My language, my crime

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Language is one tool that can bring about division amongst the people but can also bring about unity. I have had the personal experience of being made an outcast by my extended family because the only language I could speak was English. It was a very unpleasant feeling.

One day, I attended a family gathering. There was so much hospitality in the air. For a timid lad like me, felt like I belonged. I was so excited to meet family members, like my cousin whom I had not seen in 3 years. We shared stories about our experiences and laughed at silly jokes we told. Suddenly, an auntie came from nowhere and asked, “W’adidi?” meaning “Have you eaten?”. There was no response from me, just a blank stare with confusion written all over my face. That was the climax of our conversation. At that moment, it dawned on them that I couldn’t speak the tribal dialect. Soon after, the entire extended family realized I couldn’t speak the tribal dialect. I was 13 years old, and someone was to blame. Either my father or I.

“Language brings with it an identity and a culture, or at least the perception of it. A shared language says "We're the same." A language barrier says "We're different.” (Noah, 2016, p. 49). Here lies the case where I didn’t speak the same language. At that instant, the family looked at me as if I was a foreigner. The sudden feeling of belongingness disappeared with the onset of loneliness. I then realized how language could unify people and bring about separatism.

Knowing myself and ego, I know I am a person who is intelligent but doesn’t look as such. A nerd is known to wear glasses or have a peculiar way of acting. Here lies the case where I possess neither traits. I had to find another way to show this. According to Noah, English comprehension is equated with intelligence (2016, p. 54). For someone like me whose ambition was always to be seen as intelligent, this conception served me well.

I once went to a marketplace with my mum to purchase foodstuff during the Christmas holidays. Like any other marketplace in Ghana, there was so much noise coming from traders who called out to customers in diverse and fancy ways and the engines of vehicles. There was also the smell of smoked fish in the air. There was so much movement as well. My mum began to buy the stuff from the traders. She switched between languages when she spoke to the traders and me. This went on from trader to trader. Out of the blue, one trader called me “Obroni” which meant white man. But why did she? She realized my mum had to switch language and translate to the white man’s language, English, for my sake. I know I should have felt awkward, but I felt intelligent knowing that I spoke a language that was unusual enough to give me respect amongst the elderly.

Language is a useful, beautiful and powerful tool. People have long recognized the force and significance of language (Robins & Crystal, 2018). The beauty in speech and conveying ideas with beautiful and appropriate vocabulary makes language an irresistible tool. Accents behind some languages add flair and originality to them. French is the most beautiful language I know, cherish and have never regretted learning. The beauty of the language comes with the passion behind the intonation of words pronounced. It makes the audience and speaker emotionally connected to the message with chills running down their spines.

French helped me save the life of someone back in Junior High School. There was a French boy who was known to play basketball very well. Unknowingly, he was an asthma patient. In the course of playing one day, he had an attack. I didn’t know what was wrong with him until he struggled to say the French word, “inhalateur” which meant inhaler. Being the only one who understood it, I ran to his bag, took out his inhaler and brought it to him. I felt like Superman, better still, a French-speaking Superman. Who knows what could have happened if English-speaking Superman was around?

Some French teachers in Ghana have made it an aim to make French as subject an enemy of students. Why is that so? In many schools in Ghana, French teachers have forbidden students to speak English during the lesson even if they have a question. They believe it is a strong way to allow the students to learn. Nevertheless, it’s also a harsh way since all students don’t learn the same way.

One day in junior high school, I looked around the class and saw confusion written all over the faces of the class because the French tutor had set his mind not to speak English. He perceived it was a way to force the students to speak and understand French. In doing this, some students gave up on the quest of speaking French and have detested the language even till this day. Others came to me for help to catch up. As expected they accompanied their request for help with complaints about the tutor. Some sessions led to the revelation of diverse ways in which they hated French and the tutor. Climaxing these events, eighty percent of the students failed their final French papers. This, in turn, led to the dismissal of the French teacher. As much as authority was exercised to force students to learn the language, it yielded bad fruit.

According to Noah, “English is the difference between getting a job or staying unemployed” (2016, p. 54). During the apartheid, language was a way the colonist best used to oppress the South Africans. Speaking English was a passport to receiving some services in South Africa during that period. Mandela arrived with the key to liberation.

References

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