

Language as a Factor in Participation and Exclusion

Glory Ikechukwu Worukwo

Department of English and Communication Art
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education
Rumuolumeni P.M.B. 5047, Port Harcourt
Rivers State, Nigeria
Email: gloryworukwo@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This paper starts by recognizing the existence of different criteria within a society which bring about both the exclusion and the participation of individuals within the society. The paper presents some of the parameters for classification as color; race, gender, religion, occupation, social class, ethnicity, caste, age, etc., all of which function to create a class of the excluded within the society. The various ways in which language creates a class of the excluded are discussed in turn. The paper concludes by suggesting that speakers of the languages that are accorded prestige in the society should take steps to empower the language of the excluded as this will make for the participation of more citizens in official domains, and therefore national development.
Keywords: Language, Participation, Exclusion.

Introduction

A common feature of society is the existence of different recognizable groups within the society. While this may be just for the purpose of classification, it can also serve as a determinant for participation or exclusion of the members of the different groups making up the society. A given society can be classified on the basis of color, race, nationality, ethnicity, gender, age, physical condition, social class, caste, religion, occupation as well as language.

Many of these parameters can be put to positive use on some occasions, but quite often they are used to exclude some members of a society. In many societies, for example, females are not allowed to handle certain positions even when they are better qualified than their male counterparts, which therefore means that the recognition of the existence-of gender differences is just to deny members of a particular gender access to certain positions in the society, their eligibility notwithstanding.

Language and Exclusion

According to Anderson (1985) "language is not an instrument of exclusion in principle, anyone can learn any language". This statement tries to draw attention to the fact that it is what people do with language that matters, and fails to recognize that though any one can learn any language, it is not everyone that has access to learn most of the languages that affect their daily lives. Many languages also serve as identity for

different cultural and ethnic groups. For language, therefore, to be used in differentiating people into groups also means that it can be used to exclude some members of the society since language variation is capable of acting as a bond among the speakers of a particular variety. Inability to speak a given variety can therefore lead to exclusion from certain privileges in the society, while speakers of such a variety enjoy a high level of participation. There are some well-known measures that determine the participation and exclusion of members on the grounds of language.

Language Requirements

One source of exclusion are language requirements. When the condition for certain positions in the society is the possession of a given language, it automatically means that people that cannot speak the language in question are excluded from such positions.

Literacy

Literacy is another criterion for participation and exclusion in the modern world. Using literacy as the basis for occupying certain positions in the society means that those who cannot read and write are excluded from such positions. This factor is gaining so much ground that even in some traditional African societies, people who are illiterate are not allowed to be community/family heads on the ground that they cannot effectively represent their communities outside. What this means is that, given the fact that the majority of members of such a society are illiterate, more people are excluded on the grounds of literacy, while just few are able to participate in such spheres. This ugly trend can, however, be reversed if government takes the issue of mass literacy more seriously since the result will be the participation of more citizens in the areas where literacy is made a prerequisite. In the absence of a mass literacy programme, more attention can be given to oral communication as this will enable more people to participate in the affairs of the community.

Official Language

A good number of African countries have adopted one Indo-European language or the other as official language. The favoured languages are English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese, which are used in all official circles in these African countries. Participation in any official domain therefore depends on the ability to operate in the relevant European language: English in Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, etc, French in Togo, Burkina Faso, and DR Congo, Spanish in Equatorial Guinea, and Portuguese in Angola and Mozambique. Only the educated minority in these countries, who by virtue of their formal education can operate in these European languages, have access to all official positions in these countries, to the exclusion of the uneducated minority that cannot speak the official language of the country. The adoption of an alien language as official language automatically excludes a good number of the citizenry from participating in official domains.

Medium of Instruction in Schools

Most African children suffer exclusion in early primary education because rather than being taught in their mother tongues at this early stage, they are taught in some European language with which they have had little or no contact. Such a child is therefore faced with the dual problem of first learning an alien language as well as the content taught in the language. This situation places them at a disadvantage when compared to their privileged counterparts who are already proficient in the imported language. A good number of these children are unable to complete their education and are consequently excluded from those domains that require proficiency in the alien language. Conversely, those for whom the alien language is a first language cope better in the school subjects since the medium of instruction is their LI. Such children therefore progress faster than their disadvantaged counterparts, and eventually qualify for participation in the official domains of the society.

Language Proscription

Language proscription usually results when there are government policies that favour some languages within a society. Such policies accord recognition to some of the languages within the society to the exclusion of others, and even when there is no obvious statement on the proscription of some of the languages, the languages that are not included in the official policies stand proscribed since their use is not tolerated in those domains where the recognized languages are used. There are international organizations in Nigeria, for example, where the staff are only allowed to speak a European language, French or English, to the exclusion of any Nigerian language. This policy automatically excludes all those that are unable to operate in these European languages from functioning in such organizations.

Language Stigmatization

Language prejudice can bring about unfavorable attitude to language. This is due to wrong judgments that people make about languages based on the general "feel" of the language by describing some languages or accents as "beautiful", "harsh", "melodious", etc. This attitude can determine the inclusion or exclusion of the speakers of the affected variety in high culture. In the U.S, for example, children who speak Black English are usually stigmatized. A language can also be stigmatized when it is associated with a negative situation like oppression, as is the case with Afrikaans in South Africa.

Majority/Minority Language Status

This situation prevails in multilingual societies. Languages can be different terms of the number of speakers and spread. In such circumstances, speakers of the minority languages experience exclusion as their languages are not accorded any recognized function in the society. The minority languages are largely ignored by the language policy of such societies. The situation is different with the majority languages, whose speakers are able to occupy positions of influence in the society.

Neglect of Immigrant Language

Many countries today have a good number of immigrant population. In a majority of cases, the immigrant population maintain their language, such as Spanish among the Hispanic population in America, or develop a peculiar form of speech for themselves, such as Black English in the United States. To neglect the language of the immigrants is tantamount to exclusion, especially when the immigrants contribute significantly to the growth of the host community.

Empowerment through Language

In any society, language policies can also bring about participation and exclusion because it locates language within the social structure. Policies about language accord prestige and power to members of the society whose language is used in official domains. The result is that speakers of varieties that are not used in high culture are excluded from such domains, thereby making them, weaker and disadvantaged when compared to their other counterparts.

Conclusion

Although language is useful in classification and identification within a society, it can equally be manipulated for participation and exclusion. Those members of the society, especially in Africa, who have benefited immensely by virtue of having access to power should encourage the excluded members of the society by empowering their languages through development, use in education, and the provision of incentives to those that use or study such languages. An approach such as this will bring about the participation of a larger number of the members of the society in the higher domains of the society.

References

- Alexander, N. (1989). *Language policy and National Unity in South Africa Azania*. Cape Town: Buchu Books.
- Anderson, B. (1985). *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Ansre, G. (1976). *National Development and Language: A Prologue to Language Policy Formulation and Implementation*. Paper delivered at the 12th West African languages Congress, University of Ife, Ile-Ife, (Mimeo).
- Bamgbose, A. (1991). *Language and the Nation*. Edinburgh: Edinburg University Press.
- Benjamin, I. (1994). *Language and the struggle for racial equality in the development of a non-racial Southern African nation*. In Richard Fardon and Graham Furniss (eds). *African Languages, Development and the State*, 97110. London: Routledge.
- Cooper, R. L. (1989). *Language Planning and Social Change*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- De Kadt, E. (1991). Language, Power and Emancipation: A South African Perspective. *Theoria*, October, 1-15.
- Grandguillaue, G. (1997). Le Maghreb confronte a ITsiamisme: Arabisation et demagogie en Algerie. *Le Monde diplamtique*, Ferrier.
- Fishman, J. A. Andrew, W. C. and Alma R. L. (eds.) (1996). Post-Imperial English. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Ikara, B. (1982). Towards Participatory Democracy and the Official Use and Application of Local Languages in Nigeria: ATentative Survey of the Linguistic Imperative in the Changing socio-political order in the Northern States of Nigeria. In Bashir Ikara (Ed.) *Nigerian Languages and cultural Development 119-137. Lagos: The National language Centre, federal Ministry of Education.*
- Kaschula, R. H. and Christine, A. (1995). *Communicating A cross Cultures in South Africa: Toward a Critical Language Awareness*, Johannesburg: Hodder and Stoughton & Witwatersrand University Press.
- Labov, W. (1972). *Language in the Inner City: Studies in Black English Vernacular*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- McLean, D. and Kay McCormick (1996). English in South Africa 1940- 1996. In Fishman, Conrad and Rubai Lopez (eds) (1996), 303- 337.
- NEPI (1992). Language: report of the NEPI Language Research group (A Project of the national education. Co-ordinating Committee). Cape Town: O.U.P. NECC.
- Ngugi, Wa Thiong'o (1985). The Language of African Literature. *New Left Review*, April-June, 109-127.
- Oyelaran, O. (1990). Language, Marginalization and National Development in Nigeria. In E. Nolue Emenanjo (ed.) *Multilingualism, Minority Language and language Policy in Nigeria* 20-30, Agbor: Central Books Ltd.
- Philipson, R. and Tove, S.K. (eds.) 91995). *Linguistic Human Rights: Overcoming Linguistic Discrimination*. Berlin Mouton de gruyter.
- Phillipson, R. M. R. and Tove S.K. (1995). Introduction. In Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (eds.) (1995), 1-22.
- Republic of South Africa (1996). *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. 1996.* (Act 108 of 1996 as adopted on 8 May 1996 by the Constitutional Assembly).
- SABC (1995). Language Policy of the SABC (Drafted 20 October 1994, Approved 16 February 1995) Mimeo.
- Selleck, R. J.W. (1980). The trouble with my looking glass: A study of the attitude of Australians to Germans during the Great War. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 6, 1-25.

- Smolicz, J.J. (1995). Australia's language policies and minority rights: a core value perspective. In Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (eds.) (1995), 234-252.
- Tollefson, J. W. (1991). *Planning Language Planning Inequality*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Unesco-Unicef (1990). *Towards Education For All in Africa: Starting Point* (Special Breda-Stat). Dakar: Unicef-Unesco.
- Wardhaugh, (1992). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistic* (Second Edition). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Webb, V. (1991). Conflict in South African Society and the role of Language, LAUD Paper No. 232 Duisburg: LAUD.
- Wusocka, M. (1998). Cataclysm for Anglicisms? *The Warsaw voice (Polish and Central European review)*, February 15, No. 7 486.