

Multilingualism and Peaceful Coexistence in Nigeria

Umar Mohammed Hadejia

Department of Social and General Studies,
Jigawa State Polytechnic, Dutse

Abstract: The paper attempts an exploration of the concept of multilingualism as it relates to the peaceful coexistence of the multitude of languages in the Nigerian environment. It begins by offering a theoretical illumination of various interpretations of multilingualism as provided by various scholars. It equally discusses the phenomenon of peace and the need for peace in any multilingual setting, particularly Nigeria, for the attainment of any meaningful development to actualize. The paper further underscores the prospects of multilingualism after its problems have been thoroughly discussed. It explores some specific benefits to be harnessed when multilingual situation is well managed by the Nigerian government. Finally, the work suggests what needs to be done to ensure a peaceful coexistence of citizens in the multilingual, multicultural and multiethnic Nigerian community.

Keywords: Language, Bilingualism, Multilingualism, Peace

Introduction

Language is unique to man and it interacts with every other aspects of human life in the society. An individual is the product of a particular community, he finds himself in various situations, and is expected to participate and take up roles as assigned to him. The context and the role one is expected to play are some of the factors that determine the kind of language one uses. Thus language can best be understood only if it is considered in relation to society. It is a common place knowledge that as multiplicity of societies exist the world over, it is safe to invariably argue that a great number of languages are equally spoken. With the high number of Languages existing, it is therefore inevitable for languages to come in contact as the language users also come in contact with one another. These human contacts are often born out of human needs, ranging from personal, political, economic to socio-religious needs. The result of languages coexistence is 'multilingualism'.

The question of how to define multilingualism has been a preoccupation of many researchers for a very long time. The study of this widespread and natural phenomenon is enhanced by the realization of its role in a multilingual society. Multilingualism is the way of life for hundreds of millions all over the world. There are no official statistics, but with over five hundred languages coexisting in no fewer than two hundred countries; contact of these enormous amounts of languages is necessary. Multilingualism is the process of coming in contact of two or more languages together, leading to the realization of an interaction. The level of this interaction revolves around the statuses of the languages concerned, the works of the languages, the historical structures of the languages and the understandings of the speakers of the languages (Bishop, 1974). It should be noted that the coming in contact of two or more languages is prompted by a number of factors. These factors suggest the fact that the contact made by languages is sometimes not deliberate or voluntary, but forced by circumstances in which the speakers of the languages find themselves. Multilingualism is a common sociolinguistic phenomenon, particularly in the continents of Africa and Asia. It comes about when speakers of different languages are brought together within the same political entity. Most countries of the world display considerable linguistic diversity. History has shown that the organization of human society with states has rarely followed ethnic or linguistic groupings. For instance, in Britain, America, Spain, and France, where there seem to be dominant languages, it is therefore safe to say that multilingualism brings about a number of political, social, economic and religious factors with far reaching effects upon individuals and the society. This paper, therefore, explores the phenomenon of multilingualism and peaceful coexistence in Nigeria, being a multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual state.

The Concept of Multilingualism

Several scholars have made several attempts at defining multilingualism. These definitions, however, either see the term as either a society in which several languages are spoken or a person capable of speaking at least more than two languages. But multilingualism in a most appropriate sense is the term used to denote existence of more than one language. The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics (1994: 2625) defines a multilingual person as "an individual who is competent in more than one language" while a multilingual state is "a political entity in which there is more than one speech community" (A speech community is made up of a group of people who share the same linguistic background).

In the words of Olaoye (2008), multilingualism is a speech situation where two or more languages come in harmony within the constraints of one society, or are kept in continuous contact by interest determined politically and economically. In other words, the economic and political purists of individuals or societies may have linguistic results. From the foregoing, it is not out of place to say that bilingualism, the notion of an individual having competence in two languages, is incorporated into multilingualism.

Paulton in Asher (1994: 226) defines the term multilingualism "as the presence of two (bilingualism) or more languages within a modern nation state". Here, distinction is not drawn between "bilingualism" and "multilingualism". However, the individual multilingualism occurs when an individual understands more than three languages, while group or community is one in which three

or more languages are used by language groups of the population, although not all members of each groups need to be multilingual. This is why it is mostly referred to as a property of a society and not of individual since an individual is just a part of the society. In the same vein, Akinbi (1999: 186) defines the term as a phenomenon of the above definition. Therefore, the fact that many languages exist in Nigeria makes it a multilingual nation/society.

Furthermore, Adeyanju (1989: 41) asserts that a lingual or a polyglot is a multilingual. He goes further to say that a multilingual does not know all the languages well, for example, “he may speak and understand one language best” he or she may be able to write in only one, and may use each language in different types of situation. For example, one language at home and one at work and one for another thing else. Wardhaugh (1986: 96) rightly observes that “in many parts of the world people speak a number of languages, and individuals may not be aware of how many languages they speak. According to him, they speak it because they want to do so in order to live their lives: their knowledge is instrumental and pragmatic.

According to Banard (2014) the term multilingualism is derived from two Latin words namely “multi” that means many and “lingua” that means language. Thus multilingualism means the capacity of a speaker to make himself or herself known in many languages the same way he or she speaks their native languages. He further adds that it has been realized that in both written and verbal communicative practices, proficiency in one language tends to dominate in a multilingual set up as compared to the others. This definition emphasizes individual multilingualism rather than societal. But what is significant is that the phenomenon is a product of several languages.

Aronin and Britta (2009) argue slightly by giving a sociolinguistic definition in their study “The Exploration of Multilingualism.” They see “multilingualism as the interactive ability of societies, institutions, groups and individuals with more than one language, in everyday life, based on space and time. The definition puts account on the social issues indicating the usage of “more than one language” and making an emphasis on “everyday life”. In contrast, Bloomfield (1993) argues that a multilingual utilizes more than two languages as in a native level. Comparing to the definition of Aronin and Britta, Bloomfield emphasizes the usage of more than two languages but not more than one language, thereby emphasizing the need of proficiency at a native level, without identifying the context of its usage or other functions.

Bloomfield (2010) posits that everyone in the world is multilingual and therefore defines the term as follows:

Multilingualism... should be seen as a texture of peculiar semiotic resources, some of which belong to a reversely defined ‘Languages’, while others are possessed by another language rather than a group of languages that a speaker uses. The resources are pure language varieties, registers, genre, modalities such as writing – methods of using language in specific communicative settings and struggles of life, including the views people have about ways of using their language ideologies.

Here, Bloomfield elucidates that multilingualism consists of different kinds of repertoire, they embrace a vast number of resources involving various linguistic varieties, styles, accents, genre, registers and it is a matter of degree and continuum in spite of “whether it belongs to one conventionally defined language or several of them. Likewise, it is imperative to mention that Bloomfield infers multilingualism not in “Languages” but through the use of linguistic repertoires and resources.

In a well pronounced definition, the European Commission (2007) spells out multilingualism as an ability of individuals to interact continuously with more than one language in their normal lives just as institutions, groups and societies do. This definition of multilingualism shares certain commonalities to the one given earlier by Aronin and Britta. It emphasizes both the individual and the social dimension. Multilingualism is a product of a number of critical factors.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to know that some of the factors responsible for multilingualism have been identified by numerous scholars to be political, religious, cultural, educational, economical as well as natural. Since the focus of this paper is to examine multilingualism and peaceful coexistence in a society, Nigeria by way of specificity, much attention is given to the criticality of peaceful coexistence in a multilingual setting rather than the said factors.

Defining Peace

It is well known that human beings pay much interest in peace from the ancient time until now. Because the word ‘peace’, apart from being a pleasant word, also refers to the peaceful society and the beautiful world. It can be said that peace is the greatest and highest goal or hope that everyone wishes to achieve personally and expects to be created in society and in the world. According to Bloomsbury, Dictionary of word origins (1995: 387) literally, the word ‘peace’ is derived from the original Latin word ‘pax’, which means pact, a control or an agreement to end war or any dispute and conflict between two people, two nations or two antagonistic groups of people. Martin Luther King Jr. (2008: 83) a famous Human Rights activist is not satisfied with the definition of peace focusing only on the absence of war or the unhappy situations. In his view, peace must include justice in society too as in his saying “Peace is not merely tension-free in its true sense: it is the availability of justice”. This definition is slightly different from the one earlier reported as peace does not confine to only war, but prevalence or dispensation of justice within a society is also peace.

Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), one of the famous philosophers in second half of 17th century, gives his point of view on peace that: peace is not a situation devoid of war, it is a high moral standard, a condition of mind, a tendency for generosity, trust and fairness. His definition attaches prominence to moral standard and condition of mind. According to Johan Galtung (1995: 1), Norwegian

peace scholar, the term “peace” and “violence” are linked. Peace is the absence of violence and should be used as a social goal. He further states that peace has two sides: negative and positive peace. Negative peace is the absence of personal violence, positive peace is an absence of structural violence or societal justice. His definition, though slightly different from the ones reported earlier, draws distinction between personal violence (that which affects an individual) and that of social justice (commonly expected of every peaceful state or nation). However, Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines peace from three different perspectives as follows:

1. No war: A situation in which there is no war or fighting.
2. No noise/interruptions: A very quiet and pleasant situation in which you are not interrupted.
3. Calm/not worried: A feeling of being clam, happy, and not worried.

Looking at the three positions above, it is safe to say that numbers (i) and (ii) are appropriate to this paper most, as they affect how people of diverse culture, language and ethnicity should live when they are destined to stay together in a particular territory.

The English Lexicon is rich in its supply of terms that refer to peace. In Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, for example, peace is initially defined as “freedom from civil clamour and confusion” and positively as “a state of public quiet”. This denotes negative and positive peace in the political or “outer” sense. Webster’s proceeds further to define (political or outer) peace positively as a state of security or order within a community provided for by law, custom, or public opinion. The second definition of peace, according to Webster’s, “is a mental or spiritual condition marked by freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions”. This is peace in its personal or “inner” sense, “peace of mind”, as well as calmness of mind and heart: serenity of spirit (inner peace). Third, “peace is defined as a tranquil state of freedom from disturbance and harassment”. Peace also implies “harmony in human or personal relations, mutual concord and esteem”.

Problem of Multilingualism in Nigeria

It is an obvious fact that two or more Languages in contact results in an interaction, varying according to the status, the languages, their functions, historical setting and the perception of speakers of the languages. The interaction of the speakers of the different languages (dialects) in a multilingual society, Nigeria in particular, poses certain problem for the members of the community.

One problem of multilingualism in Nigeria, and of course which is seen to be a universal one is that of linguistic domination. According to Adeyanju (1979), this situation surfaces if one language dominates other linguistic groups because of its roles, cultural strength, number of its speakers etc. Due to this scenario, the disadvantaged linguistic groups may feel belittled politically and educationally. This instills fears in the lives of the linguistically subjugated groups. In Nigeria, for instance, the big three languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) raise dominance over the five hundred or there about languages. This always put different ethnic groups at logger heads, making acrimonious exchanges which sometime result to a calamity. Even between the so called big three, there is that disagreement especially considering the Nigerians earlier frantic efforts to choose a national language or a lingua-franca. If such exercise is to be embarked upon by Nigeria, the selection may throw the country into crisis.

Most killings and other atrocities are carried out to settle certain linguistic or ethnic differences. The domination of one language over other languages, especially the minority ones in most Nigerian states (Jos, Kaduna, Bauchi, Delta, Rivers etc.) is normally the factor that contributes to the ethno-linguistic clashes these days. On the part of the speakers of the dominant Language(s), there is the feeling of superiority over the minority language groups. This is detrimental to a societal peace as well as any meaningful development.

Another significant factor that this paper finds worth-mentioning is that considering the fact that over five hundred languages are spoken in Nigeria, the problem of peacefully managing them becomes a threat also. This problem has become a general factor in Africa let alone Nigeria. Adeniran (1994) sees that language, in a place where a number of languages are spoken like Africa, can easily become devastating as the plurality really results in management problem, rather than being a quality that can be achieved for development reasons (i.e., being an asset). The problem can be so profound that even the state (government) finds it difficult to resolve. The solution will demand for tolerance that borders on the ethnic self-denial or self-liquidation. In Nigeria, the management of an overabundance of language resource seems to be compounded by the intractable sentimentality, which usually attaches to ethnic languages, a language being ethnic soul of a people and the lasting rallying stand in competition against other people. This, therefore, stands to be another source of squabbles.

Apart from the peaceful management of the coexisting languages in Nigeria, there is the issue of socio-political cohesion. This is a very serious problem posed by multilingualism. While citizens may desire to actively participate in the political activities of our country, the non-availability of a common medium inhibits and frustrates the efforts of the people. This, sometimes, throws people into certain meaningless crises. This is because the societal as well as ethnic cohesion are completely lacking. For instance, where a Hausa L1 speaker finds it difficult to speak Jukun or English, he may wrongly perceive a statement made by a Jukun, hence such a person attempts to create meaningless reactions.

Additionally, the existence of many languages in Nigeria is making it cumbersome for the country to have a national language. This is because any attempt by the Government to choose one out of its over five hundred languages may create problems. This is

definitely a factor emanating from the existence of languages. And for a country like Nigeria, being unable to possess a national language spells doom. Therefore, multilingualism has here become a threat and a cross road to development in certain guess.

Prospects of Multilingualism for Peaceful Coexistence

It is safe to say that multilingualism is not always synonymous to lack of peace, especially when the situation is carefully managed. This socio-linguistic phenomenon is not all together a dread monster. There is the need for every multilingual state, Nigeria in particular, to live in peace as the phenomenon has certain positives to offer. Multilingualism should always be seen as not the sole cause of the internal disunity of multilingual states. Crupta (1968) in Adeniran, for instance, is of the opinion that linguistic plurality suppose not to always be a bad barrier. He realizes that most new nations are based on availability of segmental groups. Adeniran further points out that the vital thing needed most is what occurs to this divergence in the course of national progress and how it happened or it does happen. This is synonymous to having unity in diversity to allow for peace, which in turn brings about national development. Against the background above, Nigerians must remain peaceful irrespective of the ethnic or linguistic differences for eventual meaningful development.

Multilingualism practice creates the development of mixed languages mainly due to intense language contact. Nigerian pidgin, which is widely spoken in this country, is a product of multilingualism. It can equally be said that there would not have been the emergence of this pidgin had there not been peaceful coexistence of the people. As a result, speakers tend to involve a mixture of languages during verbal communication. This contact may also result in the creation of slangs and some corrupt forms of languages like in the case of the Nigeria's Broken English, which could also be seen to be a product of peaceful coexistence. It must also be added that these slangs are mostly resulted by urbanization, migrant labour as well as industrial boom as was evident in Kenya and some other African countries, in the creation of slang, Benard (2014).

The peaceful coexistence of Nigerians in our multilingual setting has become necessary and non-negotiable as multilingualism provides an insight into the understanding of different cultures and experiences, hence a multilingual becomes multicultural in nature. Since language does not operate in a vacuum, culture and society play key role in its existence. This is because language is a sociolinguistic issue. Thus, language relies on society, culture and mind. In this regard, multilingualism enhances an automatic understanding and appreciation of cultural values of the societies that are contained in the concerned languages. The experiences gained from learning different languages automatically tend to change the attitudes, skills, beliefs of the people, society and create an expansion of world view. All these are only necessary when a country, Nigeria in particular, is free from war and all other forms of misconducts resulting from ethno-linguistic differences.

It is equally imperative to emphasize the need for peaceful coexistence amongst the Nigerians and by extension other African multilingual nations. Multilingualism helps in national unity, especially if people learn national languages besides their indigenous languages and lingua franca as observed by Bernad (ibid). According to him, this fact of togetherness is critical for any meaningful national development to come by. He further adds that the phenomenon equally provides a competitive edge in today's job market. Besides the academic and professional credentials, employers of labour also look for fluency in the desired languages as an added advantage. Therefore, being a multilingual is a plus to any job seeker in this millennium. This could only happen when people decide to live in peace and harmony. In other words, it is proper to say that, in this regard, development of many language skills, therefore, helps in economic adjustments.

Furthermore, it is significant to point out that the prevalence of peace in a multilingual setting like Nigeria is of utmost importance. This is because that multilingualism practices enhance intellectual flexibility and creativity. Consider certain goods produced by Igbos tagged "Igbo made". Igbos use their indigenous language to train their people in various skills, hence their determination is yielding good result. Recent studies have shown that children who grow up in a supportive environment speaking more than one language from an early age are said to be more perceptive and intellectually flexible (Bernad, 2014). It is only peace that can guarantee this in a multilingual state like Nigeria.

Similarly, Elugbe (1994) indicates that linguistic plurality should not make us panic because it does not all through leads to failure, and the kind of political system in operation in a country will not determine the successful (or other) natural development. Truly, a successful literacy sensitization can only be obtained via the use of indigenous languages (language of the wider communication). The quickest way to educate the masses or make them literate is through the employment of their languages and not some foreign ones. Elugbe (1994) strongly believes that in Nigeria, for instance, the sure way of getting the young educated (individually) in modern disciplines should be by the employment of their mother tongue or some other languages of wider communication that they fully understand. However, all this is only possible when peace prevails.

Way Forward

For a peaceful coexistence to be enhanced in a multilingual setting like Nigeria, due consideration must be given to every language, regardless of whether the language is a majority or minority one. Doing this would no doubts dismiss any fear of subjugation of any linguistic group to feel politically and educationally inferior. This would further do away with any suspicious tendencies which could likely pose communal crises and breach of peace and harmony.

Another important measure to be taken towards the realization of peaceful coexistence of the multilingual situation in Nigeria is to encourage the teaching and use of indigenous language in education. As our classes in schools are equally multilingual, it is

imperative that a policy is put in place that would allow for communication in both the indigenous and the official languages in our classes. Speaking the languages would no doubt offer the learners the opportunity to understand and appreciate the value of the different cultures of the speakers. This would no doubt go along to create the spirit of oneness or togetherness among the children, parents and the general society, thereby saying “no” to unnecessary conflicts and violence.

There is need for government, at all levels, to embark on massive sensitization campaigns, showcasing the value of every Nigerian language as well as the good cultural heritage of the users. If this recognition is granted to all languages, a fertile ground would be created in which sociolinguists would find additional areas of researches.

Conclusion

Multilingualism is a linguistic phenomenon with a far reaching effects on social, political and economic conditions of many societies. In most countries and Nigeria in particular, these effects are either negative or positive. Negatively, multilingualism hinders peaceful coexistence of people of diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. The break of peace imposed by multilingualism usually translates into violence, injustice, conflicts, agitation, hostility and lack of calmness, etc. which are detriment to any meaningful development.

Positively, however, multilingualism provides a society with plurilingual situation where alternative modes of speech or language varieties abound. Where there is peace also, multilingualism provides some illumination into the understanding of different cultures and experiences, it enhances intellectual flexibility as well as creates an avenue for a competitive edge in today’s job market. However, the effects of being either positive or negative to a large extent, rests on how best the languages are handled. With good management/leadership, a seeming linguistically complex situation can be harnessed proficiently to benefit the Nigeria people. But this is only possible when there is prevailing peace in the society.

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