African languages and the challenges of globalization

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Abstract

This paper employs the mid-point strategic view in discussing the effects of globalization on African Languages. Here globalization is seen as a process of change, full of opportunities and also challenges that have to be skilfully handled, clearly harnessed and managed for positive and all round human development. Globalization, it is argued, has come to stay. From all indications, the English language is comfortably and unchallengeably the lingua franca of the global village. This already places other languages, including African languages, at a disadvantage. The unfavourable position of African languages in the global village and the challenges this poses to the entire continent forms the nucleus of this paper.

1.0 Introduction

Globalization has come to attract both commendation and condemnation in recent times as scholars express divergent opinions on the matter. To the advocates of globalization, it is synonymous with everything excellent and a fulfillment of centuries of dreams. It is for the pleasure of man; to put man's life at its best and make his environment "most worth living" for him as he interacts effortlessly with the world around him. But to detractors, globalization stands for evil and its tentacles are the ills of capitalism – a reckless and irresistible desire to conquer and dominate the world. It symbolizes global inequalities of especially the world markets, unequal and unfair union between the rich and the poor, the developed and the developing nations, for example, the western world and Africa. By implication, globalization to them stands for subjugation and sophisticated exploitation in disguise. It is an outlet or a means of impoverishing the already poor and developing countries of the world. According to Williams, as cited in Inegbeboh (2004), it favours only the strongest countries of the world. These are the chief actors and international super-powers that transcend national boundaries to shape life and law in other nations.

Ajayi (2003) objectively explained that beyond the two extreme views: the extreme optimist who sees globalization as a transparent glass, three quarters full of opportunities; and the extreme pessimist who sees same as a calabash full of problems, there is yet a more objective view christened the 'mid-point' strategy. The 'mid-point' strategist sees globalization as a process of change, full of opportunities and also challenges that have to be skillfully handled, clearly harnessed and managed for positive and all round human development. In other words, the mid-point strategist sees globalization as a means to an end and not an end in itself.

From whichever angle one views the concept, globalization, the fact remains that globalization is a necessary evil that has come to stay. And so, like Inegbeboh (2004), we have come to the conclusion that the globalization process is irreversible. It is on the strength of this fact that this paper employs the mid-point strategic view in discussing the effects of globalization on African languages. This is done with a view to exposing the numerous challenges that lie ahead of them in the global village and also proffering suggestions and or recommendations that will enable the languages cope or endure the global move(s).

2.0 Globalization: Its meaning and origin

Globalization in the words of Atabo (2005:1) is "... a process by which experiences are standardized around the world". It is a determined attempt at unifying the world systems through encouraging uniformity, conformity, universality and common standard practices among geo-political regions on the globe regardless of certain geographical jurisdictional barriers and even ideological affiliations or divides. This, according to Omachonu (2005), is made possible by the seemingly common core of human existence in virtually all walks of life and advancement made in science and information technology. It is the ultimate form of internationalism, interdependence or interconnectivity whereby we would have the whole wide world in one room called the global village – a world without boundaries.

What then is the origin of globalization? It is said that the eye that will keep its owner till old age is detected at youth. Our sense of history and analytical ability will help discover the real motive that has kindled the desire for globalization as we trace the origin of this concept.

Ogude (2000) traces the origin of globalization to the fifteen century when Christopher Columbus and John Cabot went in search of new lands and "opened up a brave new world to ignorant and insular Europe". Their

real motive in sailing round the world was economic and selfish; to discover other races, lands and the so-called backward nations and or people with a view to bringing them under subjugation, domination and the exploitative tendencies of Europe. Similarly, Richard Steele's attempt in creating the ubiquitous Captain Andrew Free-Port in 1711 where the very concept of free trade first flourished was also a step in the same direction. With these epochs, the possibility of one world was mooted and it became manifest and concrete especially in the 20th and 21st centuries following the phenomenal advancement made in science and communication technology. However, it is sad to note that the only role played by Africa in particular, in the first phase of the evolution of the global village was not even that of a servant but of the slave, the colonized and the exploited. The essence of history is that by understanding the past we can forecast the future and so to lack a sense of it is to remain directionless forever. Here lies the lesson for us to learn concerning globalization and the real motive behind the reckless and irresistible desire of the West to propagate, popularize and enthrone it.

3.0 The purpose of globalization

Globalization serves several purposes; some positive, others negative. It touches the life of man at various realms; economic, intellectual, political and socio-cultural. The sole aim is to standardize experiences around the world for mutual benefits. Globalizing such experiences, it is argued, is for the pleasure of man; to put man's life at its best and make his environment "most worth living" for him. Besides, man stands to benefit more from globalization as scholars, especially those who are pro-globalization, applaud its overwhelming positive impacts to include the following:

(i) A rise in the standard of living by improving the welfare of people thereby eradicating poverty.
(ii) Free flow of information and innovative ideas, that is, accessibility of information.
(iii) Effective demand and growth of real income.
(iv) Expansion of production and trade in goods and services.
(v) Elimination of the discriminatory treatment in international trade relations.
(vi) Sustainable development through the optimal use of world's resources.
(vii) Development of rational thinking and team spirit.
(viii) Reduction in waste due to competitive efficiency.

(See Nwankwo, 1999; Salimano, 1999; Abdulraheem, 2002; Ajayi, 2003; Jimba, 2004 and Lawal, 2004).

In spite of these apparent advantages or positive effects that come with globalization, one is yet plagued with the fear that all is not well for developing and or underdeveloped nations of the world. The fear of being politically dominated, economically marginalized and culturally belittled is a reasonable one (Babajide, 2001). Aina (1997), for instance, expressed this fear when he described the current globalization as bearing striking similarities with the Western economy of the 1960s and 1970s built on the structure of inequality and exploitation. He stated that globalization in its stark reality advocated and still advocates remaking the world in the image of the western man, that is, the imperious white man who floats like a god across vast waters to rape a sleeping virgin (Africa in particular) whose warm legs are innocently spread. Globalization to him is nothing other than a new phase of capitalism with its attendant traditional functions of exploitation, accumulation, inequality and polarization. Similarly, in the opinion of Ogude (2000), globalization is symbolic of a deep-seated monster obsessed with reckless and irresistible craving for world domination. He concluded, it was "the logical extension of colonial enterprise in the non-European parts of the world" (p. 36).

This fear of domination is so popular among scholars or authors that one may not be wrong to conclude that the motive behind globalization could be summarized in a phrase, "to dominate". This assertion largely agrees with Atabo (2005:3) who in an attempt to explain the purpose of globalization argues thus:

> The purpose of globalization may be summed up in one word, "dominate". It could be the domination of the world with one idea such as the idea of democracy; of product such as coca cola, of religion such as Christianity and or Islam. Globalization is done under the cover of 'for the pleasure of man and the salvation of the soul' whereas the innermost drive may be a ploy for capitalism.

He further argues that "the drive to globalize springs from many desires which are capitalistic in orientation and exploitative in outlook. He further explains the ills of such desire (s) and the selfish motive behind it:

> They (Americans) would go to war against anyone whom they have their reason to believe is a tyrant. The cold war, which eventually saw the end of the USSR and Communism, was fought on that subhead... Intense capitalism... a desire for globalization... For instance, the international communication technology is putting many producers out of job. The I.C.T. is globalizing communication in all our rooms. We would no longer need the post office, the telecommunication, the typewriting machine and even the pen because we may no longer labour to write. The manufacturers of these items would be put out of job just as the globalization of plastic containers has put potters in the villages out of job. Thus the globalization of certain things poses a threat to others. (pp. 1-2)

Aina (1997) and Atabo (2005) are not the only voices in this regard. Edgel as cited in Jimba (2004) has a similar opinion to the one(s) expressed above. In this conviction, he sees globalization as the pressure for a uniform economic and political system in the world that is primarily capitalistic. This move is spear- headed by the West and or westernized nations with the United States of America leading because it is first and foremost to their advantage, even though they claim it is the key to human progress and development across cultures. To buttress this point, the salient features or qualities of this so-called globalization could be itemized to include:

(i) A structure of international power to dominate
(ii) Free market capitalism and integration of nations and markets
(iii) Dominant culture of Americanization
(iv) Technologies of computerization, miniaturization, digitalization, satellite communication, fiber optics and the Internet.

Other ills of globalization identified in the literature, include: increased inequality and the widening gap between the rich and the poor; how the rich get richer, and the poor, poorer, because of a steadily worsening uneven distribution of global wealth occasioned by globalization (Awake as cited in Lawal, 2004). It is true that global wealth has witnessed an increase in recent times but the lion share of this wealth is concentrated in a few, privileged hands and mostly, in the highly developed nations of the world.

Another adverse effect of globalization as pointed out in the same source is the negative impact of clash of cultures or cultural contact which

leads to cultural colonization and also the spread of certain alien vices too sophisticated for the developing nations to contend with. Abdulraheem as cited in Lawal (2004:12) raises a song of lamentation in response to the cultural colonization of the Nigerian youths in the following tune:

> ...Nigerian youths have been culturally colonized. This is because they (the youths) are now imitating the consumption patterns of the Europeans, their language, dress, dance, etc with no regard for the local culture. Our people are now romancing with foreign imported goods and *"cultural values"* (emphasis ours) at the expense of our own...

The list is endless. Globalization is a programme of deceit. The deception comes in shades and forms. For instance, in trade liberalization, the Western nations have deceived the poor nations to remove trade barriers which otherwise would have protected their struggling industries. As soon as they succeeded in making us a dumping ground for their less valuable and 'tokunbo' products, they smartly locked us out of where it is really happening. By this they have successfully prevented developing nations like Nigeria and others involved in the extractive industry from exporting their products to the developed nations for foreign exchange income (see also Akindele et al, 2002).

This plethora of problems notwithstanding, globalization as stated in our introduction has come to stay. We may either strive to cope with it or endure the pains of the negative impacts. It is high time we addressed African languages to the challenges ahead of them as Africa partakes in the global village. But before then, let us consider generally the place of language in globalization.

4.0 The place of language in globalization

It is practically impossible to ignore language in any issue that concerns the society. Information rules the world and the dissemination of such information goes through language and other means of communication, which are mere appendages to language. In fact, language could rightly be described as the blood and soul of globalization in that achievement in globalization is impossible without language as a veritable means of communication and transfer of values, including inter-cultural transfer. Language is instrumental in the propagation and popularization of certain ideas and ideals across the globe.

Language and culture, which is the totality of a people's way of life, are inseparable. They form the core-super-structures of any society, and it is language that transmits and sustains the people's culture, including customs, norms and values. Assuming the language dies, the people's culture goes into extinction and that race ceases to be recognized as such upon the globe. No technological effort or innovation succeeds outside language. Omachonu (2005:2) argues that "the attempt at constructing the 'Tower of Babel' failed not because of technological error or failure but language in communication failed hence the confusion that sent everybody packing". In sum, it is impossible to exclude communication (language) from societal issues, globalizing products, concepts, ideas, and so on. In fact, access to various political, economic and socio-cultural issues is unattainable without linguistic considerations.

From all indications, the English language is comfortably and indisputably the lingua franca of the global village. This already places other languages, including African languages at a disadvantage. The unfavourable position of African languages in the global village and the challenges that this poses to the entire continent, forms the nucleus of our discussion in the succeeding section.

5.0 African languages in a globalized world: The challenges

A critical look at Africa's language situation, especially right from the colonial days, reveals a pathetic story of linguistic alienation where the colonial language policies discouraged, in strong terms, the use of African languages in official functions, including even using them as medium of instruction in education or as school subjects (see also Kenyatta as cited in Inegbeboh, 2004). As a result, the official language as well as the language of instruction and scholarship in most educational institutions then, and even now, continues to be predominantly English, to the neglect of the far greater number(s) who speak other languages. This attests to the fact that during the colonial era, even the linguistic identity of Africa was subdued. It was a period of complete suppression and subjugation as the whole continent found neither voice nor vocal strength for expression. Thanks to the effort of the zealous missionaries who needed some of these African languages for effective propagation of the Gospel with a view to winning the native speakers of such languages as converts and subsequently, co-workers and interpreters. This effort, as well as the introduction and the application of linguistic studies to most African languages by expatriates and indigenous scholars were responsible for the boost in scholarship experienced by a few privileged African languages today. Even then, the

grossly negative language attitude displayed by the West towards African languages in the colonial days has continued unabated. It is clear from the much we have known of the global village that African languages have not yet found expression or a pride of place in the scheme of things in this village. Omachonu (2005:14) explains:

> ...they (African languages) only play the second fiddle because they belong to an inferior race – barbaric and uncivilized people(s) by the Western man's standard or consideration. The languages are considered grossly underdeveloped and therefore cannot be relevant globally.

The despicable political maneuver triumphing in the global village is championed by America. This is because, apart from the reckless and irresistible desire to dominate the world politically and economically, it also strives to dominate other languages and cultures. Supposedly, it always puts in place policies and programmes that suit her purpose and selfish motive. It is the United States of America, that dictates the benchmark and the marching order, as Rothkop, cited in Inegbeboh (2004: 11), alleges:

> And it is in the economic and political interests of the United States to ensure that if the world is moving toward a common language, it be English; that if the world is moving toward common telecommunications, safety and quality standards, they be Americans; that if the world is becoming linked by television, radio, and music, the programming be American; and that if common values are being developed, they be values with which Americans are comfortable.

The worry of this paper therefore is that now that Africa is fast losing out to the West politically, economically, socially, culturally and even linguistically, what do we do, especially as it relates to our neglected or dominated linguistic heritage in the global village? Should we fold our arms and watch on helplessly as we see Africa being gradually erased from the world map or pretend that all is well even when there is no peace in our camp? NO! This ugly situation must not continue and the bleak future – the extinction of African languages must be prevented at all cost. African languages must survive because language is one of the most viable legacies that can help us recover our lost glory and redeem our already battered international image – an exercise in image laundering. It is high time we learnt our lesson from the philosopher, Daniel Webstar. He explains

the place and the efficacy of language in communication, which concerns the point at issue.

Africa is at the crossroads in her membership of the global village. What she needs now is the courage to forge ahead amidst this overwhelming discouragement seeing that globalization, a necessary evil, has come to stay. Faced with this array of challenges, it is advisable for Africa to retreat and employ a virile strategy to reinforce its energy against her opponents and save her rich and enviable linguistic and cultural heritage from total collapse. To achieve this continental goal, the following challenging recommendations are put forward:

(i) Intensive and extensive development and standardization of African languages to enable them cope with new functions, roles and challenges. This could go through both corpus and status planning to enrich and equip the languages by major stakeholders in the respective languages.

(ii) A call on the native speakers of such languages to turn off their grossly negative language attitude and develop the right and positive one toward their indigenous languages and cultural values. The use of African languages in all spheres of life must be encouraged especially by the native speakers, who should be aware that the survival of their languages in the global village rests in their hands. Consequently, if they do not say 'here we are' nobody will recognize their presence or existence. They should also insist that their languages are used as media of instruction in schools, taught as school subjects and used in the official functions of the respective countries and states.

(iii) The African society, given its unique languages and culture, should take her destiny into her hands by pursuing vigorously the unique African identity and the knowledge of African independent technology for meaningful development. This should also involve domesticating science and technology to the point that communication through electronics: television, radio, computer (including internet and Encarta Premium suite) and even G.S.M. handsets are channelled or programmed in African languages and the instruction manuals and menu coded in those languages. Besides, we should insist that radio and television programmes as well as video films rendered or produced in indigenous African languages dominate the 'airtime' on our stations. To achieve this, linguistic programmes in Africa should be modified, restructured and redesigned to meet these needs (see Omachonu, 2002).

Also, the African governments (at all levels) must take a vehement stand against brain drain. Professor Philip Emeagwali, a Nigerian who

invented the fastest IBM computer in 1989 is now more of an American. To forestall further occurrences of such in any area of our socio-political and economic endeavours; the government (at whatever level: continental, federal, state and even local government area) should encourage such people to stay. This could be achieved by providing the best working environment for them, handsome rewards in recognition of their ingenuity and ensuring political stability and safety of life and property. Immortalizing the names of such rare gifts to mankind could also serve as a source of encouragement to them.

Above all, as a sign of collective responsibility and commitment toward achieving these lofty goals, all Africans should retreat or turn off completely their excessive craving for foreign materials and values. We should patronise our hitherto neglected indigenous values, including language and culture above the foreign values we have so much cherished.

6.0 Conclusion

The paper sees globalization as a process of change; full of opportunities and challenges. These challenges, it argues, have to be skilfully handled and harnessed for an all round human development. The detractions notwithstanding, from whichever angle one views globalization, the obstinate fact remains that it has come to stay.

It is practically impossible to divorce language from societal issues. The English language is, for now, the lingua franca of the global village. This spells doom for other languages, including African languages. Africa is fast losing out to the West politically, economically, socially, culturally and even linguistically. This calls for action. What the African society needs at this critical point is the courage of the dogged to pull through this array of challenges. In other words, what Africa needs at the moment is not only "the power of the mind to overcome fear" as Martin Luther King (Jnr.) asserted, but going on even when one does not have the strength. It is against this background as well as the dire need for African languages to survive in the global village that the challenging recommendations above are put forward. Our conviction and target is that Africa will not only strive to cope or endure the pains of globalization but rise to become one of the giants or leading nations in the global village, provided these recommendations are taken seriously, and with everybody doing his best to uplift mother Africa.

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