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THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND POLITICS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The English language is part of Africa's heritage from colonialism and it has remained a foreign and second language for the majority of African countries. With focus on Nigeria, the use of the English language is for practically every aspect of life – social, cultural, political, educational, and economic activities. The role played by English in politics in Nigeria at both national and international levels is fully discussed. The negative influence of politics on the use of the English language in the country is not lost sight of in this paper. The focus of this paper, however, is on the use of the English language in politics in Nigeria. This paper shall give an insight into how political ideas, issues, thoughts, policies, and ideologies are communicated or expressed to the public in Nigeria via the English language. In order to facilitate comprehension of this paper, excerpts from political statements are extracted from both primary and secondary sources (books, magazines, newspapers, internet, and so on) for discussion. In conclusion, the paper summarizes the role of English in Nigeria and observes that there are some linguistic issues that call for an urgent attention as far as the linguistic situation in the country is concerned. At the end, suggestions and recommendations are made in connection with these issues.

Keywords: heritage, educational, colonialism, comprehension, ideologies.

Introduction

West Africa societies in the pre-colonial days had political structures that reflected the structure of kingship relationship. The Yoruba's Oba, the Ashanti's Chief, the Igbo's Eze, the Efik's Obong, the Benin's Oba, the Hausa's Emir or Sultan and so on were all based on balanced system of family relationship. With the advent of European colonialism in Africa, there emerged a new political class, with the formation of nation states and new organized political parties out of an agglomeration of traditional societies (comprising a large number of ethnic groups) that had existed as independent entities with long-established code of social and political conduct. The change of political structure was profound and it altered the basic socio-political values of honesty, transparency, sincerity, consensus, faithfulness, integrity and accountability of African traditional society. Western oriented political culture, language and ideologies have greatly influenced African politics, hence, the need for this paper. Since politics itself is a mass of lies, it has debased the use of the English Language because of wrong usage. Political statements in the newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, articles, manifestoes, and white papers vary from party to party and are invested with high blown and stale metaphors, clichés, outmoded stale phrases, dying and mixed metaphors, superfluous and meaningless words, verbal false limbs or operators, Latinized diction in addition to committing serious concord, tense, pronunciation and sentence structural errors. All this will

be discussed for proper clarity in the subsequent discussions, using excerpts from political statements taken from various sources.

Language is a human social phenomenon utilized by people in their everyday life. People often wrongly perceive the term in an abstract way. However, on the contrary, much of our understanding of reality is dependent on language. Language determines our models of the world and the way in which we represent the wrong. It is in view of their reality of language that Victoria, et al (2007:407), quoting Whiteman, warns that "language is not an abstract construction of the learned, or of dictionary makers, but is something arising out of the work, needs, ties, joys, affections, and tastes of long generations of humanity". This phenomenon undoubtedly permeates every aspect of man's life.

The qualities of language, as highlighted above, aptly apply to the English Language. It is now universally accepted that English is a world language. The language is used in all the corners of the globe. As McCrum (1986:56) succinctly puts it, "The English language surrounds us like a sea and, like the waters of the deep, it is full of mysteries". Stressing the universal nature of the language, Brumfit (1995:14) makes the following observation:

> Certainly it is now true that the English language is no longer the exclusive property of speakers of English as mother tongue or first language. The ownership of English rests with the people who use it, however, multi-lingual they are, or however monolingual they are.

Similarly, Baugh (1959:61) sees English as the mother tongue of nations. Adducing reasons for this status of the language, he asserts that the combined political influence, economic soundness, the commercial activities, the social well-being, and the scientific and cultural contributions of these nations to civilization account for the large number of the users of the language at the international level. The contributions of English to world civilization are undoubtedly, immeasurable.

Politics also belongs properly to man's nature. It concerns the organization of the affairs of a society for the common good of the society members. Every political system in a country strives as a duty to achieve peace, prevent social strife. Language emphasis on good citizenship, uphold justice and fair play and emphasises respect for people's fundamental rights, accepting as a fact with the people's ethics. In short, politics is so relevant to human society that it is often asserted that man is a political animal. On the other hand, some people regard politics as a dirty game. In actual fact, politics in itself is not dirty. The problem is that some people play it in a dirty way. If it is played according to rules, people benefit immensely from it. This is why Ojukwu (1989:23) in recognition of the need to play politics according to rules stresses that; every game, whether we call it football or politics, has its rules which must be obeyed. While in politics, we should avoid intellectual conceit or dishonesty. We should shine the light of conscience on the darkest crevices of our thoughts. It is this background that the thrust of the paper is to interrogate the nexus between politics and the use of English language.

The Relationship between the English Language and Politics in Nigeria

The role played by English in politics in this country can be viewed in several respects. One of these respects is its relevance in the political education of Nigeria. Political education of the citizens of a nation is of crucial importance in politics. As obtained in the areas of other human behaviours, handling politics successfully requires some skills. Handling political issues and people effectively by a politician entails possessing high level political skills. English plays an important role in the acquisition of political skills and is an important instrument in the hands of politicians as far as handling political issues and people is concerned. The language is an important medium through which politicians acquire political awareness from both books and the speeches of more experienced politicians. In fact, a politician who is well versed in English can easily win support from his listeners through the way he manipulates the language.

The usefulness of the English language in political education in Nigeria quite understood. The language is the main medium through which politicians acquire political education. Furthermore, it is the major medium through which politicians educate their followers. Politics as a course of study features prominently in the curriculum of the Nigerian educational system. English is the major language through which this course of study is taught and studied in the country's educational institutions. Similarly, it is an incontrovertible fact that the majority of the textbooks on politics are written in English. In short, English is often the medium used by people who decide to give one written political account or the other.

The place of language in the thinking ability of an individual should not be ignored while considering the role of English in politics in this country. For a politician to be able to influence and convince his followers, his ability to think effectively should not be in doubt. Language enhances people's ability to think. It is a creative power, as means through which we do most of our thinking. This is why Benzies (1940:22) emphasis that

> We can scarcely think at all without using words. Even if we do not speak, we are constantly using words in our heads to help us to think. It is hard to imagine thought going on at all without using words.

As the major language of politics in Nigeria, English performs the role of enhancing the quality of thought of Nigeria politicians in their political engagements. It is mainly in the English language that the majority of political activities are carried out. Speech making, declaration of manifestoes and electioneering campaigns are carried out mainly in the English language. In addition to that, the English language plays a crucial role as far as Nigerians' participation in international politics is concerned. English is the major language of globalization.It is through the use of English that Nigerians participate in international politics. The participation of Nigerians in international politics can hardly be possible without the English language. It is the major language of globalization. It is pertinent, however, to point out here that politics has also negatively influenced the use of English in Nigeria. The way most Nigerian politicians use the language has corrupted the English of Nigerians, particularly the young users of the language. As Ezema (1996:41) puts it, most speakers of political rallies and other public gatherings unwittingly corrupt the English of the young ones. In most marathon political speeches delivered by politicians, English is invariably the

language used. An obvious fact is that many of the politicians who deliver such speeches are not well trained in the use of English.

Methodology

High blown and Stale Metaphors

Some political statements will be used to illustrate high blown and stale metaphors.

- "The struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism like preferring candle lights to electricity light or handsome cabs to aeroplanes. Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument with which we shape our own purpose." (George Orwell: 2006).
- "Above all, we cannot play ducks and drakes with a native battery of idioms which prescribe egregious collocations of vocables as the basic, for instance, 'put up with' instead of 'tolerate' or 'put at a loss' instead of 'bewilder'". Professor Lancelot Hogben (Interglossia).
- "All the 'best people' from the gentlemen's clubs, and all the frantic fascist captions, united in common hatred of Socialism and bestial horror at the rising tide of the mass revolutionary movement, have turned to acts of provocation, to foul incendiarism, to medieval legends of poisoned wells, to legalize their own destruction of proletarian organizations, and rouse the agitated petty-bourgeoisie to chauvinistic fervor on behalf of the fight against the revolutionary way out of the crisis." Communist Pamphlet.

Each of these passages has faults of its own. The following qualities are common to all of them:

- Staleness of imagery,
- High blown metaphors
- Clichés
- Superfluous and meaningless words
- Outmoded stale phrases
- Lack of precision

The writers have ideas but cannot express them. This shows that political writing or speech of any kind is hackneyed. For the sake of meaning, such statements or writings should consist of simple words.

Dying Metaphors

Modern English is full of bad habits, both on the spoken and written levels. This is because politics uses decadent language which spreads by imitation. Examples of dying metaphors are 'take up the cudgel for', 'toe the line', 'stand shoulder to shoulder with', 'play into the hand of', 'no axe to grind', 'ride rough shod over', 'fishing in troubled waters', 'Achilles' heel', 'on the order of the day', and so on. Metaphors are meant to evoke thought and visual image, but these selected phrases are worn-out or dead metaphors because they have lost all evocative powers due to over-use. Many of these phrases appear in political writings or speeches without the users knowing their meaning. For example, the meaning of this phrase, "the hammer and the anvil" has been twisted or perverted by current users of the English language. Instead of the anvil breaking the hammer, the phrase is used the other way round. These representative samples above are not all listed here because they are bad and portray various linguistic vices that affect good or Standard English usage.

Operators or Verbal False Limbs

These save politicians the trouble of picking out appropriate verbs and nouns, and at the same time pad each sentence with extra syllables which give it an appearance of symmetry. Characteristic phrases often used in political speeches or writings are 'render inoperative', 'militate against', 'make contact with', 'be subjected to', 'give rise to', 'give grounds for', 'have the effect of', 'play a leading role (part) in', 'make itself felt', 'take effect', 'serve the purpose of', 'exhibit a tendency to', and so on. The keynote is the elimination of simple verbs. Instead of using a single word, such as 'break', 'stop', 'spoil', 'mend', 'kill', a verb becomes a phrase made up of a noun or adjective tacked on to some general-purpose verbs such as 'prove', 'serve', 'form', 'play', 'render'.

In addition, the passive voice is wherever possible used in preference to the active, and noun constructions are used instead of gerunds, for example, 'by examination of' instead of 'by examining'. The range of verbs is further cut down by means of the –ize and de-formations, and the banal statements are given an appearance of profundity by means of the un-formation. Simple conjunctions and prepositions are replaced by such phrases as *'with respect to'*, *'having regard to'*, *'the fact that'*, *'by dint of'*, *'in view of'*, *'in the interests of'*, *'on the hypothesis that'*, and ends with high sounding common phrases such as *'greatly to be desired'*, *'cannot be left out of account'*, *'a development to be expected in the near future'*, *'deserving a serious consideration'*, *'brought to a satisfactory conclusion'*, and so on. Simple verbs, nouns, adjectives and conjunctions that give crystal meaning are eliminated as the concrete melts into abstract. This is characteristic of all political writings or statements. New words and phrases are not invented and the implications have far-reaching effects on the use of the English language in politics.

Pretentious Dictions

Adjectives like *'epoch-making,' 'historic,' 'unforgettable,' 'age-old,' 'inevitable,' 'inexorable,' 'veritable,'* are used to dignify the sordid process of international politics, while writing that aims at glorifying war usually takes on an archaic or pretentious colour. The News Magazine of June25, 2007 has some examples of pretentious dictions as used by some politicians.

- "We were in a kind of a holy crusade."
- "Obasanjo's government has been an excellent one. Oh my God, they are leaving a very good legacy and I am not always generous with praises." (Prof Jibril Aminu).

Another caption from Dangote group (p.69) has this to say:

- "Wishing Chief Olusegun Obasanjo (GCFA) a victorious farewell."
- "We celebrate his exemplary leadership." (p.22).

Newly elected Governors also made a long list of political promises, using wrong forms of the English language. Some of their utterances are quoted below:

- "My vision is to transform Imo State into a model State..." (Ikedi Ohakim, Governor of Imo State).
- "I stand before you today with a profound sense of history, not with pride, but with humility, not with fulfillment, but with anticipation, not to assume power, but to offer my selfless service". (Dr Liyel Imoke, Governor of Cross River State).

The underlined words in the excerpts above are typical examples of pretentious utterances of politicians. They use political dictions to confuse the populace who are deceived and

manipulated in order to achieve their political intention. However, our concern is the decadent use of the English language by these politicians.

In an interview in a national daily some years back, David Mark, the present Senate President said,

> "I acknowledge that my views were controversial, my politics – radical, my tactics and strategies unorthodox, my executional approach total, harsh and merciless, my pronouncements provocative, but they were necessary surgical operations dictated by situation as we were in haste for positive results".

In a Newspaper interview entitled "After the Darkness Comes the Dawn," Atiku Abubakar intones:

> "…like many Nigerians, I will sit at home and meditate over what has befallen our nation and pray that God will disperse these dark clouds gathering over our country"

He also used the opportunity to speak on the state of the nation, thus:

> "All is not well with Nigeria. Democracy is in the throes of death in Nigeria and evil forces have laid siege to our country, threatening to unleash unspeakable horrors on our future. Our nation is enveloped in gloom and a sense of foreboding prevails. A transition that should have been marked with pomp and gaiety is now being mourned by most Nigerians. I found myself in a peculiar situation in which I had fought for my political and physical survival" (Pp. 26 & 27).

Because of the influence of politics, especially in Nigeria where we practise politics of affluence and power, it is pertinent to reiterate that political thoughts and ideologies corrupt the English language. In fact, our civilization is decadent and so is our language.

Meaningless Words

In political writings or speeches, Russian, German, French, Greek, and Latinized words and phrases are used to dress up a simple statement and give an air of scientific atmosphere to confuse people. Political writers do this to grace their writings. This increases slovenliness and vagueness and, also gives an archaic colour to speeches and writings. Such words and phrases are *'realm,' 'throne,' 'chariot,' 'mailed fist,' 'trident,' 'sword,' 'shield,' 'buckler,' 'banner,' 'jackboot'* and so on. Foreign words and expressions such as *'cul de sac,' 'dues ex machine,' 'mutatis mutandis,' 'status quo,'* and so on are used to give an air of culture and elegance. Except for the useful abbreviations such as i.e., e.g., and etc., there is no real need for any of the hundreds of foreign phrases now current in the English language. Bad writers, and especially political writers, are nearly always haunted by the notion that Latin or Greek words are grander than Saxon ones, and unnecessary words like *'expedite,' 'ameliorate,' 'extraneous,' 'deracinated,' 'clandestine,' 'sub aqueous,'* and hundreds of others which constantly gain ground from their Anglo-Saxon members.

Marxist Jargon

The jargon peculiar to Marxist writing (*hyena, hangman, cannibal, petty bourgeoisie, lackey, flunkey, mad dog, white guard, these gentry, etc.*) consists largely of words translated from

Russian, German, or French, but the normal way of coining a new word is to use Latin or Greek root with the appropriate affix. These expressions should be avoided because they blur meaning. They are political expressions abused and consciously used in a dishonest way to deceive people because these words cannot be reconciled with their main meaning.

The following excerpts from Vanguard: Book of Quotations reveal the true nature of politics in the world generally and Nigeria in particular:

- "Politics is always concerned with power" – **Alan Schoomaker.**
- "Political equality is a monstrous fiction, which by inspiring false ideas and vain expectations into men destined to travel in the obscure walks of laborious life, serves only to aggravate the real inequality, which it never can remove" – **Edmund Burke.**
- "In politics, as in a sick bed, men toss from side to side in the hope of lying more comfortably" – **Joham Wolfgang.**
- "If you wish the sympathy of broad masses, then you must tell them the crudest and most stupid things" – **Adolf Hitler.**
- "You cannot adopt politics as a profession and remain honest" – **Louis Howe**, an American writer.
- "Politics is a thoroughly foul, rotten world; we get nowhere through politics. It debases everything" – **Henry Miller**, an American writer.
- "Bad language is bound to make bad government" – **Ezra Pound.**

Politics is a serious threat to the English language, especially in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that the role played by English in Nigeria is quite tremendous, it should not be thought, however, that all is well with the linguistic situation in Nigeria. There are definitely certain urgent issues that call for attention as far as this situation is concerned. From our discussions and findings, it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political causes. It is not because of bad influence or bad habits of speaking and writing, but the effect of the cause – politics, which being a mass of lies, has reinforced political thoughts, writings and speeches. We can get rid of this by the following suggestions and recommendations:

- reducing the number of foreign words in our speeches and writings,
- avoiding long words when short ones can do,
- using active sentences instead of passive ones,
- avoiding out-worn metaphors and phrases that are archaic or obsolete, and
- using simple vocabularies and metaphors for clarity.

  In view of the fact that English performs diverse functions in Nigerian society, encompassing government, politics, law, science and industry, among others, there should be a more functional approach to the teaching of the language. The current international trend to make the teaching of the language more functional should be embraced. In line with this trend we now have such concepts as English as a language of wider communication (ELWC), English for special purposes (ESP) and English for Science and Technology (EST). These concepts should be taken into consideration while designing and revising the English curriculum in the country's educational system. This will make the teaching and learning of the language more functional.
- All the segments of Nigerian society should have equal access to the effective teaching and learning of English. The current disadvantages experienced by students of the

language in rural areas should be brought to an end. These students should have the same opportunity to enjoy modern trends in the teaching and learning of the language as their counterparts in urban areas. This will enable all Nigerian students of English to acquire adequate functional and communicative competence in the language irrespective of where they reside in the country.

One can argue that one could obey rules 1 – 7 above and still speak or write bad English, but one should realize that we are discussing the English language as an instrument for clear expression and communication, not for concealing thoughts. One should avoid political language because it is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable.

The fight against bad English language usage is not the exclusive concern of professional writers. Clear thinking is a panacea for political language regeneration. Think clearly, speak, and write accurately; send verbal refuse into linguistic dust bin where they belong and save the English language from decaying.

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