



Challenges Associated with Utilising Language as an Economic Resource in Nigeria

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Abstract- Sustainable economic development requires proper integration of diverse national resources, material and linguistic. Therefore, this paper examined the philosophical challenges of using language as an economic asset in Nigeria. Drawing on linguistic capital theory, it argues that language constitutes an economic asset for Nigeria, though not without circumventable challenges. As a qualitative research, it conceptually analysed dominant concepts related to the topic using previous studies and the authors' intuition. The findings showed that, though language constitutes an economic asset to Nigeria, it also raises philosophical issues, such as whether its use undermines language's intrinsic value, leads to epistemic injustice, and denies linguistic rights. It also raises questions about language ownership. Therefore, this study concluded that Nigeria's multilingualism remains a valuable asset worthy of investment, notwithstanding some challenges. Besides, it recommends that governmental policies be enacted to ensure the optimal utilisation of all Nigerian languages, while simultaneously integrating them with the predominant global language, considering the current emphasis on globalisation and scientific advancement.

Keywords- Being, Capital, Communication, Language, Resource

I. Introduction

Language is an essential feature of humans and performs a critical role in their daily lives, serving as a means through which they interact with one another in society. Hence, Mondin (1991) noted that "it is through language that man actualises himself as a social being, as the Mitsein, as the I-THOU" (p.129). Humans achieve this social dimension using diverse symbolic gestures, offered by language, thereby characterising man as a symbolic animal - animal symbolicum – an animal capable of representing things symbolically (Cassirer, 1944 & 1957). It is in this sense that one can define language as the written and unwritten signs humans deploy in diverse forms of communication with one another. The written signs include all signs expressed in writing and documented using the alphabet. The unwritten signs, on the other hand, embody vocal signs, body language, etc. Through the above signs, humans interact with others as they engage in their daily activities. Apart from the communicative function described above, these signs also enable man to describe a state of affairs and express their feelings. This descriptive role represents the representative function of language and is relative to the object, while the expressive role is the existential role and is relative to the subject (Mondin, 1991). The functions of language above are innate to language.



Besides the innate or intrinsic roles of language described above, some scholars have attributed an extrinsic role to language. For instance, Nnaemedo (2014) called it philosophy's raw material. Akinkuotu et al. (2022) described it as a vital tool of synergy toward growth. Bourdieu (1991) typified it as an economic tool. It implies that while language performs communicative, descriptive, and expressive roles, it also performs an economic role. Little wonder Fadairo & Obasa (2022) identified a nexus between linguistic heritage and nation-building. Thus, as an economic resource, language serves hermeneutical, phenomenological, morphological, anthropological, analytic, pragmatic, ethical, and aesthetical functions, which are critical to the economic life of any nation.

The above new understanding of the role of language presents new opportunities for the economic life of any nation, including Nigeria. However, one area that has remained underexplored is the challenges posed by this language-based economy, especially in a multilingual society like Nigeria. At a deeper level, there is also a question of the philosophical impact of these challenges. Therefore, to address the above challenges, this study simultaneously asks: What are the philosophical challenges of using language as an economic asset in Nigeria? However, before responding to this question, it is pertinent to identify and clarify the dominant concepts related to the subject matter of this paper.

II. Conceptual Clarification

Language as Economic Asset

This section focused on works that addressed language as an economic asset. Among the authors reviewed was Wittgenstein (1953). He transited from the essentialist notion of language in his *Tractatus* to viewing language as a form of life, implying that "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life (P1, 19). Furthermore, he used the term "language game" to clearly portray that speaking of language is an aspect of an activity, or of a form of life. The implication of the above position is that language is not an autonomous system of symbols whose meaning can be understood independently of a human speaker, but rather exists in the context of a wider, concrete circumstance of human life (Lawhead, 2015). It means that one cannot understand language without understanding the daily activities of the language users. However, Wittgenstein (1953) noted that linguists can decode and understand ancient languages based on the common behaviour of human beings, a universal within human life. Categorically, this "common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language" (Wittgenstein, 1953, §206). Given that Wittgenstein considered language as a form of life understandable in the context of human activities, economic activity is one such activity. Thus, language is also conceived and defined from economic perspectives, serving as an instrument of economic activity, as different fields of economic activity deploy different languages for value and job creation, thereby improving economic productivity.



Austin (1962) is another thinker deserving attention here. He conceived of language as playing three roles: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. Locutionary acts comprise utterances, while under illocutionary acts, language undertakes performative acts, such as promising, contracting, negotiating, authorising, and ordering. Perlocutionary acts represent the effect that the utterances have on listeners. So, implied in Austin's concept of language above is that language undertakes performative acts that can be translated into symbolic power and capital.

Sen's (1999) central focus was not on people's resources or income. Instead, he underscored the basic freedoms that enlarge the opportunities individuals have to live the life of their choice, the life they value. These essential freedoms include education, literacy, social inclusion, communication, participation, and economic facilities. However, though Sen never engaged in direct discourse on language, one can interpret his capability approach as having an indirect application to language. For instance, a critical look at each of the essential freedoms reveals that each involves language, for none can function without language.

Heidegger (1947) viewed language as the house of Being, the abode where human beings dwell. By describing language as the house of Being, he meant that language is not just an identification or communication instrument. Rather, it is an aperture through which Being is revealed and concretised. Ipso facto, humans do not watch over language as masters. Hence, the world derives its intelligibility and meaningfulness through language, thereby pointing to the concept of worldhood. Here, worldhood stands for the meaningful network of associations, aims, and options that people live, encounter, and comprehend. It is the world as it manifests itself to humans. It comprises a web of associations, meaning that it is not just a concrete substance. Besides, language is essential to human existence, as it provides a medium for comprehension.

Furthermore, in the work *On His Way to Language*, Heidegger (1971) distinguished between ordinary speech (*Rede*) and ordinary language (*Sprache*), arguing that the former relies on the latter. By '*Rede*,' he meant everyday language use, such as talking, storytelling, asking questions, and offering information. On the other hand, he saw *Sprache* as representing in-depth and basic aspects of language, which accounts for the possibility of meaning and comprehension. It transcends mere word usage to embody the medium of the world's revelation. Daily speech relies on it, as it constitutes the fundamental structure that determines whether something is meaningful. It implies that speech rendering does not denote meaning creation from the outset. Instead, it means that humans dwell in language, which subsequently reveals the world to them. Language, therefore, existed before speech, and subsequently constitutes the grounds for ordinary communication.

Gadamer (2004), using a hermeneutic approach, focused on the relationships among understanding and shared meaning, agreement (*einigung*), interpretation, language, and meaning. According to him, language is the medium through which humans know the



world. Thus, he declared that language is the Being that humans could understand. For him, to understand means to reach a consensus, agreement, or understanding (*verständnis*) about a state of affairs. Besides, he argued that humans achieve understanding through dialogue, which subsequently requires the parties involved (interlocutors) to adopt a common language and fuse their diverse horizons, leading to shared meaning. However, when this shared meaning fails, the result is misunderstanding. Hence, misunderstanding results from a deviation from an already existing fusion of horizons, a shared meaning.

Though Gadamer did not focus on the economic dimension of language, some scholars have interpreted his thought along that direction, as evident in the work of McCloskey (1994), Brown (1994), and Klamer (1996). These scholars saw a nexus between linguistic clarity and economic productivity, as such clarity leads to effective and efficient economic collaboration, improves productivity, promotes innovation and creativity, enhances transaction costs, reduces uncertainty, builds trust and confidence, and encourages contract engagement. Therefore, following Gadamer's hermeneutical framework, the fusion of horizons and shared meaning leads to economic efficiency, whereas the reverse is counterproductive.

Searle (1995) argued that language is essentially constitutive of institutional reality, given that the existence of institutional structures such as money, marriage, governments, and property is made possible by language, not vice versa. Hence, he insisted that language is the basic social institution as all others presuppose it, and not conversely. Besides, he maintained that each institution requires its own linguistic elements for the facts within it. Further, he underscored that the existence of symbolic devices, such as words, that by convention mean or represent or symbolise something beyond themselves, is the feature of language essential for the constitution of institutional facts.

Searle (1995) also distinguished between language-independent facts and language-dependent facts. The former deals with facts whose existence is independent of the language or requires no linguistic elements for its existence, while the latter requires such for its existence. He also distinguished between language-dependent thoughts and language-independent thoughts. Some thoughts are language dependent in the sense that an animal could not have that very thought if the animal did not have words or some other linguistic devices for thinking that very thought, but some thoughts are language independent in the sense that an animal can have those thoughts without having words or any other linguistic devices.

Searle (1995) likewise distinguished between brute facts and institutional facts. According to him, the former exists independently of human institutions, while the latter can exist only within them. To explain what he meant by these institutions, he introduced the concept of regulative and constitutive rules. The former regulates preexisting activities (for example, rules about driving). At the same time, the latter not



only regulates but also creates the very possibility of certain activities, as in the rules of chess. Institutional facts exist only within systems of constitutive rules.

Bourdieu (1991) focused on the theory of linguistic capital. Basically, this theory assumed that:

- Language is not just a communicative tool, but also an asset or symbolic capital.
- All linguistic forms do not possess equal value.
- The worth of a linguistic performance depends on the social context and language users, implying that language use is like a market.
- People's social context, education cadre, and social stratification govern their acceptance of linguistic dispositions.
- Institutions assist in validating and rewarding foremost linguistic capital and downgrading others.
- Authority uses symbolic domination, the capacity to determine what represents a proper language, to preserve their social ladders.

Therefore, by virtue of its intrinsic value, language plays communicative, descriptive, and expressive roles. However, language also has extrinsic value, enabling it to play other roles beyond those outlined above. One of these roles is instrumental. In this consideration, language is a symbolic power convertible into economic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). As a result, it constitutes part of a nation's economic resources and assets, implying that it is part of its sources of revenue. In this context, language competence becomes a symbolic power that translates into economic capital through paid language programmes, proficiency testing certification for immigrants and international students, and cultural orientation for tourists, among others. These economic factors impact the nation and Nigerian citizens by providing job opportunities. In the long run, it reduces a nation's ranking in the global unemployment index, with its attendant underdevelopment and security-related issues.

Challenges of Using Language as an Economic in Nigeria

Considering language as an economic asset implies that each language in a multilingual culture, such as Nigeria, is an economic resource. Thus, it implies that there exists a multiplicity of linguistic resources in Nigeria, meaning that linguistic diversity in Nigeria represents a multiplicity of linguistic assets. To validate the above claim, previous studies have shown that linguistic diversity is a blessing rather than a source of conflict, fragmentation, and confusion (UNDP, 2004; Glanz, 2013). This is because diversity provides broader and richer insights into reality. Then, as language is a symbolic power convertible into economic capital, the diversity of languages represents a diversity of symbolic powers and consequently a multiplicity of economic capital. The rapid economic contribution of the Nollywood industry in Nigeria is a clear testimony to the above submission. This body received an initial boost from the play-casting in different languages, a move that later gave birth to the Actors Guide of Nigeria (AGN). Also, the contemporary trend of using language-based artificial intelligence to transform languages into a marketable economy underscores language



as economic capital. Despite the above considerations, conceiving language from an economic perspective in Nigeria presents certain challenges:

First, there is the question of whether it undermines language's intrinsic value, given that some scholars argue that language has intrinsic value (Chomsky, 2006; Gaskin, 2021). However, one circumvents the challenge by recognising that the pressure to utilise language as a resource for sustainable development in Nigeria does not foreclose its intrinsic value. Rather, it depicts an underexplored aspect of language, especially in the Nigerian context. So, the exploration, far from undermining the intrinsic nature of language, reveals language's instrumental value as a potential necessary for optimal utilisation of human language towards sustainable development in Nigeria. Hence, language is not only pivotal in enabling humans to live authentically as cultural and free-thinking beings, but also instrumental, as it impacts the economy.

Second, it raises questions of justice, given that the affordance of language certification may be available only to the rich. It implies that it may not ensure fair distribution of essential goods and equal basic liberties (Rawls, 1977). Language in this case is taken as a good, since it is considered an instrument. Besides, it means that language certification will fail to enhance people's capabilities and eliminate obvious disparities among them (Sen, 1999). Hence, there is a need to make it more inclusive and equitable. Third, it raises the issue of epistemic injustice, as Fricker (2007) calls it, which can take the form of testimonial or hermeneutical injustice. For Fricker, testimonial injustice occurs when people fail to believe someone's words due to bias. At the same time, hermeneutical injustice takes place when somebody lacks the concept to express his or her experiences, as happened to women before the introduction of sexual harassment. So, in this paper, epistemic injustice occurs when certification determines the validity of a speech act, irrespective of its actual content, or when people's voices are sidelined because they are not considered language authorities. So, there is a need to embrace epistemic justice, emphasising the equal validity of all languages.

Fourth, it raises the notion of denial of linguistic rights, as it may project some languages as superior to others, thereby promoting further marginalisation and gradual extinction of minority languages in Nigeria. It is even more so when one considers language as symbolic power, as Bourdieu (1991) meant it: language confers status. By implication, certification promotes status by elevating some languages above others. Circumventing linguistic rights denial also calls for the equal validity of all languages as a remedy.

Fifth, it raises the issues of language ownership and, subsequently, the sharing of the benefits from the utilisation of language as a resource. The ownership issues revolve around who should lay claim to the language as the rightful or aboriginal custodians. This may involve interest groups such as the original speakers of the language, the government, and others who claim epistemic competence in it. Likewise, issues regarding sharing the benefits of language use may arise from the same groups



mentioned above. Remediation of this issue requires collaboration among all stakeholders delineated above, as this is required for language maintenance, preservation, and promotion.

Sixth, it further raises a meta-semantic issue about meaning-fixing. It asks, who should fix the meaning of words? Is it the language community (owners) or those in charge of organising and issuing language certification? For Lewis (1969 & 1975), meaning-fixing occurs through social convention. Hence, he saw language as a system of conventions. Similarly, Kripke (1980) conceived meaning-fixing as a causal-historical chain. Thus, an initial baptism fixes the reference of a name, and from there it passes on to other link-ups, forming a causal chain. Likewise, for Putnam (1975), "meanings just ain't in the head" (p.227). On the contrary, meaning-fixing is done by the outside world and by experts through scientific discovery, and the real nature of the substance (Putnam, 1981).

Thus, resolving meta-semantic issues requires openness and cooperation, with a conscious awareness of the dynamic nature of language, a thrust mediated through diverse human agencies. So, the determinant of a meaning is not restricted to experts alone. It emerges from diverse perspectives: individuals/experts and the community. A typical instance of an individual subsisting as a meaning-fixer is well-captured in the Igbo proverb, *ihe madu kporo nwankita ya ka ona aza* (what a person calls his dog is what it answers). In this case, an expert studying such a dog will first use the dog's name during an interview with the owner. If not, they will not have a common ground for the interview. Likewise, many science-related meanings have been fixed by experts and the scientific community. The same applies to local communities. They have played a tremendous role in meaning-making in their cultures, as exemplified in many Igbo proverbs such as *okwa mba na achi na olu na olu* (partridge of each community laughs in different voices). The partridge here represents a community whose meaning-making distinguishes them from others, subsequently demonstrating communities' role in meaning-fixing.

Seventh, there is the issue of how language utilisation as a resource is possible in a multilingual community such as Nigeria. This issue raises the question of which language would constitute a paid programme and language proficiency certification. Would it imply engaging over 250 languages in Nigeria in the programme? Remarkably, rather than worrying about the possibility of encountering issues with linguistic diversity in Nigeria, the choice of language for the paid and certification programmes should rest on the availability of tourism and investment opportunities in the language area. With that in mind, when investors gain access to Nigeria and have certified the proficiency test required by the region they are to work in, migration to other regions may also require further orientation. This practice is not something new. In the United States of America, where there are Spanish and other communities, missionaries who intend to work among Hispanics are required to learn their language before being permitted to work among them. Hence, a foreigner who has passed a



proficiency test to work in Igboland can also take another proficiency test to work in other parts of the country. Even where there is a variation within the same language group, the person concerned should also undertake the necessary orientation to work in his/her new place of work.

III. Conclusion

Apart from its communicative, descriptive, and expressive roles, language also serves an instrumental role, functioning as an economic asset. Nigeria can leverage its diverse languages as economic assets, as each constitutes symbolic power convertible into economic capital. However, such engagements are never without some challenges. For instance, it raised the question of whether the pressure to emphasise the instrumental value of language undermines its intrinsic value. It also raised questions about justice, given the cost implications of language proficiency certification. Besides, it raised the issues of epistemic injustice, denial of linguistic rights, and language ownership. Others are meta-semantic issues about meaning-fixing and the use of language as a resource in a multilingual community. Further, this paper underscored that the use of language as a resource does not undermine its intrinsic value but rather helps project and present another dimension of language, often underexplored, especially in an underdeveloped economy such as Nigeria. This paper concluded that, though there are challenges to using language as a resource, these challenges are surmountable, as shown by those currently cashing in on the language-based economy. Subsequently, this paper recommended that the Nigerian government should enact a multilingual-friendly policy to optimise the utilisation of Nigerian languages. Besides, given the status of English and other dominant languages, and conscious of the thrust of globalisation and technological advancement, a hybridisation of Nigerian languages with these dominant languages is not optional.

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