OVERCOMING INSECURITY IN A MULTILINGUAL SOCIETY: A CASE OF WEST AFRICA

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Abstract
A major need of every human being is security. Every human being needs to feel that they are safe from predators and would be assailants. This is why a lot of expectation is often on governments to deploy every available machinery to guarantee the safety of their citizens. In West Africa, with new cases of issues of insecurity among member nations, there is also growing anxiety and anticipation from citizens who expect their governments to step up to the challenge. The ECOWAS, set up primarily as an economic body for West African states, has through the instrumentation of its security council, being attempting to curb the rising rate of insecurity to lives and properties within the bloc. Unfortunately, the multilingual nature of many all member states has continued to pose a major challenge to the efforts of the body. With hundreds of languages spoken across West Africa, ECOWAS has had to rely heavily on the languages of colonialism that is English and French to communicate among member nations. While relying on colonial languages aids in communication especially among the elites, there is a continued danger of neglecting the grassroots where many may not speak or understand either of the languages adopted officially by ECOWAS. This paper focuses on the multilingual character of West Africa, how it has or is affecting the fight against insecurity, and what can be done to use the multilingual nature of the region as tool for maintaining security, and not as an impediment. The paper reviews a number of previous works on the issues of insecurity and multilingualism, as well as reports available from various reliable sources. The paper recommends that stakeholders begin moves to write important security information in the languages of the people, while incorporating learning the major languages within the bloc among security operatives within ECOWAS member states.

Key words: multilingualism, ECOWAS, security, French language, West Africa

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Introduction

The African continent is blessed with several linguistic societies. In every bloc of the African continent, there are hundreds of languages existing side by side with colonial languages brought on from the colonial years (Wallace and Fargion, 2023). The many languages of Africa give her its uniqueness and beauty, but have also been a major impediment to solving the challenge of insecurity. In Nigeria alone, there are over three hundred languages on record. With the challenge of society that is naturally plural linguistic, many African governments often find themselves in a bind when attempting to proffer solutions to security. With our collective history and experiences, it is often the case that when problems of insecurity arise in one nation, it quickly spreads into neighbouring countries through travel and commerce (Hahonou, 2016). It is imperative therefore that government in African countries intensify efforts to find ways of bringing permanent solutions to these issues. One major hindrance to solving insecurity issues in Africa is the multi-linguistic nature of many African countries. This paper focuses on examining what has been done so far by way of bridging the linguistic gaps in African communities in order to improve security among ECOWAS member states, and what can still be done.

Methodology

This paper is qualitative, using secondary data available from various respected sources. The works of other researchers in related areas also served as resource for the work. Drawing from journals, news reports, and information from local and international organizations, the paper reviews what has been and proposes what can be. The work is based on the theory of multilingualism, focusing on its social implications for West African states. Focusing on the socio-cultural implications, helps to analyse the potentials of the subject as it concerns many West African Countries.

Conceptual framework

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Multilingualism is as the name implies, a situation involving many languages. Viera (2018) notes that Africa is the most multilingual continent in the world. It is not uncommon to find an African speaking two or more languages. Although there have been calls from several quarters to find a regional language, language policy in West Africa has been left untouched for many years because of its complexity. Because it was practically impossible to bring communities with different linguistic realties together, Africa has especially relied on colonial languages. Instead of reducing multilingualism, the inclusion of European languages has only broadened the multilingual nature of Africa. Viera (2018) points out that there are very few African communities where more than 90% speak the same language. Multilingualism far from being the exception in Africa is the norm. While multilingualism could be a source of strength for an individual, it poses a bigger challenge for governments, especially when there is little or no documentations for some of the languages. If not properly handled, the government could find itself unwittingly denigrating some linguistic communities while overhyping others. It is to this end, that governments in West Africa need to revisit security issues while giving proper attention to the possibilities of a very multilingual society.

The Role of Language in Security

According to Hamourtziadou (2019), security in the 21st century focuses on all aspects of the human life – economic, political, financial etc. There are quite a number of definitions for security, but this paper focuses on security as a measure taken to guard against espionage or sabotage, crime, attack, or escape (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Generally, it is the responsibility of every human being to ensure that they are secured as much as possible from threats or perceived dangers. By providing accommodation for the family, the head of a home offers protection to his family. In a larger sense however, security is seen as the responsibility of government towards its citizens. In a more global world, security is no longer just a function of safeguarding against physical force. Security now goes as far as protecting digital properties too. Whether physical or digital, ensuring maximum security is not the job of one single person. It is often a collaborative effort between individuals, organizations and government. To this end, language comes as a tool for communicating perceived threats, security concerns, plans and solutions. For all organs responsible to comprehend the message, the language needs to be one. It becomes challenging when there are security details to pass across, but one part speak a different language than the other, as is seen in Africa.

According to the British Library, there are well over one thousand (1,000) languages in West Africa. Each linguistic society has its norms, cultures and their unique communication styles. According to Solanke (2006), language is an indicator of history and self awareness. The identity of any human is generally tied to the language they speak. Language is a core component of any human society, and is used for different purpose. Language, apart from being a tool for expression and communication, could also be a useful tool for cultural integration. The early missionaries who ventured into Africa during the colonial times, and who were considered to have made significant impact, are reported to have learnt to speak the languages of the people they went to. By acquiring the language of their host communities, the colonialists were able to achieve their aim, as it sent a message of identification to the people.

In Africa, apart from the many languages found in the different linguistic communities, there is also English and French languages, which are for the most part, the official languages not just in member states of the ECOWAS, but also in the ECOWAS as an organization. When considered, many security documents are also written in French and English language, thereby putting the larger percentage of Africans who are not lettered at a disadvantage. Often, as is the case with Nigeria, the grass root populace have to rely on the interpretation of security documents on radio or television, and even then, the languages do not often cover the many linguistic communities. The consequence is that certain security issues that could have been solved at the grass root take longer time to resolve or are never truly solved. To remove this impediment in the fight against insecurity in West Africa, member states need to begin to pay more attention to the indigenous languages within their borders. The collapse of security within a country has the potential to spread and begin to affect surrounding countries, and all member states need to show commitment to the security of the entire bloc by paying attention to their individual nations.

In Nigeria, there has been a growing call for the domestication of security operations, especially the police. Stakeholders in the security industry and other citizens have continued to mount pressure on the government to permit state policing in Nigeria. While not completely giving a go-ahead for the state police ideology, the authority of the Nigerian police force decided to ensure that commissioners of police were posted to serve in areas where they had a good grasp of the local and indigenous languages. In an article published by The Punch, a newspaper daily in

Nigeria, the growing consensus is that having a central policing system in a country with over two hundred (200) ethnic groups and linguistic communities, was impractical, the writer of the article further argued that the police force would continue to find itself falling short of the expectations of the citizenry where non indigenous police officers who do not have the capacity to communicate in the local dialects are sent to police such areas. Smith (2007) agrees with this position, stating that in cases of conflicts, best results are seen when officials to be sent to de-escalate issues are chosen based on cultural inclinations and experiences, with language as key indices.

Language is a tool of trust. Nwadike (2004) cited in Nzekwu and Oboko (2019) points out that language is the key to the heart of the people, and when the heart of the people is lost, there is little that can be done. In history and even in contemporary times, security operatives have often relied on information passed to them by regular people. Smith(2007) notes that for optimum effectiveness, diplomatic officers in the United states are only sent to areas where they have the linguistic capacity to communicate with the locale. This helps not just in communication, but also in gathering sensitive information. This is only possible when the language of communication is one and the same. Recently, the federal government of Nigeria made it mandatory for members of the armed forces to learn the three regional languages in Nigeria. This policy was aimed at ensuring that necessary intelligence can be gathered and acted upon by man of the armed forces where needed. By arming the armed forces with the required language skills, the government hopes to be able to get useful information from citizens that can help to curb the challenge of insecurity,

In order to be able to safeguard the borders of West African countries, it is necessary that member nations of ECOWAS empower their armies and security operatives with the predominant languages of member countries. Acquisition of other languages should also be the focus of ECOWAS member states. Even though the majority of our borders in West Africa are porous, a joint action by men of the armed forces of the different countries could help to improve security measures at the borders. For this to be a reality, and because there are just too many language sin the West African sub region to learn, members of the armed forces of member states of ECOWAS should be made to learn to speak both English language and French language.

The Role of ECOWAS in Regional Security

From its inception in 1975, ECOWAS had issues of economic importance between West African countries as priority. In recent years however, it has become imperative for ECOWAS to also focus on matters of security concern in the region (Nisrin 2023). As one of its fundamental principles, the ECOWAS website states that it seeks "maintenance of regional peace, stability and security through the promotion and strengthening of good neighbourliness…" in trying to achieve this goal, the organization has had to foster different programmes aimed at ensuring that neighbouring countries maintain peaceful coexistence among themselves. One of such endeavours is the Bordeless Protocol which allows for free trade among member countries.

Awosusi and Aja (2023) note that the ECOWAS borderless protocol was initiated to "foster a seamless movement of people and goods within West Africa." In furtherance of a "borderless" Africa, the African Union also instituted the African Continental Free Trade Area. While these ventures have helped to boost economic activities among member states, another challenge has gradually come to the fore. With unrestricted movement between member states, there has been not just free movement of goods, but also free movement of crime and insecurity challenges. Awosusi and Aja (2023) argue that while the borderless protocol has been beneficial to member countries, the poorly managed borders in many African countries, and especially in west Africa has allowed for a free flow of miscreants among member states. Aja (2023) points out that among the many security challenges that have become much more rampant due to the borderless protocol include human trafficking, illegal trade in arms and ammunition, increase in drug trafficking, and armed robbery among others.

In Nigeria, in the wake of the Boko Haram insurgency, reports were heard that some of the members of the sect were non-Nigerians who gained access most likely through the borderless policy. After an attack on villages, there have been reports of villagers claiming that the perpetrators of the dastardly act spoke languages that were foreign to the victims. This presupposes that even where it might have been possible to avert attacks from listening to conversations between terrorists, many victims would have been oblivious to the danger they were in because the terrorists communicated in foreign languages. Security operatives too may have lost vital information because of the language

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gap. This language deficiency could easily be overcome by equipping security operatives with the necessary language skills to gather security information without blowing their cover. Until the joint forces of ECOWAS member states begin a decisive confrontation by ensuring that the security operatives have the linguistic capabilities required to man the borders, the fight against insecurity in the region would continue to suffer setbacks.

Conclusion

There are inherent advantages in the multilingual nature of Africa. These advantages can only be fully enjoyed when the various organs of government within African commit to exploring and having a deeper knowledge of the many linguistic communities. If Africa is really serious about overcoming growing insecurity, stakeholders must begin to pay much more than just lip service to disseminating relevant security information in the language of the people. While working on the grass root, regional bodies can begin to arm their security operatives with the necessary linguistic skills across borders. To effectively tackle insecurity, security operatives must move beyond being just Anglophone or francophone, to gaining communicative competencies in the "major" regional languages beyond their borders. This would ensure that there is a better chance of confronting perpetrators of insecurity across borders. This could take years to achieve, but with gradual and consistent steps, it can be done.

Recommendations

With the major role of language in communicating key security issues within member staes of ECOWAS, it is recommended:

❖ That security operatives around the border and even in the cities of West African nations be made to learn the major languages of the communities they serve as well as the major languages within the bloc – English and French language.
❖ That the government of countries in West Africa be more committed to grass root policing through cooperation with locales.
❖ That there should be more concerted efforts to reduce languages within West Africa to writing.

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