


## THE LANGUAGE OF NATION-BUILDING IN NIGERIA: A SYSTEMATIC EXPOSITION

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### Abstract

The general objective of this paper is to study the language of nation-building in Nigeria by making a systematic exposition. Language is perceived in the work as a means of communicating meaning, conveying emotional conditions, viewpoints and philosophies. Nation-building is underscored in the work as the framing or shaping of a national identity through the instrumentality of state power, aimed at unifying the people within the state and thereby engendering political, economic and socio-cultural sustainability and stability of the state. The problem of the study centers on a supposition that in multiethnic and multilingual Nigeria, the citizens invariably hear and understand what the others are saying in the exact language of delivering such communication. Hence, nation-building is on course in the Nigerian nation. Findings of the study however point towards the contrary dimensions of these suppositions, revealing that the assumed language of nation-building in the country has been the language of war, bitterness, animosity, recrimination and vendetta, as principally propagated by the political elite. The work recommends the inauguration of a national language policy in the country within an overall framework of a generic nation-building agenda.

Keywords: Language, language policy in Nigeria, nation-building, nation-building in Nigeria, Nigeria's national challenges

### Introduction

Scholars of different hues have expended mammoth amounts of research energy on attempts to locate the central point of Nigeria's protracted national problems (Ajayi, 2006; Famosaya, 2021; Gever et al, 2018; Mensah et al, 2019; Nwaoga et al, 2014; Okeke et al.(2021); Olasupo et al, 2017; Osaghae, 1998). But it appears as if the most daunting problems of the country are fundamentally interwoven with the issue of nation-building. Hence, the national adversity is neither separately insecurity as many researchers are wont to believe nor exclusively economic as others have tended to conclude (Adebayo & Adepoju, 2018; Adenike, 2021; Adofu & Alhassan, 2018; Asika & Nwangwu, 2021; Ewetan & Urhie, 2014; Omoyibo, & Akpomera, 2012). The germane issues are probably more squarely locatable within the political spheres of action but pungently have to do with nation-building. Therefore, from whatever angle sundry concerned crusaders and commentators engage with the surrounding trajectories of the Nigerian developmental challenges, the issue of nation-building (also describable as the national question) seems to remain at the center.

There are more than 370 ethnic groups and 500 spoken languages in Nigeria (Bell, 2021). The country is accordingly a multiethnic location with monumental language diversities. Besides the indigenous languages emanating from the multiplicity of ethnicities in the country, there is also the colonially imposed English language, subsisting as the official language in the country. The English language is very widely utilized for unofficial and informal communication in Nigeria. Furthermore on the position of the English language in these scenarios, Opara (2016) highlights that despite the "fact that definitions of words are culturally and contextually bound, because words carry meanings that make sense to members of a shared social environment, there is an underlying assumption in dispute resolution in

Nigeria, that all the words for dispute resolution should be in English – the second language” of the people.

The above scenario thus creates immense challenges for nation-building in the Nigerian territory – a multiethnic location. The central aspect of this problematic therefore centers on how to seamlessly engender nation-building in the country. Odeyemi (2014, p.6) relatedly highlights that “nation-building is an uphill struggle in multiethnic states”. Thus, integral to the generic conundrum in the Nigerian nation is the question bordering on the language of nation-building in the state. What has been the language of nation-building in Nigeria? What should be the language of nation-building in the country? The general objective of this paper therefore is to study the language of nation-building in Nigeria by making a systematic exposition.

### **Conceptualizing Language**

The paper continues by attempting to conceptualize language. Opara (2016, p.11) accordingly sees “language as a structure of meaning-giving and reality-creation, composed of words, phrases and sentences, as humans’ communications are based on these features, to describe an event, explain one’s emotions, needs, interests and fears, etc.”. Tidwell (1998) in Opara (2016, p.12) further perceives “language as an external behavior that allows the identification of a speaker as a member of some group. Opara (2016, p.11) additionally highlights that:

People from different cultures and social units perceive the world through the lens provided by their distinctive languages. Meaning that language provides repertoires of words that name the categories into which the language users have divided their world. In fact, definitions of words are linguistically, culturally and contextually bound. This is because words carry meanings that make sense to members of a shared social environment.

Citing Ali (2011) and Macaulay (2011), Okeke & Oboko (2021, pp.28-29) highlight that “language is a pungent means of conveying communication and transmitting emotional states, and philosophies, as language and discourse thus, bring together, organize and validate knowledge, group relationships and coordination”. Hence, “language communicates meaning, and without this quality of meaning communication, language translates to an irrelevant exercise. Yet, determining what meaning means in language is problematic but whatever language is, and however it is stored in the brain, it is a highly effective system of communication among human beings”.

### **The Meaning of Nation-building**

Nation-building is currently a shapeless concept among scholars. In these regards, some contemporary researchers tend to use nation-building and national (or even economic) development synonymously (and interchangeably). There are even articles that have interpreted nation building in terms of economic growth and stability. Some others equate it with efforts at national progress on the political, social and other indices of development in a country. Some scholars still use nation-building as a synonym of state building (Aderemi et al, 2019; Amadi & Alolote, 2019; Dinnen, 2007; Egbule, 2019a; Egbule, 2019b; Joseph & Anikelechi, 2019; Idike & Eme, 2015; Ojiagu et al, 2020; Onyebueke, 2020; Soetan & Osadola, 2018). In the process of these multifaceted theorizations, such authors usually fail to succinctly say what nation-building means. In place of definitive conceptualizations the researches under reference usually lead to some whirls of unhelpful positions seemingly bordering on the definition of nation-building.

But according to Eboh and Ukpong (1993) in Ita et al (2019, p.4) “the usual difficulties in nation-building could be up-turned: (i) if a country is blessed with truly committed, self-less, dedicated, patriotic, nationalistic leadership; a leadership with a clear sense of vision and dynamism, devoid of ethnic or tribal sentiments, and (ii) if there is desire by the diverse groups to live together in the spirit of oneness, patriotism, mutuality and reciprocity”. Borrowing from Eboh and Ukpong (1993) therefore, and concisely denoted, nation-building in this contribution refers to the process of achieving the desire by diverse groups in an envisaged or supposed nation-state “to live together in the spirit of oneness, patriotism, mutuality and reciprocity”. It is a function of the national leadership culture that is devoid of ethnic or tribal sentiments. And it actually needs to be underscored that for nation-building to be consequential the desire by the diverse groups to live together is essential. In the absence of such desires

what takes place would be either nation grouping at best and at worst perpetual nation feuding and cantankerous union of ethnic nationalities.

Hence, when Egbule (2019b, p.103) submits that “nation building is one of the un-accomplished desires in Nigeria, mainly because of numerous challenges”, the questions that follow should be: Whose desires are being referred to? How and when were these desires showcased? On the issue of hate speech in Nigeria for instance, as trigger of nation-building detraction in the country, Yakubu (2019, p.293) submits that “hate-speech-making is not peculiar to any single region or group in the country and that it cuts across a myriad of social and societal hierarchies”. The desire by the diverse groups in a multiethnic nation-state to live together is accordingly not only essential for the engendering of nation-building among such people, it is also important to ensure that the putative desires are not egotistically elite-hoisted.

Furthermore, nation-building as a concept can refer to the formidable building of a new nation from previously independent nationalities. Hence, Adigun (2015) in Egbule (2019, p. 81) opines that nation-building “means the systematic process of making a people, who hitherto are from different cultural, ethnic, religious, racial, or national backgrounds to feel they belong together under a nation”. Nation-building is finally describable as the piecing together or shaping of a national identity through the instrumentality of state power, with the aim of unifying the people within the state, in order to engender political, economic and socio-cultural viability and stability of the state (Deutsch & Foltz, 2010; Mylonas, 2021).

### **Statement of the Problem**

There seems to be some flawed conclusions that despite the existence of over 500 spoken languages in Nigeria (Bell, 2021) the citizens of the country invariably hear and understand what the others are saying in the exact language of delivering such messages. Bell (2021) also posits that there are more than 370 ethnic groups in Nigeria. The inaccurate suppositions also extend to the thoughts that these ethnic groups are obligated to learning and using the English language as lingua franca because it was validly bequeathed to the country by the erstwhile British colonizers. The role of language in nation-building is accordingly overlooked in the country. In any case, the nation's elite (particularly the political elite) even seem to be indifferent about nation-building. The elitist mantra is rather usually in the regards that “the unity of Nigeria is not negotiable or that the nation of Nigeria is an indissoluble and indivisible entity”. What language do the elite speak in propagating these renditions? When the elite class speaks in English language, who understands them? When citizens do not understand each other, and composite nationalities in a nation state speak to each other in a different foreign language and the elite and the masses communicate at cross purposes, it becomes truly far-fetched preaching nation-building in such a location. Yet nation-building is the most critical task of leaders in all multiethnic and plural societies and it must have its own language – the language of nation-building. What should be the language of nation-building in a multiethnic and multilingual Nigerian nation?

### **A Literature Review**

There is actually a dearth of related literature on the language of nation-building in Nigeria. However, on the awkward position of English as second language and medium of nation-building House (2003) argues against the widespread supposition that in the role of English language as lingua franca it poses a severe threat to multilingualism and national languages. He makes a distinction between ‘languages for identification’ and ‘languages for communication’. For the stance against unfairly attacking English as a killer language, House (2003) draws additional support from the results of three research works carried out at Hamburg University, the first one on the impact of English on discourse norms in significant genres in other languages; the second study on the nature of interactions in English as a lingua franca; and the third work focusing on supposed ‘international degree programmes’, in which the language of instruction is English. House (2003) finally makes some exploratory propositions for novel research paradigms of English as a lingua franca.

Opara (2016) studied language and culture as conflict resolution tools” and essentially explored “the challenges of English language in intercultural conflict resolution, emphasizing the need to consider the different uses of the language in national and transnational conflict resolution” (Opara, 2016, p.11). According to Akujobi, O. (2019, p.1) “the language scenario in Nigeria is complex, intricate and dense,

leading to an extreme degree of multilingualism due to an array of aboriginal, exogenous and pidgin languages. Then the need to break the language barrier in Nigeria to make for a free flow of mutually intelligible communication led to the introduction of the English language by the colonialists". Akujobi, O. (2019, p.1) further deposes that "the aboriginal languages lacked the power to unite members of the varied ethnic groups in the country but the English language has proven to meet the requirements of an official exogenous language to bond the varied ethnic groups in the heterogeneous state together for lucid communication, which is fundamental to the economic, social and political unity of the nation".

In a relevant work to the issue of "the language of nation-building in Nigeria" Yakubu (2019) studied the degree of correlation between the prevalence of hate speech in Nigeria and the prevailing poor state of nation building in the country. Perceiving hate speech as derogatory and prejudicial remarks against people of other ethnic origins, the study found that primordial ethnic affiliations and identities remain major driving forces behind the prevalence of hate speech in Nigeria. The research further found that the incidence of hate speech is usually more pronounced at periods preceding and following local and national elections in the country. Yakubu (2019) subsequently proposes legislative action in combating hate speech in Nigeria. The contribution finally advised tribal and regional leaders in the nation to retreat from making incendiary utterances that incite one group against the other.

Odeyemi (2014, p.1) in the study on "a political history of Nigeria and the crisis of ethnicity in nation-building" describes the nation-building situation in Nigeria as "nation-building in close call". This is akin to dismissing the position as close shave nation-building. Then the truth is that a near miss nation-building is as good as no nation-building. The upside of nation-building is integral to the process. According to Odeyemi (2014, p.11) therefore, "the cumulatively divisive impact of ethnicity in Nigeria over the decades, has constantly rendered nation-building experiment in the Nigerian federation most difficult, as indeed this process has been, till date, such a woeful failure". Anyanwu (2019) studied "ethno religious conflicts and nation building in Nigeria" and recommended "the inclusive theory of conflict resolution as one of the therapies needed to set the wheel of nation building in Nigeria on motion" (Anyanwu, 2019, p. 61).

Ineke (2018) examined the different institutional efforts at engendering nation building in Nigeria since 1960. The paper aimed at discussing the major factors that had negated the varied governmental efforts at creating a united Nigerian nation. The researcher suggests that these nation building efforts, especially during the prolonged years of military administration achieved mere fleeting successes as a result of some structural drawbacks. The work enumerated these deficient critical pillars to border on the military, security, language and education, submitting that unless the outlined matters are accorded core national colouration, nation building in Nigeria would be akin to building without pillars.

Shokpeka (2009) had alluded to the impossibility of building Nigeria into a united country, against the background of the divisive impact of a culture which traces citizens' state of origin in order to be availed opportunities for personal progress in the country. The work further found that in spite of the generic individualism of Nigerians, a more careful examination of the traditions of the composite ethnic groups would reveal the existence of linkages among them and such links could be emphasized in many ways for the successful evolution of a united country in Nigeria. In apparent despair, Akubor (2018) describes what currently occurs in Nigeria as nation bleeding, whereby professional politicians ceaselessly speak in dangerous and divisive tongues instead of speaking the language of harmony and concord. Then despite the foregoing, the fundamental gap in extant literature still borders on the identification of the historical and contemporary language of nation-building in the Nigerian space. This study attempts to fill this gap.

### **Language and Nation-building in Nigeria: A Nexus**

Language and nation-building are inextricably related. According to Opara, 2016, p.11) "language is used to resolve or escalate dispute, as dispute resolution relies heavily on words (language)". In other words, "language plays a crucial role in causing and resolving conflict" Opara, 2016, p.13). Dispute resolution on the other hand is a nation-building tool as the relations among hitherto disparate nationalities currently in amalgam as a nation-state frequently necessitates the occurrence of disputes and their resolutions. Ita et al (2019, p.4) in these regards opine that since independence in 1960, "Nigerian leaders have tried to make Nigeria a proper nation to no avail". But a contrary viewpoint is

canvassed in this contribution. The group that, more than any other class in the society has been beating the drums of war in Nigeria since independence in 1960 is the class of people usually called leaders.

The Nigeria-Biafra civil war in the country (1967-1970) was not brought on by the common people. It was squarely triggered by the shenanigans of the political and other elite. Currently and historically in the Nigerian nation therefore, the language of nation-building has been the language of war, bitterness, animosity, recrimination and vendetta. But the truth is that the language of nation-building in Nigeria and elsewhere is not definable by the literally connotation of language which has been duly acknowledged in this contribution. Metaphorically stated, the language of nation-building is the language of peace and concord. It is important at this point to highlight that the homogenization of a population is not nation-building.

Alesina & Reich (2015, p.1) thus argue that “homogeneity amongst people can be built with education, teaching a common language, building infrastructure for easier travel, but also by brute force such as prohibiting local cultures or even genocide. But Nations stay together (nation-building occurs) when citizens share enough values and preferences and can communicate with each other”. Prohibition of disparate ethnic solidarities in a nation-state is not an exercise in nation-building. The use of genocide and pogrom to keep insurgent ethnic groups in check is equally not the acme of nation-building. This then underscores the importance of the relevant language in nation-building – the language of amity and harmony.

## Conclusion

The paper concludes that there is a language bottleneck in the nation-building experimentations of the case study country. The language of nation-building is indeed, in short supply in the country. Invariably, practically and metaphorically, citizens and peoples of the various nationalities that inhabit the territory of Nigeria speak in different languages. The elite, particularly the political elite and the hoi polio, also deploy different languages in their intra and inter class communications. Contrary to the unifying demands of the language of nation-building, the various languages of the Nigerian peoples (languages spoken by Nigerians) engender misperceptions. Nation-building cannot therefore occur under such communicative contradictions. Hence, among the fundamental conditions precedent to the building of a nation out of the disparate national groups in the territory of Nigeria is the inauguration of a national language policy. Incidentally, it would entail the availability of enormous political will in the country and the cooperation of the people for such a unifying policy to be produced and put into operation.

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