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## Politics and The Use of The English Language in Nigeria

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*Language plays a vital role in the way a society's political structure is built and sustained. Beyond the obvious fact that it is the vehicle through which political thinking is expressed it is the means by which its very essence is defined and understood. The legitimization of political processes occurs primarily through discourse and vivid representations. The language used conveys both semantic meaning as well as the political beliefs which underpin any given statement. Closely bound up with the function of language, is also the question of choice including ethical concerns and matters of social responsibility. Therefore since society is ordered according to the dictates of dominant political ideas, the language used in politics needs to be examined for the impact and the influence it exerts. History has determined the fact that English is the medium of official communication in Nigeria thus it is important to explore the interplay between the English language and politics. This article will focus on strategies employed in language manipulation, the ethics of practice and the resultant effect on the nation's thinking. The argument here is that there is an essential link between the decline of the English language in Nigeria and the political situation that presently exists.*

### Introduction

It is frequently said that modern life is degenerating, that civilization is becoming increasingly decadent, and in some important ways our use of language also shares in this general malaise. Though there have been criticisms about the decline in standards of speech and writing in English all over the world, the idea that we should actively fight the abuse of the language is rarely discussed. Perhaps the reason for this is the generally held belief that language is inherently organic in nature and therefore subject to change. However some of the innovations in the way language is used is inimical to the clarity that good language use should strive to achieve. Nonetheless it is possible to wrest control of this instrument of social interaction; indeed there is urgent need to do so, particularly for reasons that are concerned with the progressive development of society.

Political discourse transmits and reinforces the ideas and ways of a dominant group. Through the content of its language, certain views pertaining to social arrangements become known, understood and accepted, a process which Fairclough (1989) refers to as 'the manufacture of consent'. This phrase aptly sums up the political indoctrination which occurs when words are repeated without due consideration for what they actually mean. For example, the terms '*stakeholder*' and '*dividends*' are currently and commonly used in political language in Nigeria. It seems that Nigerians are all now stakeholders in one thing or another. Similarly, every Nigerian wants a share of *dividends* of whatever is supposed to be due to him/her.

The two terms '*stakeholder*' and '*dividends*' have been borrowed from the world of commerce. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines a 'stake' as money that has been invested in a business. The phrase 'to have a stake' in something, means to own part of a business or to be party to a plan. If one claims ownership of something it is of some relevance. Consequently, by inviting the general public to consider itself part of a 'stakeholder economy', the government encourages support for programmes which are informed by its own ethics while simultaneously muting criticism. By implication, if there are problems with the programmes, then the public is complicit and cannot therefore point a finger of blame at those in authority. The constant repetition of words and phrases such as these by the government and eventually by the general public is a subtle but more effective way of manipulating opinion than outright propaganda. Therefore, the view of modern linguistics which sees language as a social activity by which social control is exerted and unity is achieved, is an acceptable representation of the function language serves in society.

It is interesting to find that in certain political situations, concrete issues seem to melt into the abstract as soon as particularly important matters are raised. For instance a person being interviewed suddenly begins to talk in clichés and to hide behind often repeated words like '*grassroots*', '*development*', '*sustainable*'.

It is not surprising that the public sits up and takes notice when an individual with an original turn of phrase arrives on the scene. A closer examination of political speeches reveals statements which consist of words chosen to confuse rather than for their actual

*toe the line* etc. These are sometimes used without knowledge of their meaning, or are spelt wrongly thereby changing the original meaning. For instance, the last example is often written as *to tow the line* which does not mean to obey what someone in authority tells a subordinate to do, but instead means to pull the end of a rope. Such combinations of incompatible metaphors are a clear indication that the writer has not properly learnt the phrase.

**False Verbal Attachments:** These are popular because they save us the trouble of finding appropriate verbs and nouns, and in addition pad out sentences with extra syllables to give the appearance of symmetry. Examples are to *militate against*, *make contact with*, *be subjected to*, *make itself felt*, *take effect from*, *give the matter a lot of thought*, etc. What is significant here is the elimination of simple verbs. Words such as *as spoil*, *affect*, *start* and *think* which are precise are abandoned in favour of the ones cited above. Similarly, noun constructions are used instead of gerunds, e.g. *by examination of* instead of *by examining*. At other times ordinary statements appear profound when conjunctions and prepositions are replaced with phrases such as *with respect to*, *in the interests of*, *in view of*, etc. Then in an attempt to save ineffectual sentences, high sounding phrases such as *greatly to be desired*, *cannot be left out of account*, *in the near future*, and *brought to a satisfactory conclusion* are placed at the end. Some may argue and they would in fact be right, that not much would be left in our speech or writing if these attachments are taken out. For one thing our utterances or written statements will certainly become shorter, but they will also be lot clearer and more precise. Are these not the most important aims of a language? According to Halliday (1975, 1978) the general preference for the passive voice rather than the more powerful active is simply because it adds more volume to written statements and gives the immediate visual impression that the writer has a lot to say.

**Word Choice:** Nearly all writers in English believe that words of Latin and Greek origin are an indication of a superior intellect. Words like *ameliorate*, *extraneous*, *extrapolate*, *apprehend*, *prima facie*, *volte-face* and many others labeled as 'formal' in the Oxford Dictionary abound in both our speech and writing. Yet one can be almost certain that when used in speech less than half the audience have any idea of what is meant. Words like *phenomenon*,

*categorical, constitute, effective, phenomenon* which have a certain ring when pronounced with emphasis are great favourites because they give an impression of scientific objectivity and solidity. This kind of word choice is frequently evident in situations where people want to display their learning, or to insidiously claim power over others. The use of such words has become so much a part of our repertoire that we are no longer even conscious of the effect they have on others.

Many overtly political words are abused in a similar fashion. A word like *terrorism* is applied to almost any kind of dissenting action. Another like *democracy* has similarly acquired meanings quite different from its original definition of a government of the people, for the people, and by the people. So called democracies around the world practice different forms of it which cannot be reconciled with each other and yet would fiercely oppose any hint that their interpretation is contrary to its true meaning. What is generally agreed is that to be called a democratic country is a desirable description. If all of these little language ploys mentioned above are repeated frequently enough, it eventually leads to mass imitation resulting in a certain kind of writing. An example is this piece from a national daily on *God-fatherism and Nigerian Politics*:

This ignoble trend has egregiously taken a monstrous and dangerous dimension with adverse consequences for our young democracy. The concomitant repercussions of such selfish and precarious ventures have already impacted on democracy in the forms of political intrigues, in-fighting, impeachments, removals of leaders, assassinations, political arson threats, blackmail, subterfuge, intimidation and outright open confrontations.

**Below is my attempt at simplifying its message:**

This shameful trend has taken an extremely bad and dangerous dimension with negative consequences for our young democracy. The effects of such selfish activities are already evident in open confrontations, intrigues, intimidation, impeachments, and assassinations.

Perhaps this passage is an extreme example of present day English in Nigeria but it serves to illustrate the point that writing no longer entails choosing words for the sake of their meaning, or inventing fresh images which enhance it, but rather of sticking together long

strips of words which have been previously arranged by someone else.

The attraction of this way of constructing sentences is that it demands little mental effort once the habit is acquired. The mental exertion that writing requires is reduced and the act of it becomes quicker. Interestingly, familiarity with such arrangements allows us to think that we grasp what is being said even when this is not true. However, the worse effect is that it discourages critical thought. Using language in this manner turns the individual into a mechanical imitator who produces words which sound appropriate but involves very little of his brain power in the task. It is precisely at this point, that the link between politics and the debasement of language becomes clear.

George Orwell (1983), the famous writer of *Animal Farm* and *1984*, once observed that where language problems are concerned, it seems that 'an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form'. To illustrate his argument, he went on to offer the example of a man who takes to drinking because he feels himself to be a failure, and who then eventually fails because he drinks. A similar thing appears to have happened to the English language in Nigeria. As the vehicle for communication in various fields such as education, science, technology, literature, mass media, and public administration, it obviously occupies a central place in Nigerian life.

On many occasions we readily acknowledge that we are losing grasp of the language yet our use of it is becoming increasingly careless and inaccurate because of a lack of will to tackle our shortcomings. Our approach to the problem has been to recognize it, but then to do nothing about it. This inaction probably springs from what is generally known as the 'Nigerian mentality' which is a reference to peculiarly negative ideas including an extremely apathetic attitude. The decline that is apparent in our use of English can be attributed to this negligent 'mentality', but the interesting irony is, is that the way we handle the language acts simultaneously to reinforce the very same state of mind. English in Nigeria is full of bad habits which appear to spread by imitation. The main argument here is that the decline of the English language in Nigeria can also to some degree be attributed to political manipulation.

Ultimately political beliefs guide and justify individual

behaviour. They shape personal as well as national values, intentions, goals, and preferences for collective action. This paper therefore adopts the position that because of the natural interplay between language and politics, the decline of a language must necessarily impact on society in very significant ways.

### Conclusion

The euphemisms and vagueness prevalent in political discourse corrupts language and as it acquires hypnotic qualities, it eventually succeeds in influencing and corrupting thought. But the situation is not entirely hopeless because this trend is reversible. Competence in the use of English is an urgent necessity for the development of Nigeria. If we have to speak or write it, then we are obligated to do so properly because language is an instrument for expression and not the means by which to conceal or indeed prevent thought. If we are willing to make a concerted effort to get rid of bad language habits, it would enable us not only to express ourselves more clearly, but also, to think more productively which will in turn bring about the political regeneration we crave in Nigeria.

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