Communicative Inequality in a Participatory Democracy: The Linguistic Imperatives

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Abstract
In this paper, we examine the concept of communicative inequality as an aspect of social inequalities that characterize any given society such as Nigeria. In the multilingual setting of Nigeria, the rights of the L1 speakers of the nearly four hundred local languages to use their communicative competences for the purpose of social interactions have largely been circumscribed by the colonial masters' predatory linguistic imperialism, which foisted English Language on the people in utter disregard for their native languages. This linguistic arrangement remains antithetical to the noble tenets of participatory democracy as a political system. To reverse this trend, it is recommended that a path, which effects a radical departure from the infamous predatory imperialism be defined, one that favours the total integration of the nation's indigenous languages in the socio-economic, political dispensation of the nation. In specific terms, the linguistic imperative being advocated here emphasizes the developmental aspect of all the indigenous languages and language empowerment of the people based on just principles of equality and egalitarianism.

Introduction
Communicative inequality, as a concept forms one of the tripods of linguistic inequality identified by Hudson (1980). The first type, which Hudson (1980:193) refers to as subjective inequality, concerns what people think about each other’s speech. Speakers in some speech communities (especially where class distinctions are clearly marked) are accorded differing degrees of wisdom, intelligence, friendliness, urbanity and other virtuous dispositions based on the way they speak although this judgment is value-laden. In this regard, some speakers are thought and seen to have more of those of virtues that are highly valued than they really have simply because they have the ‘right’ way of speaking, while other speakers are thought to have less of these highly valued virtues because their speech patterns convey the ‘wrong’ impressions. The second type called strictly linguistic inequality refers to the linguistic items that a speaker knows. Whatever set of linguistic items a speaker has is strictly dependent on his practical experiences acquired through constant interaction with his immediate environment; another speaker with a different set of experiences will know a different set of items. The implication is that a given speaker is likely to fare better in the particular social situations where his own set of linguistic items is used than the speaker who has a different set of items. In essence, social inequality arises on each occasion due to the differing individual experiences. This incidence of social inequality is even more accentuated given
that some situations carry more social importance or significance than others do. As a result, the speaker, whose range of items derives from his practical experiences in socially significant situations enjoys more social relevance than the speaker whose linguistic items are a reflection of his practical experiences in situations that of less social importance. The third type of linguistic inequality, called communicative inequality, is concerned with the knowledge of how to use linguistic items to communicate successfully, rather than simply with the knowledge of the linguistic items themselves. It therefore touches on the differing degrees of knowledge or skill required in the event of using speech as a social interaction.

In this context, we shall use the concept of communicative inequality to refer to inequalities in the ways in which speakers within a given society such as Nigeria are differentially empowered to use linguistic systems at their disposal for various dimensions of communication activity. In sociolinguistics, it is usual to draw the fundamental distinction between linguistic competence and communicative competence. Linguistic competence is the ideal speaker’s innate linguistic knowledge, which is the innate ability to espouse a set of finite rules to generate an infinite array of grammatical and acceptable sentence structures. Communicative competence, notes Agbedo (2000:173) is the speaker’s ability to discern the appropriateness of these acceptable sentence structures in practical day-to-day communication activity. In Nigeria, speakers of the estimated four hundred languages can rightly be assumed to possess both the linguistic and communicative competences of their individual languages by virtue of their statuses as L₁ speakers. Incidentally, however, the prevailing socio-economic and political dispensation of Nigeria since it came into existence in 1914 as a sovereign nation has tended to impose communicative inequalities of various kinds on the greater majority of Nigerians. In other words, the right to and use of communicative competence of this silent majority of Nigerians for purposes of social interaction, information dissemination and indeed mass communication across ethno-linguistic boundaries, has largely been circumscribed by the deliberate institutional arrangements in the nation’s social, economic, and political systems, as put in place by the ex-colonial overlords, and dutifully sustained by the apologists of the woeful status quo. In this paper, we shall discuss communicative inequality, (which subsumes subjective and linguistic inequalities) and relate it to the fundamental social issue such as equality of opportunities in Nigeria’s presumed participatory democratic experiment and explore the viability of linguistic option for redressing observed social inequalities in the polity.

The Myth of Participatory Democracy in Nigeria

Democratic dispensation in Nigeria as is conceived in contemporary times spans three significant periods in Nigeria’s history as an independent sovereign nation. The episodic military interventions, which interspersed these periods, might have tended to stifle the young tendrils of democracy and robbing it of its intrinsic values. The unenviable heritage of failures in democratic experiments is not very surprising given that many African countries, notes Uju (2001:75)
“...tend towards the practice of pseudo-democracy...” As Flammang et al. (1990:18) remark, “...freedom (in the so-called democratic countries) is still extremely fragile and economic and social a distant dream.” Nigeria, in the opinion of Uju (2001) is a good example of those African countries where the end of dictatorship and whatever political system that replaces dictatorship no matter the tone is erroneously referred to as a democracy. This calls to mind the ingenuity of the Abacha regime as was evident in the conceptualization of ‘home-grown’ democracy, which according to Igbo (2001:103) was supposed to be a democracy rooted and nurtured according to the culture and tradition of Nigeria. But in reality, this novel brand of democracy only sufficed to provide convenient hinge on which die-hard apologists of Abacha dictatorship clung to in their frenzied ‘patriotic’ duty of rationalizing brazen human rights abuses and organized state terrorism. Also, in his assessment of the state of democracy in Nigeria and other countries, using some democratic indices such as income per capita, literacy urbanization fragmentation and political life, Nwachukwu (2001) avers that the ideals of democratic culture have not taken roots. Although the full realization of democracy, in the opinion of Marcuss (1985), presupposes outright abolition of pseudo-democracies, is yet to be achieved in Nigeria, the will to institutionalize an enduring participatory democracy at least in principle, has not been lacking. This is evident in the avalanche of constitutions midwifed by the colonial masters and the post-colonial independence constitutions such as the 1979, 1989, and the 1995 draft constitution ratified in 1998 and promulgated in 1999. The first statutory provision for institutionalizing participatory democracy in Nigeria was implicit in the terms of reference given to a Committee set up in 1974 by the then Federal Military Government to review the local government system. By 1976, Guidelines for Local Government Reform had been released by the FMG as a crucial element in its political programme. Part of the Guidelines that impinged on participatory are implicit in the observation by the then FMG that these proposals are intended to stimulate democratic self-government and to encourage initiative and leadership potentials. The most significant step taken towards ensuring participatory in modern Nigeria, notes Ikara (1982:129) “...is the enactment of the 1979 Presidential Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria...through which democracy and the rule of law as well as major changes in the socio-political order of Nigeria have been accomplished. Relevant sections of the Constitution, which were either modified or adopted wholly in the subsequent 1989 and 1998 Constitutions abound. These explicit provisions in the Constitution reflect in microcosm the fundamental basis of the nation’s political system, which is participatory democracy. In practice however, participatory democracy in Nigeria, notes Ikara (p.132) is stifled at the level of language use; and this may well account for the innumerable problems that Nigerians face today in operating the Constitution. There is no gainsaying the fact that the successful institutionalization of an enduring and sustainable participatory democracy in any polity depends to a large extent on a clear-cut linguistic desideratum, which ensures unfettered flow of information and direct communication between the leaders and the led. Democracy, as a political system, has often been described as ‘government of the people for the people
and by the people’. Akande (2000) in Onabanjo (2004:16) sees the concept as “a political process that allows the plurality of political parties to ensure popular participation in the political decision making”. Democracy, viewed from the standpoint of Sawant (2000) also in Onabanjo (p.17), is “a government by debate and discussion of the people, and not a rule by arbitrary will and whim or dictate of an individual or a few individuals”. Onabanjo lists what he considers the three essential requisites of democracy as: “a well-informed citizenry, participation of the citizens in the day-to-day governance of the society, and accountability to the citizens of those who exercise power on their behalf”. The minimum content of this conceptual explication points somewhat unwaveringly to a political system that is people-centered and people-oriented; one whose ideals can be achieved by involving the people in the process, not as passive spectators or fawning minions but as robust and vibrant participants. Given that the majority of the citizenry in any nation such as Nigeria are illiterate rural dwellers, who use only indigenous languages in their day-to-day communication activity, their involvement in the democratic governance is best achieved by integrating their languages into the democratic system. The cognitive, behavioural, aesthetic, and communicative dimensions of language clearly demonstrate its centrality and indispensability in this regard. In spite of this unique role of language in facilitating thought processes, dialectics and discourses as well as activating human genius and creativity that are crucial in democratic governance, the fundamental problem of language use in Nigeria, which derives largely from the nation’s complex multilingual situation and further exacerbated by the flat-footed, befogged and ill-advised language policies, has tended to render participatory democracy in Nigeria a remote possibility.

**Communicative Functions of Nigerian Languages**

From the preceding discussions, it is obvious that participatory democracy presupposes the total involvement of the citizens that cut across the diverse social strata in any given nation in the articulation and implementation of policies and programmes of government of the day. In this regard, the centrality of language as a factor in the socio-economic, political and other aspects of national development has been accorded due recognition by linguists. (cf. J. Fishman, 1968; B. Jernudd, 1968, Spencer, 1983(a & b), 1970, 1971(a), 1974; Das Gupta, 1968, 1970; E. Haugen, 1968; Ferguson, 1965; Bamgbose, 1976, 1982a,b; Oyeleran, 1990; Agbedo, 1998 ). In Nigeria, where conscious efforts are being made to adapt and adopt a Western democracy, the success of which, is dependent on enlisting the entire citizenry for effective government, the seemingly intractable problems of information dissemination, and indeed mass communication, mainly occasioned by the exclusive appropriation of English language by the ruling elite as an instrument of oligarchic control, constitutes a formidable barrier to the emergence of a type of social structure, whereby distinctions are not based on linguistic abilities but one that ensures class mobility and safeguards the individual’s inalienable rights to self-determination. This sorry situation has persisted in spite of the demonstrable communicative functions of local languages and their information dissemination potentials
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Unoh (1982) analyzed the concepts, dimensions and models of communication and information dissemination and explored the possibility of effective information dissemination through the local (Nigerian) languages. In a fairly detailed discussion of both the linear and the convergence models of communication and information dissemination, Unoh (p.101) makes reference to the three constituent elements of the act of communication: the speaker, the speech and the audience, as specified by Aristotle in his communication and information dissemination model. This linear paradigm, which was taken a step further by Lasswell (1948) gained added dimension with Shannon and Weaver’s (1949) redefinition of communication as ‘all the procedures by which one mind may affect another’ and by producing a left-to-right linear paradigm, which implies a one-way transmission of message from an information source, by a transmitter, through a channel and a receiver, to the destination, with the probability of some distortion arising from the intervening ‘semantic noise’. This linear paradigm triggered off other sundry theories and models of communication and information dissemination (cf. Schramm, 1955; Wesley and MacLean, 1957, and Berlo, 1960.) Of particular relevance is Berlo’s ‘Source-Message-Channel-Receiver (S-M-C-R)’ model of communication and information dissemination, whose underlying assumptions, according to Kincaid (1979:4), are reminiscent of the epistemological biases involved “in treating information like a physical substance, and individual minds like separate entities”. Continuing, Unoh (p.103) observes that Kincaid identified and listed seven types of epistemological bias, the awareness of which, ‘has led to a continuing search for a communication and information theory that will take care of some of these problems, and also provide a more meaningful context within which to assess the capacity of a given language for information dissemination.’ The result, notes Unoh, has been the emergence of the convergence model of communication. Quoting Kincaid, Unoh further observes that this model is based on some of the fundamental principle of information, cybernetics, meaning, and language combined, and articulated in a manner, which should make them easier to apply for professionals who use communication in their work, as well as those engaged in scientific research on the communication process. By implication, this model suggests that what happens during communication and information dissemination is a meeting of minds, a mutual interaction in situations where various meanings and points of view are possible. The assumptions, notes Kincaid, are that the common goal of communicators is mutual understanding; that communication is a process in which two or more individuals or groups share information in order to reach a mutual understanding of each other and of the world in which they live; and that the process of convergence towards mutual understanding subsumes divergence at certain points, and implies that the goal of mutual understanding can be approached in a cyclical manner, through mutual information-sharing or feedback, but can never be perfectly achieved.

Against the backdrop of these models of communication and information dissemination, Unoh goes further to discuss the peculiar and pragmatic problems of disseminating information through Nigerian languages. The picture that emerges from his analysis is that the multilingual character of the Federal
Republic of Nigeria; the terribly underdeveloped state of our so-called ‘major’ languages and ‘minority’ languages; the lack of concerted effort to identify, promote or evolve an acceptable lingua franca, and the acknowledged status and dominance of English as a medium of communication and formal learning in Nigeria, are among the potentially limiting factors with regard to the effective use of local (Nigerian) languages as means of information dissemination. In spite of these problems, the effectiveness of Nigerian languages as information dissemination means in a variety of communication settings is not contestable. This is more so when these basic communicative functions of Nigerian languages, according to Unoh (p.111), tend to follow the convergence model much more closely than they follow the linear model and would appear to confirm the possibility of effective information dissemination through them. However, the extent of this effectiveness depends on the type of information to be disseminated; the intended destination of the information; the information source, and which local language is involved. In summary, Unoh posits that Nigerian languages are potentially effective media for information dissemination and that they can be effective in a variety of communication settings, such as, interpersonal, group, intercultural, religious, political, and mass communication settings, so long as the conditions are basically conducive to effective communication. In other words, when the type of information to be disseminated in the variety of communication settings listed above are simple, non-technical, and non-scientific, information can take place quite easily, barring all the possible limitations imposed by normal semantic and other problems, and the antithetical and cyclical processes that may operate to bring about some degree of convergence.

The value of this analysis derives from the fact that the political system expressed in our present aspirations for participatory democracy calls for a radical re-examination of the current mechanics of mass communication and information dissemination in a manner that would gradually eliminate those ‘disabilities’ in the communicative functions of our local languages and ensure diffusion of maximum information to a maximum number of people in a plural society such as Nigeria. To cope with the urgency of democratizing mass communication and information dissemination means, we would explore the possibility of putting an institutional arrangement in place that would foster an interplay of vertical movement, downwards of communication from the leaders to the led and vertical movement, upwards, from the led to the leaders. Herein lies the relevance of linguistic imperatives, to which we shall turn in the next section.

The Linguistic Imperatives

As earlier observed, the minimal content of democracy as a political system, presupposes the active participation of every segment of the political community. The fact that this all-important full participation is guaranteed only when the people (being the major stakeholders in the democratic project) are in total control of mass communication and information dissemination means, points to the centrality of language as a powerful tool of political action. In contemporary
Nigeria, the accident of colonialism and its concomitant linguistic imperialism produced an oasis of mental poverty-stricken neocolonialists, and brainwashed ruling elite who holds on to the primacy of English, the colonial language to render the greatest majority of the population as inconsequential variables in the crucial art of governance. Consequently, much of the invaluable information on the processes and techniques of government, of the things that affect the common man on a daily basis such as health-care delivery programmes, fiscal policies, economic reform programmes (commercialization, privatization, deregulation), scientific and technological innovations, (Information and Communication Technologies) and the impact of international politics on the national life is lost on the majority of the population. To redress this ugly situation, we offer plausible way forward, one which harks back to the nationalistic and ideological reasons often given as to why local languages should be fully integrated into the mainstream of socio-cultural, economic and political dispensations of the nation as a veritable and viable instrument of mass communication and information dissemination. The age-long argument, which comes in different hues and shades, has continued to reverberate in any typical sociolinguistic discourse. As a rehash, the kernel of the argument is that the colonial edifice in Africa generally, which was built on three strong pillars- the political, the economic, and the linguistic- must be dismantled completely and similar pillars deeply-rooted in the socio-cultural heritage, traditions and collective consciousness of Africans erected in their places before we can lay claims to true independence. In reality, the tragic import of colonialism in Africa is that even the acclaimed demolition of the political and economic pillars has left the linguistic pillar intact. This, in essence, makes nonsense of our claims to full independence since we will remain marooned in the enslaving and suffocating sphere of influence of the ex-colonial masters, in whose languages we conduct government activities and other aspects of our national life. This, according to Ugonna (1982:26-7), “...is the psychological basis of linguistic imperialism, which to the unwary, appears innocuous but which is in reality the most pernicious.” Unfortunately, there seems to be no end to this evil called linguistic imperialism as popular opinion affirms that the African elitist hierarchy, which constitute the ruling class appears determined to hang on to the apron-strings of the colonial master and would spare nothing to foreclose any break with colonialism. The implication of the foregoing is that the first combative step in the direction of meaningfully engaging Nigerian languages in the mechanics of mass communication and information dissemination should take the form of an offensive aimed at pulverizing this neocolonialist nuisance called linguistic imperialism. In specific terms, there needs to be a radical reorientation of the ruling elite who see what Fishman (1968) refers to as “official exoglossic languages, (that is the ex-colonial masters’ languages, notably English, French, Spanish) as the only possible and effective medium of information dissemination in all formal communication settings. These tired imitators of colonial language and cultural values who conspire with the brainwashed products of the Christopher-Mahood school to befog the nation’s already cloudy linguistic horizon with imperialist-driven policies must be shoved aside as good riddance to...
a bad rubbish\textsuperscript{12}. Of course, it goes without saying that the colonial character of such language policies, whose elitist inheritors rake up spineless arguments for is a clear reaffirmation of Pio Zirimu’s ‘catechetical litany’, which, according to Ugonna (1982:25), is chanted as follows:

English and French are international languages, the languages of science and technology, of commerce and industry, of higher education and universal culture- in short the languages of education, development and international communication. Moreover, these languages, being foreign and therefore neutral, and being institutionalized through formal education, will unite us. Native languages cannot claim to perform the same functions, and must therefore take a second place, and be used in those areas where we cannot do better for the time being.

The predicaments of our local languages appear worsened by the new threat of globalization, an evolving worldwide integration, interconnection and interdependence process, which defines a future where everybody is homogenous, speaks the same language and draws from a common pool of thought processes.

The cheering news, however is that the dialectic walls of the foregoing hackneyed argument and its variant disguises have been collapsing in the face of logical superiority of more tenable arguments in favour of indigenous languages. The ideological basis of our predilection for the indigenous languages derives largely from the cultural and cognitive perquisites of language as a vehicle of aesthetic or sublime expression. Language, notes Greenberg (1963)\textsuperscript{13}, “…is not only a necessary condition for culture, it is itself a part of culture.” Again, as an integral part of thought processes, language is the vehicle through which, not only thoughts are expressed, but also through which thoughts are had. Language is instrumental in the all-important cognitive process of reality perceptions, hence Oliver Holmes’ characterization of this man’s unique property as “…the blood of the soul into which thoughts run and out of which they grow, (Kuju, 1999:37). This intrinsic humanness rings loud and clear in Kuju’s delineation of language as “…the key to the heart of the people. If we lose the key”, he warns, “we lose the people. If we treasure the key and keep it safe, it will unlock the door to untold riches, which cannot be guessed at from the outside…a lost language is a lost culture; a lost culture is a lost civilization. A lost civilization is invaluable knowledge lost…the whole vast archives of knowledge and expertise…will be consigned to oblivion”. In essence, language provides a melting point for both culture and thought since when one thinks in a language of a particular culture, what one expresses, according to Ugonna (1982), is largely part of that culture. In affirming this aspect of language, Ahmed (1982:139) refers to W.A. Gatherer’s observation:

\begin{quote}
It is language, which gives our thinking form, sequence and coherence and it is by means of language that we give substance to our thought…
\end{quote}
Thus we think in language; and effective thinking is not possible unless we possess linguistic competencies adequate enough to realize and express our ideas.

Perhaps, it is the recognition of the central role of language in the life of its speaker, which informed the observation of Ahmed Sekou Toure (1978) in Ahmed (1982:138) about language. According to him, “language constitutes the basis of a people’s personality, while contributing to their creative genius” and warns that “… a people renouncing the use of its language is doomed to stagnation, and even to retrogression and to disappear completely as a people.” Therefore, the best recipe for staving off this impending linguistic cum cultural doom is the total involvement of the people in the development process through the integration of their local languages in the development process. In this respect, the school comes handy as an important agent of development process. Unfortunately, however, the neocolonial status of most schools in ex-colonies of Africa in general and Nigeria in particular does not stand them in the good stead to offer development-oriented education. Commenting on the colonial system of education, Altbach and Kelly (1978) in Ahmed(p.142), observe that colonial schools never held out the prospects of integration into indigenous culture of whosoever attended them; neither did they prepare the colonized for leadership in their own society. Contrary to schools in Europe, where the schools reinforced the cultural and social context of the students it served, giving the elite the baggage to remain elite grounded in its own culture and norms, the colonial schools, note Altbach and Kelly, were alien in the sense that whatever they taught had little to do with the society and culture of the colonized, and served as a mechanism whereby the schooled would gain a new social place and a new culture rather than be prepared to work within the context of the indigenous culture. On the school’s curriculum, they aver that it represented a basic denial of the colonised’s past and withheld from them the tools to regain the future; it represented a simultaneous obliteration of the child’s roots and the denial of the wherewithal to change; and denied him the skills for anything worthwhile except what he had traditionally engaged in such as farming or crafts. Even after political independence, the colonial education only underwent some cosmetic transformation, giving the grand illusion of real change. The imperialistic characteristics of these schools, notes Carnoy (1974) in Ahmed (p.143) were preserved through the establishment of economic, political and cultural dependency. The evils of this cultural dependency permeate the socio-economic, political and cultural fabrics of the neo-colonial nations such as Nigeria through the agency of cultural multi-national corporations. According to Mazrui quoted in Ahmed (p.144), this cultural dependency syndrome is best illustrated by the derisive attitude of African elite class towards the promotion of indigenous languages. The people who remain steadfast in their self-serving roles as intellectual and bureaucratic ‘front men’ in the interest of their neo-colonial collaborators cling to the primacy of the colonial languages. In their neocolonial ‘wisdom’, they seem to have dismissed the problems of African languages as a ‘fait accompli’, the lots of which, nothing can be done to improve. Nevertheless,
Ahmed disagrees with this line of thinking. Quoting Baugh (1951), he cites a classical case of English, regarded in contemporary times as a world language but which was a subject of debate in the eighteenth century among scholars as to whether it was refined enough to displace Latin as the vehicle for intellectual and formal discourse. Again, this fatalistic disposition towards the development of the local languages hardly stand the huge successes recorded in the linguistic engineering projects in Finland, Israel, former Soviet Union, Tanzania, Kenya, old Somalia. Given this backdrop, the only viable option in this regard, is what Spencer (1963) calls a deliberately devised piece of ‘linguistic engineering’ as a first step in the direction of adopting a realistic language policy aimed at developing all languages in Nigeria. As Ifemesia (1982:36) would put it, all should be cultural grist that has come to the Nigerian linguistic mill. It would be an institutional arrangement that would discourage the current propensity for unilingualism (courtesy of the new global networking) or make room for suppression and achieve the unity of the graveyard. Of course, it is inconceivable to think of implementing any useful and lasting transformation of the lives and conditions of our people for the better without such changes being effected through the agency of our local languages acting upon our local cultures. This becomes even more relevant in contemporary Nigeria, when the Obasanjo administration has embarked on reform agenda in the various aspects of our national life. Democracy, as a system of government, is all about developing the people, considered as the major beneficiaries of the system. To succeed in this onerous task, the political leader, in Nigeria’s case, Mr. President and his team need to think and feel in the indigenous African language(s) rather than serving as misguided purveyors of alien ideologies and cultural values. Good enough, the President, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo seems to appreciate the dangers of neocolonialism when he (as Nigeria’s Military Head of State) declared in his opening address during the 1977 FESTAC that “the standing tragedy of all Blacks and Africans wherever they may be is that their tongues have been pulled out and they must speak in strange tongues”. However, the exigencies of the moment apparently dictated by the inexplicable leadership conveniences appear to have robbed General Obasanjo’s heartwarming declaration twenty-seven years ago of its steaming pan-Africanism. Not only has Chief Obasanjo, as a civilian President failed to put in place an enduring institutional arrangement that would ensure the total integration of these primal languages of Nigeria into the mainstream of national development process, his administration has demonstrated far more rabid penchant for perpetuating the woeful socio-economic and cultural dependency syndrome than any other administration in Nigeria, military or civilian. As ‘trading-posts’ of all sorts, the Obasanjo administration has been captured in differing but complementary terms as blindfolded and misguided apostle of the Brettonwood, World Bank, IMF, and other financial institutions through which agencies, the ex-colonial masters tighten the noose around the necks of neocolonial states and tether them irredeemably to the tentacles of the colonial octopus.

In the light of the foregoing, we suggest a reformulation of Nigeria’s communication policy as well as the cultural policy in a manner that would take
adequate cognizance of the centrality of language in all conceivable spheres of national development struggles. In specific terms, we envision a policy that encourages researches aimed at harnessing the rich linguistic resources brought about by ethno-linguistic pluralism. Such a policy would insist on promoting the use of local languages in conducting the affairs of government, business, education, and mass media. In advancing this position, we are not unmindful of the inescapable necessity of linguistically re-educating a national population, with all the attendant cost implications and disruption of cultural unity. However, the cost of re-education pales into insignificance, compared to the tragedy and malaise of training one’s children in English, French or any other colonial language that symbolizes past oppression and conveys alien cultural values. As Chumbow (1990:72) asked, “what worthy cause has ever been achieved without a cost? Even though investments in language development programmes, continues Chumbow, have not known to yield immediate dividends, especially in monetary terms, wise governments worldwide that recognized language as an indispensable ally in national development have invested in the development of their local languages. Therefore, an overall communication and information dissemination policy that would ensure the decentralization and democratization of communication and information becomes urgent. In this way, genuine voluntary and commercial outfits who, with their sectarian group loyalties and sensibilities will favour the use of their group languages in gathering more in-depth information on their group identity, would be empowered to own institutions of communication and information dissemination. With the tempestuous gale of democratization and globalization sweeping across the contemporary world, Nigeria has embraced the principles of market liberalism, hence the decentralization and democratization of communications. However, it is one thing to decentralize and democratize information and another thing to consummate such policy reformulation. One of the criteria for genuine democratization of communications, according to Iidoko (1999) in Rodney (2004:5), is “...civil society’s active participation in communication and its control, that is the participation of groups of people, communities, outside and separated from state power means, united and organized to achieve different aims or enforcement of interest in the political development of the society”. The expected gains of this democratization, notes Okunna and Omenugha (2001) in Rodney (p.6), include the extension of access and participation to the rural dweller, and the marginalized urbanite; shift of emphasis from urban centres to rural centres where the large population of media consumers reside. This is in consonance with the democratic ideal, which enables all those concerned to participate in the political decision-making process based on equal access. However, in spite of the enthusiasm and great expectations that greeted the National Mass Communication Policy of 1989, which brought about the promulgation of Decree 38 of August 1992 and Decree 75 of 1997, establishing National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and National Communication Commission (NCC) respectively, the nagging problems in the domains of programming, technology, finance, professional standard, legislation, and public dialogue, observes Rodney, stand out as major threats to growth of communication decentralization.
and democratization in Nigeria. By implication, the primary objective of the so-called communication decentralization and democratization policy, which was explicitly stated in the guidelines for the third National Development Plan (1976-1980), has hardly been realized. Udoakah (2004) carried out a study on the disparity in radio coverage of urban and rural areas of Rivers and Akwa Ibom States, Nigeria and observed that the “claims and wishes of Nigerian government to use the radio medium to mobilize the rural population for development seem to continue to be a dream”. A cursory survey of programmes of Radio Nigeria Coal City FM and Cosmo FM, Enugu, for instance, clearly justifies Udoakah’s claims. The seemingly uncanny predilection for urban-oriented, elitist-driven type of programming, news coverage, and musicals tend to reflect a corporate vow to shut out illiterate and rural dwellers from the current of information flow. This is evident in the disproportionate allocation of space and airtime to news and programmes concerning empty rhetoric of the people in government, intended more to lionize the awesome political Didigborigbos, massage their bloated ego, and offend the sacred sensibilities of the discerning public than dispassionate appraisal of government policies and programmes. Even where ample provision is made for rural-centered programmes, as is the case with the AM Frequency of Radio Nigeria Enugu, the target audience remains a potential target as the reception signals hardly extend beyond the precincts of Enugu urban. Ironically, the FM wing, whose clear reception signals permeate the far reaches and inner rungs of the rural populace, is fully loaded with elitist programmes and presented most time by snobbish Deejays whose obsession with hackneyed and quaint Americanisms is a classical study on linguistic puppetry. This prevailing situation, perhaps informed the opinion of Moemeka (1981) in Udoakah (2004), that “the impact of radio diminishes as one gets away from the cities into the rural areas, while the rural dwellers exist mainly as an eave-dropping audience”. Similar conclusion, according to Udoakah, is evident in other scholar’s works.

In the light of the foregoing, it behooves the National Broadcasting Commission to ensure strict compliance with its policy guidelines on communication decentralization and democratization in order to smoothen both the vertical (downward-upward) and horizontal movements of communication, earlier advocated, and promote the enviable culture of participatory communication. This is in consonance with the universal declaration of human rights of 1948, part of which, recognizes the right of every citizen to “seek, receive and impart information through any medium and regardless of frontiers”. Citing Rae and Taylor (1970), Nwachukwu (2001:215) identified cleavage tendency (fragmentation) rooted in ethnic, linguistic, religious differences as one of the factors that have stymied democratic efforts in Nigeria. Of all the cleavage areas, linguistic differences appear to be the most potent in fanning the embers of centripetal and centrifugal forces in a typical evolving democratic culture such as Nigeria. As Agbedo (2004:****) observed, the two cross-polity profiles, which Fishman (1958) studied, suggest that linguistic fragmentation or heterogeneity characterizes state in which primordial ties and passions are less controllable, and interests tend to be articulated on platforms of kinship, ethnicity, religion,
region etc. The divisive undertone of linguistic fragmentation, continues Agbedo, was explicit in Schwarz’s opinion that “differences between indigenous languages keep the people apart, perpetuate ethnic hostilities, weaken national loyalties and increase the danger of separatist sentiments.” In addition, Antia and Haruna (1997) outlined the Soweto, Belgian, Indian and Quebec paradigms of language in ethnicity as apt examples of how language can become an auspicious locus for sharpening sensitivities, deepening suspicion and providing the undercurrent of fire that gnawed at the souls of such nations. In Nigeria, language has gained an unprecedented potency as a veritable anchorage for polarizing the people along ethno-linguistic cleavage thereby stifling the chances of mobilizing the disparate ethnic nationalities towards consummating and consolidating the noble ideals of democracy.21 Given the centrifugal import of language in a markedly fragmented society such as Nigeria, there is an urgent need for an institutional arrangement in form of a realistic language policy that accord priority attention to the developmental aspects of all languages divested of all the official perquisites. In this way, the L1 speakers of every language would be linguistically empowered to receive basic education that would reposition them for unfettered access to the nation’s socio-economic and political dispensations and the opportunities to participate in them based on the principles of equality and egalitarianism. The total integration of the people of Nigeria, notes Elugbe (1990:13), is the only goal any reasonable government of the Federation should set for itself as a matter of top priority. To achieve this, such a government, continues Elugbe, must not only reach the people in the languages they already speak but also mobilize the resources at its disposal to understand the language of the people. Given that linguistic empowerment stalls language shift as it enthrones language loyalty (Emenanjo and Bleambo, 1999:ii), the ultimate aim of eliminating communicative inequality, which runs against the grain of participatory democracy would have been achieved and the people, and indeed the entire nation would be better for it. Finally, the threat posed by language endangerment needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. A Time magazine publication, notes Kuju (p.38), revealed that “…there is hard evidence that the number of languages is shrinking; of the roughly 6,500 language now spoken, up to half are already endangered or on the brink of extinction.” In the light of the current unbridled emphasis on globalization with its in-built homogenizing mechanism, the collective fate of world languages, which Fishman (1999) describes as ‘receding’, ‘disadvantaged’, ‘sickly’, ‘dying’, weakened’, ‘threatened’ has been put on the tenterhooks by the predatory tentacle of the so-called ‘safe’, ‘living’, ‘dynamic’ languages. By implication, it is just a matter of time for these endangered languages to respond to the theoretical dictates of survival-of-the-fittest or Darwinian theory of evolution through natural selection by taking ‘terminal refugee’ in the globalizing bowels of the world’s known predator languages. In Nigeria for instance, Hausa has since launched predatory incursions into the pristine linguistic sanctuary of many minor languages of the northern region. While bemoaning the serious ‘desertification’ and ‘deforestation’ in the linguistic landscape of the north, Kuju (p.40) laments, “…Hausa seems to have the effect
of a greenhouse gas, which has eaten up the ozone layer leading to some kind of global warming that has affected the survival of the indigenous languages." The gobbling propensity of the Hausa language reflects in microcosm the monstrous and corrosive rage with which English in league with other predator languages of wider communication are wreaking ecological havoc upon the global linguistic landscape. The feline fluidity with which these predator languages strut the globe and guzzling down the endangered languages with ferocious ease perhaps informed Krauss' doomsday prophecy in 1992 that “…the coming (21st) century will see either the death or doom of 90% of mankind’s languages.” In the peculiar case of Nigeria, the panacea for language endangerment is language empowerment, which Emenanjo (1999:83) notes, derives its ideological base from enabling provisions such as The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), The Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National, Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minority (1992), The Universal Declaration of the collective Rights of Peoples (1990)22 and The Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights (1996)23. Although these populist declarations are language endangerment-unfriendly, the actual success of a language empowerment programme requires the cast-iron commitment of the native speakers to evolve a credible framework that addresses all the intra- and extra-linguistic forces, which would reshape the collective language attitude and redirect their endangered languages along the path of renewed vitality, vibrancy, and freshness. This is an inescapable option, since according to Emenanjo (p.82), “…the fate of an endangered language may well lie in the hands of the owners of the language themselves and in their will to make it survive.” This line of reasoning is in consonance with the Igbo adage, which says that the owner of the corpse carries it on his head.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, we have tried to examine the concept of communicative inequality in a democratic setting such as Nigeria, and explore the linguistic option for eliminating social inequalities rooted in ethno-linguistic origin. We observed that the practice of participatory democracy as a political system in Nigeria falls far below the minimum content of the concept even when there are ample statutory provisions in the Constitutions. This failure derives largely from the problem of language use and which is further worsened by flat-footed language policies. In spite of the nation’s rich linguistic landscape, brimming over with robust languages with varying degrees of linguistic vitality, there is yet to be an institutional arrangement in place to integrate these languages into the mainstream of the nation’s mass communication and information dissemination system. Consequently, the minority ruling elite holds on to the primacy of English language to exclude majority of Nigerians from participating in the socio-economic and political dispensation of their nation, thereby rendering participatory democracy, a pipe dream. To reverse this ugly trend, we suggested a linguistic imperative, which derives its ideological basis from two complementary planks: decentralization and democratization of mass communication and information dissemination system; language empowerment
programme that would eliminate disabilities rooted in social inequalities and the threat of language endangerment.

**Notes**

1 Unoh (1980) observes that there are various dimensions of communication, which include the following: interpersonal, group, organizational, business, agricultural, religious, legal, health, instructional, cross-cultural (trans-racial), political, and mass communication.

2 The colonial edifice in Africa, writes Ugonna (1982:26) was built on three strong pillars—political, the economic, and the linguistic. The psychological bases of linguistic imperialism derives from the fact that Africa will remain moored in the sphere of influence of that master whose language they speak, leading to the production of the brainwashed, neocolonialists, slobs, and tired imitators of foreign culture.

3 These periods include, 1960-1966; 1979-1983; 1999-date.

4 The pre-independence Constitutions included the Clifford (1922); Richard (1946); Macpherson (1951); Lyttleton (1954) and Independence (1960).

5 The document goes further to observe that it is through an effective Local Government System that the human and material resources could be mobilized for local development. Such mobilization implies more intimate communication between the governed and the governors. But above all, these reforms were intended to entrust political responsibility to where it is most crucial and most beneficial, that is, to the people. The government hopes that these reforms would further enshrine the principle of participatory democracy and of political responsibility to every Nigerian.

6 Sections 1-8 recognize the Republican status of the country as an indivisible and indissoluble sovereign state. Sections 66, 69, 104, 105, 124, and 164 stipulate the electoral processes for both the executive and legislative positions. The democratic rights of the individual are guaranteed in the Human Rights sections 30-37, that is the right to life, dignity of the human person, personal liberty, fair hearing, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of expression and press, movement, freedom from discrimination, and freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

7 This is in line with Vygotsky and Luria’s observation, cited in Ahmed (1982:139) that “language plays a crucial role in the mental development (since) it is the interaction of language and situation in a social context…which gives the child the capacity to organize his mental activities.”

8 In Nigeria, language policies exist, attempts to implement them, notes Ahmed (1982:142) are at best haphazard, if not lukewarm. Agbedo (1998:72) also observes that the problem of implementation stems partly from the obvious inconsistencies and vagueness of the policy and partly from the fixated opinion that a trilingual policy is impracticable in a multilingual Nigeria, operating a federal system that tends to negate the basic tenets of true federalism.

9 They are: (i) a view of communication as a linear, one-way act, usually vertical, rather than a cyclical, two-way process over time; (b) a source bias, based on dependency rather than on the relationship of those who communicate,
and their fundamental interdependency; (iii) a tendency to focus on the objects of communication as if they existed in a vacuum, isolated from the context; (iv) a tendency to focus on the message per se at the expense of silence and the punctuation and timing of messages; (v) a tendency to consider the primary purpose of communication to be persuasion rather than mutual understanding, agreement, and collective action; a tendency to concentrate on the psychological effects of communication on separate individuals, rather than the social effects and the relationships among individuals; a belief in one-way mechanistic causation, rather than mutual causation which characterizes human information systems that are fundamentally cybernetic.

10 In spite of our so-called political independence, most ex-colonial nations of Africa are tired copycats of the outworn shibboleths of western political and economic systems. The inheritors of the woeful colonial legacy, who constitute the ruling elite, moon away the art of governance as they sacrifice the welfare of the hapless citizens on the altar of privatization, deregulation, market forces, and other instances of macro economic policies churned out for them by the spin doctors of the Bretons Wood Institutions, London and Paris Clubs.

11 Ugonna’s (1982:27) remarks is a subtle reference to Molly Mahood’s position stated in his inaugural lecture at the then University College, Ibadan on 17th November 1954, that one of the chief aims of Christopher-Mahood School was to produce students who needed to “think without strain in English rapidly and easily enough for them not to divert energy from the substance of their thought to its verbal form.”

12 The French policy, which reflects an extremely constricted perception of the nation’s true linguistic configuration, notes Agbedo (1998:74), represents one of such policy decisions of the Abacha regime taken with such a rioting sense of expediency to meet the exigencies of the moment.


14 Obasanjo himself had once decried the culture dependency in the neo-colonial states, which in his opinion, is maintained by stake groups who are ‘trading posts’ of all sorts- commercial, bureaucratic and academic-cum-intellectual.

15 The continued retention of the colonial language policy; the introduction of French as Nigeria’s second official language, the myriad of so-called economic reform programmes, which portray the Obasanjo administration as people-unfriendly all add up to portray the administration’s unenviable status as imperialist agents in a hurry to take Nigeria back to the dark ages of slavery and colonialism.

16 Citing Albrow, 1990; Giddens, 1990; Cox, 1994; Kanter, 1995; Robertson, 1992; Khor, 1995; Awake, 2000, Nsude (2002) sums up the concept of globalization as “the process of increasing interconnectedness between societies such that events in one part of the world more and more have effects on peoples and society faraway.”

17 Genuine democratization, according to Ildiko’k (1999) in Rodney (2004:2), means that the media be separated from the state, the government and their total independence guaranteed.
Part of the Plan in this respect is “to provide the country with strong and efficient information media, to achieve the end of fostering national reconciliation in the aftermath of the civil war, mobilizing public support for the effectiveness of national development and presenting a balanced, unbiased and timely information about conditions.”

Odidigborigbo is a super hero in Urhobo folklore whose immense supernatural prowess transcends the comprehension of an ordinary mind. This folk hero demolishes every obstacle in his way to realize his tall ambitions. Greatly enamoured of the uncanny dexterity with which their Governor has so far pulverized the on-going judicial process to determine his ex-convict status, the people of Delta State, Nigeria have gleefully ascribed the mythical powers of Odidigborigbo to His Excellency, Chief James Onanefe Ibori, a.k.a “The Man with the Big Heart”. The ruthless ease with which political grandmasters and gladiators (who found a common nest of convenience in PDP) bestride Nigeria’s undulating political turf against all known logic and permutations equally cast them in the mould of the mythical Odidigborigbo. The Omisore’s (s)election abracadabra that lent ludicrous flavour to the 419 (April, 19) elections of 2003, characterized by massive nuclear rigging of epidemic proportion and the consequent systemic corruption, high profile political assassinations, policy shifts and somersaults are clear footprints of typical Odidigborigbos on the prowl.

See for example, Opubor, (1985); Baofo, (1987); Nehu, (1993), and Olatunji, (1993).

Nwachukwu, (2001) attributes the demise of the First and Second Republics as well as the infamous annulment of the June 12 elections to the fragmented nature of the Nigerian society.

The Declaration holds that:

all peoples have the right to express and develop their culture, language and rules of organization and, to this end, to adopt political, educational, communications and governmental structures of their own within different political frameworks

This Declaration hinges on the need to correct linguistic imbalances... and ensure the respect and full development of all languages and establishing the principles for a just and equitable linguistic peace throughout the world as a key factor in the maintenance of harmonious social relations.

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