Language and Power in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Language remains an essential instrument for shaping political, economic and social landscapes in Nigeria, especially in an era of technological explosion in the 21st century. This paper explores language as it functions as both a means of communication and a tool to assert political dominance, negotiate identities and reinforce power structures in Nigeria. With the advent of digital communication, and media in the 21st century, the dynamics of language usage and power have transformed, allowing certain languages to gain prominent and political dominance while others face marginalization. This paper discussed the challenges of political dominance by these structures and explored the role of English Language as a Lingua franca in political systems. The paper also examined how language policies, education and technology influences power; relative to the 21st century attributes. The paper analyzed case studies to investigate the intersection of language and power in the 21st century.

Keywords: Language, Power, 21st Century, Media, Lingua Franca

Introduction

The desire to acquire and retain power has always been a great human concern from the 1st Century unto the present. "Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault, 1979: 63).

Power is dynamic in its usage; Hence, it can be transformed from one form to another. Moreover, the issue of studying the mechanisms of power realization is multidimensional. The elusive and value-laden nature of power has led to a plurality of theoretical and conceptual approaches and is the object of an interdisciplinary study of such scientific branches as philosophy, psychology, political science, sociology, journalism and linguistics. From our perspective, we will consider this subject 'Power' and its dynamics, as it relates to language, our region, 'Nigeria' and present age, 'the 21st Century'. Aside from the role of language as a tool in communication, it is also a tool of persuasion used strategically in the domains of Business, Law, Politics, Media, Advertising/Marketing, etc.

In the modern global landscape, language serves as a critical medium of expression, cultural identity and influence. This role is particularly significant in Nigeria, where diverse linguistic backgrounds shape the nation's political, economic, and social dimensions. Language in politics is also wielded as a powerful tool to positively self-represent and misrepresent one's political opponents (Adegbija, 2004). Language is more than a tool for communication; it embodies power dynamics and cultural identities, especially in the 21st century, a period marked by rapid technological evolution and digital communication (Nwokike, 2023). Moreover, in the present-day digital epoch, new bits of knowledge are produced continuously, circulated and consumed as discourses (economic, organizational, managerial, political or educational) and disseminated through discourse technologies (Olabanjo, 2023). Hence, this paper aims at dissecting the intersection of modern-Day Technology, Media, Language in the Nigerian political landscape.

The Importance of Language

Without Language, there will be no communication, and when there is no communication, no interaction nor development can take place. The importance of communication to man is incalculable, especially when daily human interaction is considered. In political and social policy, "Language functions as a vehicle of interaction and an instrument of communication, although it has always possessed an added cultural importance as a tool of the dominant ideology. Language is a powerful tool of control used by the colonial powers" (Black, 2015).

Nigeria as a diverse and multi lingua country adopts English language as a lingua franca, and English plays a central role in the marketing, socio-cultural, Business and political domain. Its adoption as the official language fosters communication across Nigeria's diverse linguistic groups (Blackledge, 2005).

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework provides the foundation for understanding the interplay between language and power in the 21st-century Nigerian political landscape. This study draws from several linguistic, sociopolitical, and discourse theories to examine how language serves as a tool for political dominance, identity negotiation, and power reinforcement.

1. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) serves as a key theoretical lens for examining the role of language in power structures. CDA posits that language is not a neutral medium but is instead embedded with power relations that shape societal dynamics (Fairclough, 1995). In the Nigerian context, political elites and institutions use language strategically to maintain control, influence public opinion, and reinforce social hierarchies (Blackledge, 2005). English, as the official language, is often employed in political discourse, thereby excluding non-English speakers from full participation in governance and policy-making (Adegbija, 2004).

2. Hegemony and Language (Gramsci, 1971)

Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony highlights how dominant groups use language to establish and sustain ideological control. In Nigeria, English serves as a linguistic tool of hegemony, reinforcing elite dominance and marginalizing speakers of indigenous languages. Through education, media, and governance, English is positioned as the language of power, limiting access to political participation for non-English speakers and perpetuating socio-economic disparities (Baubock & Wallace, 2010).

3. Linguistic Capital (Bourdieu, 1991)

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital underscores the socio-economic value of language proficiency. In Nigeria, fluency in English is associated with

access to political, economic, and educational opportunities, positioning it as a marker of elite status. Those who lack proficiency in English face barriers to political engagement, employment, and upward mobility, reinforcing social stratification (Black, 2015). Nigerian Pidgin, despite its widespread use, remains stigmatized in formal settings, further limiting linguistic inclusivity in governance (Gbadegesin & Adeyemi-Adejolu, 2016).

4. Language Policy and Ethnic Identity (Fishman, 1999)

Joshua Fishman's work on language policy and ethnic identity provides insights into the impact of linguistic marginalization on national unity. Nigeria's language policies prioritize English and the three dominant indigenous languages (Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo), leading to the exclusion of over 500 minority languages (Aluya, 2023). This exclusion fosters ethnic tensions, as speakers of minority languages perceive their linguistic and cultural identities as undervalued. A more inclusive language policy that recognizes the diversity of Nigeria's linguistic landscape is essential for fostering national cohesion (Nwokike, 2023).

5. Digital Communication and Political Discourse (Castells, 2009)

In the 21st century, digital communication has reshaped the relationship between language and power. Manuel Castells' theory of the network society explains how digital platforms decentralize political discourse, providing marginalized groups with a voice (Castells, 2009). Social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and WhatsApp have facilitated multilingual political engagement in Nigeria, enabling the use of English, Pidgin, and indigenous languages in political mobilization (Ise, 2023). However, the spread of misinformation and digital literacy disparities continue to pose challenges (Olabanjo, 2023).

Conclusion

The theoretical framework for this study integrates Critical Discourse Analysis, Hegemony Theory, Linguistic Capital, Language Policy and Identity, and Digital Communication Theory to explore the role of language in Nigerian politics. These theories collectively provide a nuanced understanding of how language functions as a tool of power, inclusion, and exclusion in the political landscape. Future research should focus on policy recommendations that promote linguistic inclusivity and equitable access to political participation in Nigeria.

Languages and Nigerian Political Landscape

In Nigeria, language is intricately linked to political power. The predominance of English in political discourse creates a form of linguistic gatekeeping, often limiting non-English speakers from full participation. Although Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo hold regional importance, English remains the official language, deeply influencing access to political resources and control (Nwokike, 2023). For example, Nigeria's recent 2023 general elections highlighted how language was leveraged for political messaging. Candidates and parties increasingly utilized social media to communicate with diverse linguistic communities in English, Pidgin, and regional languages, show-casing a shift toward multilingual political engagement aimed at reaching a broader electorate.

Recent research indicates that political actors strategically choose languages to either consolidate or broaden their support base. In particular, regional leaders tend to use indigenous languages to foster local solidarity while adopting English for national messaging (Adegbija, 2004). This approach reinforces the notion that language choice in political settings is instrumental, shaping the reach and inclusivity of political dialogue.

Nigeria's political landscape is deeply intertwined with its complex linguistic diversity, where language plays a dual role as both a unifying tool and a symbol of division. Nigeria's linguistic composition includes over 500 languages, among which Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo are the most prominent, while English serves as the official language. This linguistic setup is not only a reflection of Nigeria's ethnic plurality but also a significant factor in the socio-political power dynamics, where language influences political representation, governance, and electoral mobilization.

1. Language as a Tool of Political Mobilization and Identity:

Political actors in Nigeria strategically leverage language to appeal to specific ethnic or regional groups, fostering solidarity and building political alliances. For instance, candidates often conduct campaigns in regional languages to connect emotionally with voters, reinforcing ethnic identity as a decisive factor in Nigerian politics (Aluya, 2023). Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba-speaking regions, which correspond to the Northern, Southeastern, and Southwestern parts of Nigeria,

respectively, often see political messages crafted in their native languages, creating a sense of inclusivity while also promoting regional loyalty.

The use of indigenous languages in politics is further amplified through digital platforms. Social media has emerged as a vital tool in Nigerian elections, where candidates and supporters use Nigerian Pidgin or regional languages to expand their reach to diverse audiences, particularly in rural areas with limited English proficiency (Ise, 2023). These platforms offer opportunities for political discourse that bypass traditional language hierarchies, enabling marginalized communities to participate more fully in the political process.

2. English as the Language of Governance and the Elite

While regional languages are essential for political mobilization, English remains the language of officialdom and governance, positioning it as a marker of power and education. English's dominance in government proceedings, legislation, and judiciary functions effectively excludes individuals who are not proficient in it from fully participating in these critical areas of national decision-making (Blackledge, 2005). Nigeria's National Policy on Education mandates English as the primary language in secondary and higher education, which further reinforces its elite status. Consequently, political power in Nigeria is closely aligned with English proficiency, often resulting in a political class composed largely of those who have been educated in English (Baubock & Wallace, 2010). This language hierarchy has significant implications for socio-economic mobility and representation. Fluent English speakers, who typically come from urban or elite backgrounds, are more likely to access better economic opportunities and political positions. Conversely, individuals from rural areas with limited exposure to English experience barriers to socio-political participation, which perpetuates economic and educational inequality (Baubock, 2006).

3. Language Policy and Ethnic Tensions

Nigeria's language policy, which elevates English and the three main regional languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) while neglecting minority languages, has fueled ethnic tension. Minority language speakers, who make up approximately 35% of the population, often view this exclusion as a form of linguistic oppression that reinforces social marginalization. This marginalization has contributed to ethnic

grievances, as many groups feel their identities and voices are sidelined in the national discourse, leading to calls for greater linguistic inclusivity in the political sphere (Gbadegesin & Adeyemi-Adejolu, 2016).

The policy of using indigenous languages at the primary school level is intended to foster early literacy and cultural pride, yet it transitions quickly to English instruction in higher education. This abrupt shift alienates students from their linguistic heritage, often leading to a decline in proficiency in their mother tongues. Additionally, the lack of infrastructure and trained educators in minority languages has hindered policy implementation, limiting the effectiveness of these efforts to bridge linguistic divides.

4 The Role of Nigerian Pidgin in Bridging Divides

Nigerian Pidgin, widely spoken across the country, has emerged as an informal *lingua franca* that transcends ethnic and regional lines. Pidgin is particularly prominent in informal political discussions, media broadcasts, and social interactions, creating a unique space where diverse groups can communicate and engage in national discourse (Adegbija, 2004). Political commentators have noted that Nigerian Pidgin serves as a leveling language, bridging the gap between the elite and the general populace by providing a neutral ground for dialogue (Aluya, 2023).

The popularity of Nigerian Pidgin in media and politics illustrates a pushback against the dominance of English, challenging traditional power dynamics by providing a more inclusive platform for political engagement. In recent years, this shift has led to calls for the formal recognition of Pidgin as a national language, arguing that it reflects Nigeria's multicultural identity more accurately than English does (Oyeleye, 2004).

Challenges of Language in Nigerian Politics

Nigeria's linguistic diversity is both a source of cultural identity and a potential ground for marginalization. While English remains the official language, indigenous languages serve as a foundation for regional identity and social cohesion. The marginalization of indigenous languages often translates into socioeconomic disparities. For instance, many Nigerians who lack proficiency in

English experience limited job opportunities and social mobility, reinforcing cycles of poverty in rural areas where indigenous languages dominate (Olabanjo, 2023). This linguistic hierarchy fosters resentment and perpetuates identity struggles, as those forced to adopt English may feel disconnected from their cultural heritage.

Language in Nigeria's political sphere is a powerful but complex instrument, influenced by the country's vast ethnic diversity and historical legacy of colonialism. Although language serves as a unifying tool, it simultaneously creates division and inequalities that challenge the political landscape. This section examines the obstacles posed by language in Nigerian politics, covering issues of language policy, marginalization of minority languages, the dominance of English, and the influence of indigenous languages on political representation.

1. Dominance of English and Accessibility Barrier:

English, inherited from Nigeria's colonial past, is the official language of governance, education, and national administration. While it serves as a neutral medium among Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups, English proficiency is primarily accessible to educated and urban populations, creating a division between the elite and marginalized communities. As a result, individuals who are not fluent in English are often excluded from political discourse and decision-making processes, reinforcing socioeconomic inequalities. Those fluent in English gain a disproportionate advantage, often translating linguistic skills into political power (Adegbija, 2004).

2. Marginalization of Minority Languages

Nigeria's language policy prioritizes English and three dominant indigenous languages (Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba), leading to the marginalization of over 500 other languages spoken by smaller ethnic groups. This policy exacerbates ethnic divisions, as speakers of minority languages feel alienated from the political process and perceive their exclusion as a form of linguistic and cultural suppression (Aluya, 2023). Additionally, the decline of these languages impact cultural identity, contributing to social and political grievances. Minority language speakers have called for greater recognition in government and

education, but practical implementation remains limited, partly due to the lack of resources and trained educators in these languages (Aluya, 2023).

3. Language Policy Implementation Challenges

Nigeria's National Policy on Education (1985) advocates for using local languages in early education before transitioning to English. However, in practice, the policy's goals remain largely unfulfilled. Limited educational materials, insufficiently trained teachers, and an overarching preference for English hinder effective bilingual or multilingual instruction (Adegbija, 2004). Moreover, Nigeria's federal structure adds to the difficulty, as language policy implementation varies across states, with disparities in resources and educational priorities, particularly affecting rural areas.

4. Ethnic and Political Fragmentation

In Nigeria, language closely aligns with ethnicity, meaning that language can both unify and divide political alliances. Political candidates often rely on ethnic and regional languages to appeal to their constituencies, reinforcing ethnic identities and encouraging regional loyalties. While this approach strengthens community ties, it also deepens political fragmentation, where voters tend to support candidates based on linguistic and ethnic affiliations rather than policy considerations. Such practices contribute to a political environment where language-driven identity politics take precedence, creating barriers to national unity (Gbadegesin & Adeyemi-Adejolu, 2016).

4. Policy Making challenges

The limited role of minority languages in political discourse and governance further restricts the political representation of smaller ethnic groups. Official government proceedings are conducted in English, sidelining speakers of minority languages from direct participation in policy discussions (Adegbija, 2004). This language barrier diminishes the influence of minority groups in national decision making processes, leaving many issues pertinent to these communities underrepresented. A more inclusive language policy that enables indigenous languages in political contexts could empower these groups, fostering a more balanced representation (Baubock, 2006).

5. Linguistic Nationalism and Unity Challenges

Linguistic nationalism, fueled by the desire to assert ethnic identity through language, creates further political tensions. In some regions, linguistic pride has led to conflicts over language use, particularly when one ethnic group perceives its language as superior or more politically legitimate. In the north, for example, Hausa's dominance can create resentment among minority groups, while similar dynamics are observed among Igbo and Yoruba speakers in their respective regions (Nwokike, 2023). These tensions highlight the difficulty of fostering a cohesive national identity in a country with deeply entrenched linguistic loyalties.

Influence of 21st Century Technology and Media In Nigerian Politics

The rise of 21st-century technology and media has dramatically reshaped Nigeria's political landscape, driving change in political engagement, campaign strategies, and public discourse. Social media platforms, digital communication tools, and technological advancements have empowered citizens, enabled greater civic participation and fostered a more informed electorate. This section explores the impact of these technologies on Nigerian politics, covering areas such as social media's role in political mobilization, the spread of digital misinformation, technology-driven transparency, and the challenges of digital literacy.

1. Social Media as a Tool for Political Mobilization

Social media platforms like X (formally Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram have become central to political mobilization in Nigeria, allowing politicians, activists, and citizens to share information and engage with one another on political issues. During the 2023 Nigerian general elections, social media played a critical role in amplifying political messages, mobilizing voters, and facilitating public debates. Candidates and political parties used these platforms to communicate their agendas and counter opponents' messages, while citizens leveraged them to hold political figures accountable and demand transparency (Ise, 2023). Hashtags like #EndSARS, initially aimed at protesting police brutality, exemplify the power of social media in catalyzing grassroots movements that influence political discourse and policy decisions (Olabanjo, 2023).

2. Impact of Digital Media on Political Campaign Strategies

Digital media has transformed how Nigerian politicians campaign, shifting strategies from traditional rallies and advertisements to more targeted online campaigns. Politicians increasingly use data analytics to understand voter demographics and preferences, tailoring messages to appeal to specific groups. Through targeted advertisements, especially on Facebook, campaigns can reach users based on location, interests, and online behavior, enhancing campaign efficiency (Ise, 2023). Additionally, WhatsApp, a popular messaging platform in Nigeria, allows political messages to spread rapidly within communities, often through grassroots networks that can bypass mainstream media.

3. Challenges of Misinformation and Fake News

Despite the benefits of digital media, the spread of misinformation has become a significant challenge in Nigerian politics. False news stories, manipulated images, and conspiracy theories often go viral on social media, misleading voters and inflaming political tensions. During the 2023 election, fake news proliferated across social platforms, with political actors and supporters using it as a tool to discredit opponents or mislead the electorate. The rapid spread of misinformation undermines democratic processes and can erode public trust in political institutions (Nwokike, 2023). Efforts to combat misinformation in Nigeria include fact-checking initiatives, such as those by the Center for Democracy and Development, yet the scale of the issue remains daunting.

4. Technology-Driven Transparency and Accountability

Technological advancements have also promoted transparency and accountability in Nigerian politics. Online platforms allow voters to access information on candidates, policies, and government actions more easily than ever before. Civic tech initiatives, such as BudgIT and Tracka, use data to monitor government budgets and projects, empowering citizens to demand accountability and transparency from public officials. Furthermore, digital technology has facilitated the live-streaming of political events, public hearings, and election results, enabling real-time scrutiny of political processes (Ise, 2023). These tools contribute to a more transparent political environment, where citizens can actively participate in governance.

Despite the transformative impact of technology, challenges related to digital literacy and unequal access persist. While urban areas in Nigeria enjoy relatively high internet penetration, rural areas lag, limiting the political influence of digital media among certain populations. Additionally, low digital literacy rates mean that many citizens may struggle to critically assess online content, making them more vulnerable to misinformation. Addressing these disparities is crucial to ensuring that all citizens can fully participate in the digital political landscape.

Contemporary society is knowledge- and discourse-based not only in their economies but also, in their expectations about how people should lead their private lives and conduct their relationships. The new media discourse can shape people's lives, habits, opinions and beliefs. One can feel how the power of language is disseminated through texts of different sorts and is transmitted through the media and modern information technologies. The new media are top-heavy with expert advice on how people should conduct almost every aspect of their lives and the language of the media discourse is not a neutral channel, but the tool for influence, guidance, manipulation and control. The perception of the language of power in the present-day media discourse nowadays can be interpreted through simple models (Ise, 2023), emphasizing direct media influence, to more sophisticated analyses highlighting the interaction of the media and the audience.

Case Study: The Intersection of Language and Power in the 21st Century

Nigeria's linguistic diversity has a profound influence on its political dynamics, where language serves as a key factor in political mobilization, representation, and ethnic solidarity. Several recent case studies highlight how language affects Nigerian politics, examining its role in elections, regional tensions, and the mobilization of grassroots movements. These cases illustrate the complexities of balancing a national identity with Nigeria's diverse linguistic landscape, where English serves as a unifying force but also perpetuates elitism and marginalization.

1. The 2023 Nigerian Presidential Elections: Language and Campaign Strategies

During the 2023 presidential elections, candidates and their campaigns demonstrated the strategic use of language to reach diverse audiences. English was used in formal campaign materials and televised debates to project a national image, while local languages and Nigerian Pidgin were strategically employed to connect with ethnic and regional groups. Social media also became a critical platform, where politicians used regional languages and Nigerian Pidgin to reach a broad demographic, especially the youth and rural populations. This approach reflects a shift in political communication, where language is tailored to resonate with Nigeria's multilingual audience, enhancing relatability and building ethnic solidarity (Ise., 2023).

2. The #EndSARS Movement: Language in Digital Activism

The #EndSARS protests against police brutality in 2020 marked a turning point in Nigerian activism, where language played a vital role in mobilizing support across ethnic and socio-economic divides. Nigerian Pidgin became the unifying language of the movement, allowing participants from different linguistic backgrounds to engage in a common cause. Through platforms like X (formally Twitter) and Instagram, activists used Pidgin to make the movement more inclusive and relatable. The movement's language strategy was instrumental in fostering a sense of unity, demonstrating how language choice in digital activism can bridge ethnic and linguistic divides to address national issues (Olabanjo, 2023).

3. Regionalism and Ethnic Politics in Northern Nigeria

In Northern Nigeria, Hausa dominates as the regional language, often aligning with political mobilization and regional identity. Political candidates in this region frequently rely on Hausa to connect with local voters, emphasizing shared values and cultural identity. However, the dominance of Hausa also leads to the marginalization of smaller ethnic languages within the region, reinforcing ethnic hierarchies and influencing political allegiances. This scenario highlights the dual nature of language in politics, where it fosters regional cohesion but may also exclude minority groups from the political conversation, limiting their representation and influence (Gbadegesin & Adeyemi-Adejolu, 2016).

3. Nigerian Pidgin in Political Engagement

Nigerian Pidgin, widely spoken across the country, has emerged as a tool for political engagement that transcends socio-economic barriers. Political discussions in Nigerian Pidgin are common on social media and radio broadcasts, reaching audiences who may not be fluent in English. During the 2023 elections, Nigerian Pidgin was used extensively in informal discussions, campaign rallies, and media broadcasts to ensure that political messages resonated with the masses. The accessibility of Nigerian Pidgin enables political actors to communicate effectively with a broader audience, promoting inclusivity in political discourse (Adegbija, 2004).

4. Language Policy and Minority Representation

Nigeria's language policy, which emphasizes English and three major indigenous languages (Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba), often marginalizes speakers of minority languages, influencing their political representation and participation. For instance, in states where minority languages are predominant, there are ongoing demands for language policies that recognize and promote these languages within local government and educational institutions. However, these demands face challenges due to limited resources and political resistance, as seen in states with mixed linguistic populations where local politicians prioritize dominant languages to consolidate power (Nwokike, 2023).

Conclusion

Conclusively, the relationship between language and Nigeria's political landscape is complex. While English remains the dominant language in governance, indigenous languages and Nigerian Pidgin continue to play critical roles in Nigerian Politics in power acquisition. However, the dominance of major languages and the marginalization of minority languages highlight the complexities of political representation in our multilingual society. While the 21st century lifestyle, social media and digital tools have empowered citizens and democratized political participation, challenges such as misinformation, digital literacy gaps, and unequal internet access continue to impact the efficacy of power acquisition in our era. Moving forward, fostering digital literacy, ensuring equitable internet access, and establishing effective measures against misinformation are essential to maximizing the positive impact of the 21st century

technology in Nigerian politics. To mitigate these challenges, our language policies must adopt a more inclusive approach that recognizes the value of linguistic diversity and fosters equal representation across ethnic and linguistic lines.

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