individual or community uses several languages. As observed by Ansa (2003) who quotes Wolff (2000) “in Africa, multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception.” The use of many languages by a speaker or community entails the choice of

which language to use in a particular context. Thus multilingualism emphasizes the issue of which choices speakers make in a multilingual society, therefore, the choice of which language to use in a particular situation affects any interaction between the interlocutors (cf. Ejele, 2003). Since multilingualism is the norm in African societies, Akwa Ibom State is not an exception.

Furthermore, multilingualism is an asset which can aid language choice for different roles in the nation. The reason as argued by Scholars is that different languages and varieties are used for different purposes, depending on the situation. From the foregoing, we wish to answer the following questions in this article.

1. Does multilingualism exist in Akwa Ibom State?
2. What roles do languages play in a multilingual society like Akwa Ibom State?

2.0 The Language Situation In Akwa Ibom State

There are many languages spoken in Akwa Ibom State. These languages included: Annang, Efik Efoi, Ekit, Etebi, Ibibio, Ibuoro, Itu Mbon Uso, Nkari, Ebughu, Enwang, Uda, Ibino, Iko, Ilue, Obolo, Okobo, Oro. The languages listed above are indigenous to Akwa Ibom State. Besides, there are other languages like the English language, Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, among others that are not indigenous to Akwa Ibom State. The Nigerian Pidgin is also used in Akwa Ibom State. The citizens of Akwa Ibom use more than two of these various languages in their daily activities for the purpose of communication .

3.0 Multilingualism In Akwa Ibom State

So far, we have listed the various languages that are spoken in the state we can safely state that every Akwa Ibomite is multilingual. From the definition in Wikipedia, a multilingual person is anyone who can communicate in more than one language, be it active (through speaking and writing) or passive (through listening and reading).

Multilingualism as a phenomenon in Akwa Ibom State can be discussed from two perspectives. The first perspective is what could be described at the Ibibi cluster in which it has been observed by linguists that the total number

of languages in Akwa Ibom State ranges from twelve to eighteen. In addition, others have classified the languages in Akwa Ibom State under three (3) sub heads. East – Ibibio, Itu Mon Uso, Annang, Efiat, Eket; Enwang, Uda-Central and Ebughu, Ibuno, Idua, Oro, Okobo and Obolo as West. This listing has a total of thirteen (13) languages (cf. Faraclass 1989, Essien 2003 and Urua 2004).

We have listed the languages that are indigenous to and also those that are not indigenous to Awa Ibom State. The existence of all these languages in the state go to prove that the state is a multilingual society. As already observed (Okon 2003:405) the issue of the "Tower of Babel" is an established phenomenon in most states of Nigeria, including Akwa Ibom State. These assertions confirm that "50% of the population in Africa is multilingual".

4.0 Language And The Transmission Of Culture

Without language, there will be no culture and vice versa. To show the extensive nature of language. We can define Language as: ...the *institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other...

This definition succinctly describes language as an institution, which is all embracing to subsume other issues in the society. Its embodiment of other issues include the acts of communicating and interacting which in turn involve the transmission of ideas and the society's culture to the next generation. If language performs the function of cultural transmission, what then is culture?

Culture can be defined in different ways based on people as well as different disciplines. For instance, disciplines like anthropology, sociology and humanities et cetera have varied definitions. In this section, we will define culture and show its relationship with language. Culture is the knowledge that someone has by virtue of his [her] being a member of a particular society.

In essence therefore culture refers to the totality of knowledge which one must have or acquire in order to get through the process of living in a particular society. To sum up then, there is no society without a culture and language must and does perform its function as a vehicle for cultural transmission.

So far, we have looked at the meanings of language and culture, the question is – how are these two related? Two basic patterns of their relationship are discussed here. Firstly these two, that is language and culture must find

their existence /survival within a society. Secondly, one of them is the pivot around which the other rotates. Therefore, for these two complementary elements to co-exist, language the carrier of culture is the willing vehicle for the transmission of the ways of life of a people in our society. Hence, we want to agree with other scholars that language is a part of culture. It enables the continuity of learning and experiences in every society. From our discussion so far, we wish to argue that Akwa Ibom State which is a multilingual society is also bound to be multicultural. The interface between language and culture is best summarized by Elugbe (1990:12), "Language is one of the, if not, the most enduring artifacts of culture... a people can always have their history traced through their language". In essence, there will be no culture without language nor the narration of a peoples' history without language. Since culture depicts a particular society and social group, we agree with want to argue that all social groups develop shared meanings, or understanding of right and wrong, truth and error, good and bad. The patterned ways they interpret or collectively understand things constitute their culture. Social groups also establish certain patterns or forms in the way they arrange social relationships. These patterns or forms in the established relationship constitute their social and cultural structure. It is interesting to note that language is used to transmit the culture of the people through songs, folktale, oral literature, myths and legends, etc.

5.0 Language Use And Domains

In a multi-lingual setting like Akwa Ibom State, language is used in different domains. Domains imply areas where language has control or influence. It deals with particular area of activity or interest. In essence, language exerts great influence in different areas of activity such as in the school, home, place of work, hostels, social gatherings, market and religious activities, among others.

With the numerous languages in Akwa Ibom State (cf. 1.1), the multilingual will choose which language best suits the topic, the interlocutors and the setting in order to communicate. In an earlier research work, it was discovered that in a multilingual society, the choice of which language to use in any domain is dependent on whether the situation is formal or non-formal. Furthermore, it was found that in formal situations, speakers use the English language in domains like school, offices, etc, whereas in domains like home and the neighbourhood,

the choice is usually the mother tongue. From this, we can say that multilingualism is a blessing in communities where it exists. This blessing is seen in the fact that it (multilingualism) encourages the acquisition, learning and the use of the languages that exist in those communities. This acquisition/learning takes us into the core of this paper – the role of language in a multilingual society.

6.0 The Role Of Language In A Multilingual Society

The principal role of language in a multilingual society like Akwa Ibom State is the networking of cultural events and practices. In addition, language is very essential for unity, integration, physical planning, education, environmental management, sound economic development, social projects and for monitoring events in the community. It is note worthy, that there is nothing developmental that language does not play a pivotal role. The choice of language in a multilingual society plays a vital role in resolving conflict, combating crime, interpersonal communication, intercultural communication, critical thinking and creating awareness, among others.

The issue of language in a multilingual society does not only focus on the number of languages spoken in that society but also on its function in that society. Bamgbose quotes Deutsch thus: "the Swiss may speak four different languages and still act as one people..." So the role of language as a unifying factor in any society cannot be overemphasized. From the numerous roles of language in a multilingual setting as listed above, one of them will be briefly examined because all the other roles are subsumed within this one major function – language and integration.

7.0 Language, Multilingualism And Societal Integration

The role of language in any society is paramount since it enables the members of that society to interact with each other. As argued by linguists national integration is "... the continued oneness of a state as well as the forging of a bond of belonging together as nationals of the state amongst its citizenry". From this quotation, we would like to argue that in spite of the multilingual setting in Akwa Ibom State, the role of language contributes to the peoples' sense of belonging as members of the state.

In tandem with Elugbe (1990:11) we wish to state categorically that "though

tribe and tongue may differ", it has not prevented the people of Akwa Ibom State from seeing themselves as members (one) of this multilingual society. In the same vein, we would like to recall Bamgbose (1991:12) who cites the example of the Swiss as he states. "The Swiss may speak four different languages and still act as one people..." Based on this succinct quotation, we assert that multilingualism in Akwa Ibom State is a blessing and not a curse. In this context, where every member of the society acts as 'one', language performs the role of inclusion where every member of the society is mobilized and as Bamgbose sums up "Language plays a functional and symbolic role". For Bamgbose, this symbolism is what impedes or further state integration. We would like to see the symbolic role as further consolidating societal integration in Akwa Ibom State.

8.0 The Way Forward

The preceding section naturally dovetail into the last section of this paper as it answers the question – how do we reposition the women in a multilingual setting like Akwa Ibom State? Language is an integral part of the social world and understanding the roles that language plays in communicating, manipulating and controlling is surely vital to understanding the workings of power. It goes a long way in positioning the women in the society. In order to reposition the women (FAIWA) in Akwa Ibom State, we suggest that the choice of language that is appropriate to understanding the communicative interactions in the social world should be encouraged among the women. This appropriate communicative interaction will always position the women within the bounds of inclusion (cf. 7.0) within Akwa Ibom State, therefore, it is recommended that social networking be encouraged among the women through language use and choice which gives power and will emancipate the women. The choice will solve the social, political, economic, educational and technological needs of the women.

The languages existing in the different Local Government Areas should be developed and promoted for use as tools of integration among the citizenry including the women. The development of these languages will involve assigning functions to them and where possible institutionizing them so as to reposition them for the purpose of using these languages to enhance the well-being of the

women in Akwa Ibom State. Esther 3: 12.

...According to the writing thereof and to every people after their language.

This quotation aptly illustrates that multilingualism as it exists in any society must be utilized to cater for all the different groups of people in that society. Therefore, developing the languages of Akwa Ibom State will enable those interested in the emancipation of the Akwa Ibom State women to reach out to them orally and in writing in their respective mother tongues. Thus, the aim of mobilizing the Akwa Ibom State women both in the rural and urban centers would have been achieved because FAIWA would be able to communicate with women in languages they understand. This in our opinion would be one of the benefits of multilingualism to the Akwa Ibom Community

9.0 Conclusion

From the foregoing, the women will not be silenced but will adequately communicate their needs and also receive what is theirs. Furthermore, the women will be properly positioned in a multilingual society where their intentions will be understood and appreciated. In essence, the role of language as a vehicle of communication will prepare the women to meet the challenges of life in a multilingual setting.

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