

THE ROLE OF FRENCH LANGUAGE IN REPOSITIONING NIGERIA ECONOMY

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of French language in repositioning Nigerian economy. French is a foreign language in Nigeria and has a stance of copious advantages as regards its pertinence in all spheres of life. The language has gained ascendancy among international languages especially in Nigeria because of her geographical proximity with French-speaking countries. Besides, French is the second most widely learned foreign language in the world (Adirika). This paper equally considers the emergence of French language in Nigeria and depicts its relevance to the fields of economic, social, political, religious, educational, employment and diplomatic benefits. French is unusual in that it often exists alongside other languages in multilingual contexts; it shares with English the distinction of being taught as a foreign language in the educational systems of most countries around the world including Nigeria. As a result of all these, many Nigerian scholars are now kept abreast of the salient importance of the language. This is the reason they are committed to learning French language. This paper, concentrates on the place and impacts of French in repositioning Nigerian economy and to determine how the language has opened doors and opportunities to our youths nationally and internationally.

Introduction

Language is the primary mode of human expression and this distinguishes humans from other animals. With the use of language in its oral and written form, humans are able to communicate and express their feelings within cultural norms. The potentials of language in the private and public spheres indicate its centrality in the sociology and the economy of the society. Different opinions have been formed by scholars and linguists about the meaning and nature of language in a speech community. These definitions of language are wrought with some ideological and semantic differences because “it is impossible to find a definition against which we could not raise at least one objection” (Elugbe, 1995:42).

The definition of language given by Greeno, J. G. (2006:156) regarded language as something unique to humans. Thus, it can be said that the ability to use language creatively as against the use of the same by other living creatures delineates human communities from other animal communities.

It should be noted that language does not develop in a vacuum because it cannot be separated from culture. It is part of the culture of the people and the only available means by which the members of a society communicate. We may say that language is an embodiment, a component of culture and a central network through which the other components are expressed. Adirika (2013) buttressed the above view when she stressed that language is a critical element of culture through which it reveals its fascinating power. All these inform the goals of learning a language as the ability to use it, understand its meaning and connotation, ideas and

achievements. This could be the reason why Wilkins (2014) insists that language is the key to the heart of the people. If we lose a key, we lose the people. If we treasure the key and keep it safe, it will unlock the door of untold riches which cannot be guessed from the other sides of the door.

With all these definitions and meanings of language, as given here, it can be said that there are key features that can describe language and these are:

- i. language is an element of culture;
- ii. language is a medium of communication;
- iii. language is a universal property of human community;
- iv. language is used in spoken and written discourses;

Linguistic Ecology of Nigeria

Nigeria is a multilingual and multicultural nation with numerous indigenous languages, English as the second language and French, German, Arabic and other modern European languages as foreign language. It is on this note that this paper classifies the linguistic ecology of Nigeria as follows:

- (i) majority Languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba);
- (ii) minority languages; e.g. Efik, Ijaw, Ibibio etc
- (iii) english Language;
- (iv) foreign Languages (French, Arabic, German and Portuguese, etc);
- (v) Pidgin.

The attention of this paper is on the role and status of French as a foreign language. This is because French is one of the languages that follow in the linguistic ecology of the country.

French Language in Nigeria

The history of French language in Nigeria started from the 16th century. It was introduced as a secondary subject in Yaounde Conference (1961). This conference recommended the introduction of teaching and learning of French and it was to be taught and examined as a school discipline in Anglophone Africa, including Nigeria. This was done as a result of the great importance of the language. Obanya (2004) recorded that the first French trading company in Nigeria was Française de l'Afrique Occidentale (CFAO), established in 1902. It is also on record that by 1881, the French language had started so intense since Nigeria's independence (particularly since oil boom), that in 1993, the France-Nigeria Chamber of Commerce became a desirable necessity. Besides, there has been mutual cooperation and agreement signed by both France and Nigeria (The Guardian Newspaper, March 13, 1994).

Apart from the company mentioned above, another one was established in Lagos – Societe Commerciale de l'Ouest Africaine (SCOA). The expatriate employees were involved in the social exchanges that took place.

The France influence persisted in Nigeria in the custom, by signing the Governor's book contained in a gate-house at the entrance to Government House in Lagos. It was signed when you arrived from leave or transfer into the territory and again when you went on leave. These were activities on the ground for making French language a popular language in

As a result of the importance of French language in Nigeria, the Federal Government of Nigeria established the Nigerian French Village in 1991 as an inter-University Centre for French studies. The centre offers a variety of programmes and services with the mandate of providing language immersion programmes which include: certificate, diploma, NCE, university programme.

The importance of language cannot be over-emphasized because the late General Sanni Abacha in 1997 declared the new status of French as the nation's second official language. Therefore, for Nigerians to interact effectively with francophone countries they should not only be able to speak the language fluently but also attend international seminars and conferences without much problem (Obanya,2004). The Nigerian language policy should make provision for the following areas of communication: internal communication, international scientific or technical communication. French is one of the languages most widely used in commerce, scientific and technological research, administration, education, literature, etc. With the knowledge of French, Nigerians and Francophone countries will be able to work together in areas of science and technology. This, however, cannot be achieved if French teachers are not employed or if those employed are not encouraged to teach the language. There is a growing concern about the attitude of Nigerians towards the study of French in our schools. Many Nigerians are not sufficiently informed about the usefulness of French in our

educational system or its importance as an international language. They feel that people who study French language especially in the tertiary institutions are slow learners, studying an inferior course. Some think that it is for those who did not pass their intended course of study. And, therefore, it is a waste of time studying it.

Nigeria's geographical, economic, diplomatic, educational and research needs make it imperative for her to give adequate attention to the learning of French. It is, therefore, necessary to make Nigerians realize the importance of French in our country. Some government officials and individuals are enrolling for French studies in French institutions and private French lessons in the country. And this shows that the need for this language is increasing learning. The language should be encouraged among youths, teachers, curriculum planners, communicators, lawyers, military, paramilitary, technologists and other professionals.

French is an important language needed by professionals. It is prominently known that, right from the onset, we cannot underrate the role of French language in Nigeria because, the country, Nigeria, is geographically surrounded by francophone countries. In the North, East, South and West are Republic of Niger and Chad, Cameroun and the Republic of Benin respectively. The benefits of language include enhancing human communication. Language is the crucial component of cultural identity and the most prominent factor in bringing out a distinction from one culture to

another. For instance, Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa in Nigeria which share different linguistic identities, backgrounds, cultures and social life within one defined nation can still express their own different languages with full audacity. The roles of language include expressing a substantial amount of a people's historical experience, their thought patterns, and their world view (Aride, 2010). Language's roles are said to be related to the embodiment of culture leading to the depth of a person's reflection-beyond the practical necessities of life to such aspects of searching for knowledge, education and collaboration among multi-ethnic societies. In such a way, it reveals how language continues to operate signs and elaborate functions in almost all phases of Nigeria's life. Particularly unique position where it ranges in its usefulness in the exceptionally experienced in Nigeria is in the domains of politics, education, legal matters, mass media, art and leisure, all of which are typically carried out through the medium of languages, most particularly the so-called foreign languages such as French, German, Spanish and Chinese. etc. Language is seen as an instrument that brings about wholesome exchange of ideas to be able to affect comprehension.

French language is considered as one of the most widely used languages. It is a foreign language in Nigeria. The language has gained ascendancy among different international languages because of its pertinence in all spheres of life. Ajiboye (2002) opined that French could be regarded as one of the most important

foreign languages used by many countries. Most of these countries need to interact to form unified bodies for economic, political and technological advancement. In spite of the enviable position occupied by French, it is yet to be given its rightly place in the country. It is quite obvious that the language is now popular in the country since its inception right from the 16th century. The relevance of French language in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized.

Therefore, the role of French language is repositioning Nigerian economy cannot be measured. Some of the inevitable roles being played by the language are discussed below.

Utilitarian Functions of French Language in Nigeria

Since French is a language, it performs the role which human languages perform. Scholars and critics of different extractions (Owoeye, 2010; Esoh and Endong 2014) have examined the utilitarian functions of French language in Nigeria. In their different theoretical and empirical positions, they argue that French, as a language, performs communicative, interactive, diplomatic functions. These functions have impacted positively on sustainable human development in the country. The functions of French language are identified and discussed below:

French as a Communication Tool

The word 'communication' originated from the Latin expression 'communis' which means 'common'. Its derivation 'communicare' means 'to share' 'impact' or 'partake' (Aride 2010). It is the

transmission of which a communicator attempts to convey an image to communicate. It is essential in the sharing of ideas, notions, feelings and experiences between the sender and the receiver of the message. Brann (1975) defined the concept as the process by which meanings are exchanged so as to produce understanding among human beings.

Without an iota of doubt, just like other foreign languages, French has been a useful instrument of communication in repositioning Nigerian scholars. The beauty of a language is in its communication, Nigerian scholars are interested in the language for the purpose of communication. The Nigerian scholars who specialized in B. A and B. A (Ed) keenly want to develop themselves in the oral and written skills of the language. Therefore, it is a language of communication among the professionals and amateurs. It is often observed that scholars who are not specialists of the language are still in need of it. This is because it serves as a means to keep abreast with other foreign languages apart from the common English language. For learning to have more than transient utility, what is learnt must be kept available in the day-to-day events and activities through communication. French language serves as a medium of communication in seminars, conferences, meetings and diplomatic gatherings. In fact, the language is becoming more popular in Nigerian universities due to its inclusion in the universities' curricular.

French Language as a Tool for Economic Development

The relevance of French language has been a topical issue in Nigeria since the sixties. Language, culture and economy are quite inseparable because of their intimate relationship. In the process of learning French as a foreign language, one learns French culture and tradition. A good knowledge of French language may serve as catalyst for economic empowerment and development for Nigerian scholars. The economic empowerment functions of French does not solely depend on the contingency of Nigeria to neighbouring countries such as the Republic of Benin and Togo, that speak French as an official language. Elliot, (2010) argues further that:

The importance of French does not depend only on the nearness of French-speaking countries, France, the mother country of these neighbouring francophone countries, has long since realized the necessity to disseminate her language in Nigeria as well realized its importance to her economy.

Therefore, one of the principal functions of the language in repositioning Nigerian economy is to act as a base of commerce. Nigerians can easily venture into business with the neighbouring Francophone countries. It is crystal clear that most Nigerian scholars in France and

in some French-speaking countries are there for the purpose of trade and commerce.

Most Nigerian scholars are aware of the facts that one should not solely rely on his or her course of study. The employment situation in Nigeria has never given any room for relying only on one's area of specialization. Therefore, French can serve as a booster to one's dream for getting a good job in both national and international establishments and companies. Thus, in order to be gainfully employed, scholars from Nigeria study the language. They, therefore, apply for a course like diploma and certificate courses – DELF = (diploma d'études en langue française), and degree, despite the fact that they are already scholars in their different fields. For instance, there are some establishments that are keenly interested in some people that can speak and write French. Some of them are as following: Total Nigeria Plc, CFAO Bouyale, Fougerole, Hotels, Nigeria Customs, militaries and Para-militaries, communication companies, communication (Broadcasting), NNPC, Federal Airport of Nigeria, theatre and film companies, multi-national companies, ambassadorship, U. N., ECOWAS, etc. The above mentioned establishments cannot do without the use of French as a means of communication or to transact business (Elugbe 1995). It is highly judicious for current Nigerian scholars to note that the mastery of the language can facilitate their getting good employment. In most establishments, it is always included in their advertisement that the knowledge of French language is

an added advantage. Sometimes, both speaking and writing of the language is required. It is a fact that many Nigerian scholars are interested in the language for the fact that it serves as an added advantage for them to get better jobs.

Without mincing words, one can become a teacher, the father of all professions. The learning of the language can give Nigerian scholars the opportunity to be instructors of the language in elementary, secondary and in tertiary institutions. In Nigeria today, we have a reasonable number professors of French in higher institutions. The language actually plays important roles in the formation of the national expectations and the integration of the nation and the neighbouring French-speaking nations.

Diplomatic Benefits of French Studies

Closely related to the role of French language in the development of the economy is that of political benefits of the language. French is a language of politics; it is as useful as the English language. Before one can become an ambassador or work in the international relations section of a country, he or she must have the knowledge of international languages like French. This is one of the reasons why scholars must strive to have the knowledge and the culture of the language. Most political and international posts need the French language. Therefore, knowledge of the language will enhance the repositioning of Nigerian economy. For instance, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo was denied the post of President at the level of ECOWAS simply because he did not have the knowledge of French (Aride, 2010).

One should also take note of the fact that French language is a language of conflict resolution and peacemaking. Multilingualism is necessary to promote understanding among peoples and settle rising problems both nationally and internationally. Therefore, many Nigerian scholars should be interested in learning other languages in order to achieve political values. (Elugbe, 1995). Diplomatically, many Nigerians should think beyond their environment. They need to work towards having mutual relationships with other countries of the world. Therefore, it is strongly believed that when they have the knowledge of French, this exposes them to many opportunities that can make their lives better. French is one of the working languages of the European Union, along with English and German and the sole language used for the deliberations of the court of justice of the European Union. It is the only official language of the Universal Postal Union (UPU). It is one of the languages of many other international institutions such as; the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), The Office of the nation's High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), etc.

Socio-cultural Benefits of French Studies

French language needs to be studied because of its socio-cultural benefits. Nigerians should be keenly interested in French culture and civilization because a knowledge of its culture and civilization could bring about unity and solidarity within the West African sub-region. When one knows a country, one can easily relate with that country, one can develop economic transactions with the French-speaking countries; culture is inseparable from a language. A cultural knowledge of French will enhance easy access to French speaking nations for commercial and monetary benefits. Socially, the knowledge of French will help to develop a great rapport with other people from French speaking countries.

Nigerian scholars can attend seminars, conferences and meetings in French-speaking countries if they have the knowledge of the language with it, they can understand the discourse at the programme.

David (2011) opined that there is no serious-minded, political, scientific, philosophical or even athletic organization which does not have the ambition to associate with other groups, sharing its ideas outside its national boundaries. This is because language promotes inter-personal relationship among the speakers.

Furthermore, those who engage in sports activities need to know more about French. This will help them in their career. The role of French in developing Nigerian scholars is inestimable. These

scholars can plan and travel to France or any Francophone country, so as to widen their knowledge and horizon

Educational Benefits of French Studies

As language is the centre of human life, the French language is one of the most important languages that express one's love in the midst of French speakers. It is also useful in achieving one's goals and careers. For instance, somebody who studies French and works hard can become a French teacher. In fact, the French language is one of the subjects taught in our secondary schools. As a consequence, there are lots of job opportunities for many who study the language and also are willing to teach it.

Recently, about twenty lecturers were given the opportunity to travel to France to study for one month. This French training programme, sponsored by the French government, is intended to expose them to French culture and civilization and also to inculcate in them the rudiments of the French language in a conducive environment.

Conclusion

For a democratized nation like ours, to attain greatness, the issue of a second official language should not be handled with levity. French is supposed to be taught and made compulsory right from the nursery and primary schools so that it will not be a great burden or task for the scholars to learn. Equally, due to the tremendous role being played by French in the development of Nigerian scholars, we need to re-engineer the teaching and

learning of the language at primary, post-primary and as a general course level in all higher institutions of learning in Nigeria in order to prepare various Nigerian scholars and professionals for the challenges of learning the language.

For the role of French to be well implemented, there must be encouragement on the part of the government, by providing the necessary facilities for the teaching and learning of the subject and this will arouse the keen interest of our scholars to keep abreast of the language and the reinforcement in learner's environment towards its teaching and learning.

Equally, French teachers and lecturers need to be encouraged in terms of remunerations; they need to be well paid so as to be readily prepared to give out their best without being forced to do so. The government also needs to encourage this team in the area of organizing seminars and conferences for them both locally and internationally. With all these facts, I strongly believe that the place of the French language in Nigeria will be more prominent than before.

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