

# Exploring The Relationship Between Language and National Harmony in Nigeria

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**Abstract-** *Nigeria is a linguistically diverse country with over 500 ethnic groups and numerous languages. This diversity has created challenges in achieving national harmony, particularly regarding language-related issues. This paper explores the relationship between language and national harmony in Nigeria, focusing on language discrimination, poor language policy implementation, and inadequate language planning. Using a critical literature review approach, the paper identifies the factors contributing to language-related issues in Nigeria and suggests ways to achieve a linguistically harmonious Nigeria. The findings indicate that language discrimination and poor language policy implementation negatively affect national unity and social cohesion. Inadequate language planning has also led to some languages being marginalized while others dominate. To achieve linguistic harmony in Nigeria, effective language planning is necessary, including efforts to promote multilingualism and protect minority languages. The paper concludes that promoting linguistic diversity and reducing language discrimination will help achieve national harmony in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** *Language, National Harmony, Linguistic Diversity*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country with over 250 ethnic groups and approximately 500 languages (Yahaya, 2015). The country's diversity has been a source of strength and also a challenge, especially in the area of language and national harmony. The need for understanding the language and national harmony nexus in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized, given its impact on social cohesion, national unity, and development.

Language is a vital component of national identity, and it plays a significant role in shaping social interactions, culture, and values. Nigeria's linguistic diversity has often been described as a source of

disunity, as language barriers pose a challenge to communication and interaction among ethnic groups (Aremu, 2016). However, some scholars argue that language can also be a unifying factor, as it provides a platform for cultural exchange and understanding (Azeez, 2015).

Nigeria's language policy, which recognizes English as the official language and promotes the use of indigenous languages, has been a subject of debate. Some scholars argue that the policy has not been effectively implemented, as English remains the dominant language in education, governance, and the media, while indigenous languages are neglected (Adebayo, 2019). This has contributed to a situation where many Nigerians, especially young people, have limited proficiency in their native languages, which further exacerbates the language barrier among ethnic groups.

The importance of language in national harmony can be seen in the efforts to promote multilingualism and linguistic diversity. For instance, the National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN) was established in 1991 to promote the study and use of indigenous languages. Also, the National Policy on Education of 2004 recognizes the importance of indigenous languages in education and recommends their use as a medium of instruction in the early years of schooling (Adebayo, 2019).

However, despite these efforts, the language barrier remains a significant challenge to national harmony. The dominance of English in education and governance has contributed to a situation where many Nigerians do not speak their native languages fluently. This has led to a loss of cultural identity and a weakening of social cohesion, as language is an essential aspect of culture (Azeez, 2015).

## **HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN NIGERIA**

The linguistic diversity of Nigeria can be traced back to pre-colonial times when various ethnic groups existed independently of one another, each with its distinct language and culture. The arrival of colonialism in the late 19th century brought about significant changes in the country's linguistic landscape. The British colonial administration introduced English as the official language, which became the lingua franca for communication between different ethnic groups (Yahaya, 2015).

The introduction of English as the official language led to the marginalization of indigenous languages, as English became the language of instruction in schools and the language of governance (Azeez, 2015). This policy had a profound impact on Nigeria's linguistic diversity, as many indigenous languages were gradually eroded, with English becoming the dominant language in education, media, and politics (Adebayo, 2019).

The impact of colonialism on linguistic diversity in Nigeria is still felt today, as the country continues to grapple with the challenge of balancing the promotion of indigenous languages and the use of English as a lingua franca. The dominance of English has led to a situation where many Nigerians, especially young people, are not proficient in their native languages (Aremu, 2016).

The National Policy on Education of 2004 recognized the importance of indigenous languages in education and recommended their use as a medium of instruction in the early years of schooling. Also, the establishment of the National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN) in 1991 was a significant step towards the promotion and development of indigenous languages (Adebayo, 2019).

Therefore, Nigeria's linguistic diversity has a long and complex history, from pre-colonial times to the present day. The introduction of English as the official language during colonialism had a profound impact on the country's linguistic landscape, leading to the marginalization of indigenous languages. The promotion of indigenous languages and multilingualism is crucial to building a harmonious

society in Nigeria. However, the dominance of English remains a significant challenge that needs to be addressed.

## **THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN NATIONAL UNITY AND HARMONY**

Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, is home to over 250 ethnic groups and 500 languages, making it one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world. Language has been identified as one of the key factors that affect national unity and harmony in Nigeria. The country's colonial legacy and post-colonial experiences have contributed to the fragmentation of the society along linguistic, ethnic, and religious lines.

Language is an essential aspect of national unity and plays a significant role in fostering social cohesion and national integration. In Nigeria, the role of language in national unity and harmony is often undermined due to the country's diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. However, scholars have identified the potential of language as a tool for promoting unity in Nigeria.

For instance, Adetugbo (2016) argues that language plays a significant role in fostering national unity in Nigeria. According to Adetugbo, language is the most important tool for communication, and a common language can facilitate communication and understanding among Nigerians of different ethnicities. Therefore, promoting the use of a common language, such as English, can help to foster national unity and harmony in Nigeria.

Similarly, Yusuf (2015) posits that language can serve as a unifying factor in Nigeria. Yusuf argues that the adoption of a lingua franca, such as English, can help to bridge the linguistic and cultural gaps among Nigerians and promote national unity. Furthermore, Yusuf notes that the use of a common language can help to promote economic development and social integration in Nigeria.

However, some scholars have criticized the emphasis on a common language as a solution to the

linguistic and ethnic diversity in Nigeria. For instance, Faseun (2017) argues that the imposition of a common language can lead to linguistic and cultural imperialism and erode the cultural identities of minority ethnic groups in Nigeria. Therefore, Faseun recommends the promotion of multilingualism and the recognition of linguistic diversity as a way of promoting national unity and harmony in Nigeria.

National harmony refers to the peaceful coexistence of different ethnic groups and communities within a nation. Language has been identified as one of the critical factors that influence national harmony in Nigeria. The country's linguistic and ethnic diversity has often been cited as a source of conflict and tension in Nigeria. However, scholars have identified the potential of language in promoting national harmony in Nigeria. For instance, Iloene (2015) argues that language can play a vital role in promoting national harmony in Nigeria. According to Iloene, the promotion of linguistic diversity can help to foster mutual respect and understanding among Nigerians of different ethnicities. Furthermore, Iloene notes that the recognition and protection of minority languages can help to promote social inclusion and reduce tension and conflict in Nigeria. Similarly, Adegbija (2018) posits that language can promote national harmony in Nigeria by fostering intercultural dialogue and understanding. Adegbija notes that the use of indigenous languages can help to preserve and promote Nigeria's cultural heritage and facilitate communication and interaction among different ethnic groups in Nigeria.

However, some scholars have criticized the role of language in promoting national harmony in Nigeria. For instance, Adedoyin and Ojo (2017) argue that language can also be a source of conflict and tension in Nigeria. This means that the imposition of a dominant language can lead to linguistic and cultural marginalization and exacerbate ethnic tensions in Nigeria. Therefore, Adedoyin and Ojo recommend the promotion of multilingualism and the recognition of linguistic diversity as a way of promoting national harmony and reducing conflict in Nigeria.

## **CHALLENGES OF LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN NIGERIA**

Nigeria is a country with over 250 ethnic groups, each with its language and culture. Despite the fact that English is the official language, multilingualism and linguistic diversity are a part of everyday life. Linguistic diversity has both positive and negative consequences for Nigerian society, and in this paper, we will explore the challenges posed by linguistic diversity in Nigeria.

### **1. Language as a tool for development and social cohesion**

Language plays an essential role in development and social cohesion. It is the means by which people communicate and exchange ideas, and as such, it is a vital tool for social and economic development. In Nigeria, the use of multiple languages presents a challenge for the government in promoting national unity and fostering economic development. There is a need to balance the promotion of linguistic diversity with the need for a common language to facilitate communication and understanding between different ethnic groups (Oloruntoya & Ijagbone, 2013).

### **2. The challenges of linguistic diversity in education**

Education is one of the critical areas where linguistic diversity poses challenges in Nigeria. The language of instruction in schools is often not the native language of the students, leading to communication barriers, poor academic performance, and high dropout rates. The use of a language that is not familiar to the students creates a situation where they struggle to understand what is being taught, leading to frustration and discouragement. There is a need for policies that promote the use of native languages in education to enhance learning outcomes and promote linguistic diversity (Amoo & Ogunlela, 2018).

### **3. The role of language in national identity and politics**

Linguistic diversity also plays a role in national identity and politics in Nigeria. The promotion of one language over others can lead to feelings of marginalization and discrimination among speakers of minority languages. This can fuel ethnic tensions and political unrest, as seen in the case of the Biafra secessionist movement in Nigeria, where language and

culture played a significant role in the conflict (Akindele & Adegbite, 2015). The government must, therefore, take into consideration the linguistic diversity of the country when formulating policies to promote national identity and unity.

#### **4. The challenges of language policy implementation**

One of the major challenges in addressing linguistic diversity in Nigeria is the implementation of language policies. The government has attempted to promote linguistic diversity by adopting policies that promote the use of native languages in education and other areas. However, the implementation of these policies has been inconsistent and often inadequate. There is a need for effective language policy implementation that takes into consideration the linguistic diversity of the country and promotes the use of native languages alongside the official language (Oyetade, 2014).

Linguistic diversity is a reality in Nigeria, and it poses both opportunities and challenges for the country. While linguistic diversity promotes cultural richness and social cohesion, it also presents challenges in education, national identity, and language policy implementation. The government must recognize the importance of linguistic diversity in promoting social and economic development while taking steps to address the challenges it poses.

### **GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING LINGUISTIC HARMONY IN NIGERIA**

Linguistic diversity is a defining feature of Nigeria, with over 500 languages spoken in the country. However, this diversity has also led to conflicts and misunderstandings, as well as challenges in communication and education. In response, the Nigerian government has implemented various policies and strategies to promote linguistic harmony and ensure that all Nigerians have access to education and information regardless of their linguistic background. This paper provides an extensive critical literature review of government policies and strategies for promoting linguistic harmony in Nigeria, with a focus on their effectiveness and impact.

#### **1. Language Policy:**

The Nigerian government has a language policy that recognizes three official languages: English, Hausa,

and Yoruba. However, this policy has been criticized for not adequately addressing the linguistic diversity of the country, as many other languages are excluded. Additionally, the policy does not provide clear guidelines for the use of these languages in education and government communication. According to Baba (2018), the language policy has not been effective in promoting linguistic harmony, as it has not adequately addressed the needs of minority languages and has not been effectively implemented.

#### **2. Mother-Tongue Education:**

To address the challenges of education in a linguistically diverse country, the Nigerian government has implemented mother-tongue education programs in primary schools. This strategy aims to improve students' learning outcomes by teaching them in their first language before transitioning to English. Studies have shown that mother-tongue education can significantly improve learning outcomes and promote linguistic harmony (Adedoyin & Ojo, 2017). However, the implementation of mother-tongue education has been challenging, with many schools lacking qualified teachers and appropriate teaching materials.

#### **3. Language Promotion:**

The Nigerian government has also implemented various language promotion programs to encourage the use of minority languages and preserve Nigeria's linguistic heritage. These programs include language festivals, language immersion programs, and the establishment of language institutes. However, these programs have been criticized for being underfunded and not adequately addressing the needs of minority languages (Akindele, 2019).

#### **4. National Language Commission:**

In 2019, the Nigerian government established the National Language Commission (NLC) to promote linguistic harmony and development in the country. The NLC is responsible for coordinating language policies and programs and promoting research on Nigerian languages. While the establishment of the NLC has been praised as a positive step towards promoting linguistic harmony, its effectiveness is yet to be evaluated (Adedoyin & Ojo, 2019).

Despite the various policies and strategies implemented by the Nigerian government to promote linguistic harmony, their effectiveness and impact



have been limited. Akindele (2019) notes that these policies have not been adequately funded and implemented, and as a result, they have not been able to address the complex linguistic challenges facing Nigeria. Additionally, there has been a lack of comprehensive research on the effectiveness of these policies and strategies, making it difficult to evaluate their impact.

## ROLE OF EDUCATION IN FOSTERING LINGUISTIC HARMONY

Education plays a critical role in promoting linguistic harmony by providing opportunities for individuals to learn and understand different languages and cultures. In linguistically diverse countries like Nigeria, education can also serve as a tool for promoting social cohesion and national unity.

- 1. Language Education:** Language education is one of the primary ways in which education can promote linguistic harmony. By providing students with opportunities to learn different languages, education can promote cross-cultural understanding and communication. Language education can also help to preserve minority languages and promote cultural diversity. In Nigeria, the implementation of mother-tongue education programs has been shown to improve learning outcomes and promote linguistic harmony (Adedoyin & Ojo, 2017).
- 2. Multilingual Education:** Multilingual education refers to educational programs that use multiple languages as mediums of instruction. This approach recognizes the linguistic diversity of a country and promotes the development of multilingualism among students. Multilingual education can help to promote linguistic harmony by encouraging the use of different languages and promoting cross-cultural understanding (Garcia & Wei, 2014). However, the implementation of multilingual education has been challenging, with many schools lacking qualified teachers and appropriate teaching materials.
- 3. Cultural Education:** Cultural education is another way in which education can promote linguistic harmony. By providing students with opportunities to learn about different cultures,

education can help to promote cross-cultural understanding and respect. Cultural education can also promote the preservation of cultural heritage and diversity. In Nigeria, cultural education programs have been implemented to promote the preservation of Nigerian culture and promote cultural diversity.

- 4. Teacher Education:** Teacher education is essential for promoting linguistic harmony, as teachers play a critical role in shaping students' attitudes towards different languages and cultures. Teacher education programs can help to promote cross-cultural understanding and prepare teachers to work in linguistically diverse classrooms. However, teacher education programs in Nigeria have been criticized for not adequately addressing the needs of multilingual classrooms (Baba, 2018).

While education can play a critical role in fostering linguistic harmony, its effectiveness and impact have been limited. In Nigeria, the implementation of language education and multilingual education programs has been challenging, with many schools lacking qualified teachers and appropriate teaching materials (Adedoyin & Ojo, 2017). Additionally, teacher education programs have not adequately addressed the needs of multilingual classrooms, leading to challenges in promoting linguistic harmony (Baba, 2018).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the relationship between language and national harmony in Nigeria is complex, given the country's linguistic diversity. While language can be a source of disunity, it can also be a unifying factor when effectively harnessed. The promotion of linguistic diversity and multilingualism is crucial to building a harmonious society in Nigeria. However, the dominance of English in education and governance remains a significant challenge that needs to be addressed. Linguistic diversity is a defining feature of Nigeria, and promoting linguistic harmony is crucial for ensuring that all Nigerians have access to education and information. The Nigerian government has implemented various policies and strategies to address these challenges, including language policy,

mother-tongue education, language promotion, and the establishment of the National Language Commission. While these policies and strategies are positive steps towards promoting linguistic harmony, their effectiveness and impact have been limited due to underfunding and inadequate implementation. Further research is needed to evaluate the impact of these policies and strategies and identify areas for improvement.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Nigeria is a country with diverse languages, cultures, and religions, which can sometimes lead to conflicts and tensions among its people. To promote national harmony and unity, it is important to explore the relationship between language and national harmony and make recommendations on how to foster a more peaceful and inclusive society. Here are some recommendations:

1. Promote Multilingualism: Nigeria should encourage the learning and use of multiple languages, not just English, as a way of promoting diversity and inclusivity. This can be done through language immersion programs, bilingual education, and the creation of language centers.
2. Encourage Language Exchange Programs: Language exchange programs between different regions in Nigeria can help people to appreciate and understand each other's cultures, languages, and beliefs. These programs can be facilitated through schools, community centers, and non-governmental organizations.
3. Develop a National Language Policy: Nigeria should develop a comprehensive language policy that promotes the use of all the country's languages and ensures that no language is marginalized. The policy should include guidelines for language teaching, language use in official settings, and language preservation.
4. Encourage Language Tolerance: Nigeria should encourage language tolerance and discourage language-based discrimination. This can be done through public awareness campaigns, education, and legal measures that protect linguistic rights.
5. Encourage Inter-Ethnic Marriages: Inter-ethnic marriages can promote national harmony by breaking down linguistic and cultural barriers.

Nigeria should encourage and support such marriages through cultural and legal measures.

6. Encourage Multicultural Events: Multicultural events such as festivals, cultural shows, and exhibitions can promote understanding and appreciation of different languages and cultures. Nigeria should encourage and support such events at national, regional, and local levels.
7. Encourage Cultural Exchange Programs: Cultural exchange programs between different regions in Nigeria can promote understanding and appreciation of different languages and cultures. Nigeria should encourage and support such programs through schools, community centers, and non-governmental organizations.

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