



## Harnessing Language and Culture for Community Cohesion: A Social Identity Theory

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### Abstract

This paper explores the role of language and culture as pragmatic instruments for fostering community cohesion. By examining the intersection of language, culture, and community, we demonstrate how these elements can be leveraged to build bridges, promote understanding, and enhance social cohesion. The study anchors on social identity theory (SIT) of Henry Tajfel and John Turner which recognises how individuals experience collective identity based on their membership in a group, such as racial/ethnic and gender identities. Descriptive research method was employed to carry out the research. The findings include the building of a just, cohesive and integrated society that enjoys equitable social, economic and political advancement. Recommendations include establishing community centres, creating inclusive spaces for socialization, and promoting Education and cultural unity.

**Keywords:** Language, Culture, Social Identity, Cohesion, Community Cohesion

### Introduction

In today's diverse and globalized world, building cohesive communities is a pressing concern. As communities strive to build resilience and inclusivity, it is essential to recognize the significance of language and culture in shaping our identities, beliefs, and interactions. By harnessing the potentials of language and culture, we can create spaces for dialogue, organize and pattern their thought process and concepts, understanding, and collective growth. Aghamelu and Asomugha (2009) are of the opinion that language is the medium by which culture and the collective experience of a people are transmitted from generation to generation.

Language is the basic and fundamental tool of communication. It strengthens the bounds of cohesion between the members of a society. It is viewed as the pivot around which all human activities revolve. Lyons (1981) asserts that the term standard language, national language and official language are not of course synonymous. The connection between them is that any language that is accepted by its speakers as a symbol of nationhood (that is political and cultural identity) or is designated by government for official use will tend to be standardized for that purpose.

Culture according to Nnadi (2009) refers to ideas, customs and social behaviours of a particular people or society. Culture is essential for avoiding conflicts and conflict resolution. It is an ideal means of communication across language barriers, empowering people and facilitating social cohesion. Unima (2006) sees culture as an umbrella term which encompasses the social behaviour and norms found in human society, as well as the knowledge, belief, arts, laws, customs, capabilities and habits of individuals in those groups. A cultural norm codifies acceptable conduct in society. It serves as a guide line for behaviour, dress, language, and demeanor in a situation which serves as a template for expectation in a social group. Language and culture are intertwined. A particular language usually points a specific group of people. When you interact with a group of people that

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speak a particular language, it means you are also interacting with the culture that speaks the language. You cannot understand one's culture without accessing one's language directly.

Cohesion is a conscious desire for diverse groups of people to belong together and affirm the condition of mutual dependence. Community cohesion is a process and an outcome of instilling and enabling all citizens in the country to have a sense as well as a feeling that they are members of the same community, engaged in a common enterprise and facing shared challenges. Indeed community cohesion goes beyond peacekeeping and conflict management. Community cohesion is based on the fact that societies and individuals can only achieve their potentials when living and working together. It entails constructing an integrated citizenry with a sense of belonging amongst members of different groups and regions of a country. It encompasses the values of unity, equality, freedom, democracy, peace, social justice and the rule of law.

A unified culture makes it very easy for a community to have cohesion. A sense of communal identity like language is a key element of that culture; without it, there will be no cohesion. Community cohesion is based on the fact that societies and individuals can only achieve their potentials when living and working together. This can be realized through the regulations and reconciliations of differences, competing interest and demand. A pragmatic approach to achieving cohesion entails dealing with things sensibly and realistically in a way that is based on practical rather than theoretical considerations. One of such activities is the promotion of our local languages and other cultural activities that represent the shared values and aspirations of the communities to which we belong. Celebration of cultural festivals and other events that commemorate the achievements and unity of the community. Promoting religious tolerance, good and responsible governance /leadership to promote a sense of belonging among community members, Adoption of an indigenous language as an official national language.(Lingua Franca). Education can also play a crucial role in promoting unity and peace by teaching people about diversity and inclusiveness through this way, we can foster a more tolerant and understanding society. Community festivals and sports competitions are other factors that promote Community cohesion. Communities can keep the flag of their heritage flying through excellent industry and enterprise in every facet of life and engagement.

### **The Purpose of the Study:**

The purpose of this study is to employ strategies that can make the building of a cohesive community possible. A community that can work towards the well-being of all its citizens, fight exclusion and marginalization while fostering trust, co-operation, and a sense of belonging among its members. This paper aims to contribute to the development of pragmatic strategies for community cohesion, highlighting the importance of language and culture in building strong, inclusive and harmonious communities.

### **Methodology**

This research employs qualitative design. The study data were got through observation and with the use of survey tools, while the data were analyzed descriptively.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The following concepts will be briefly discussed to enhance the study.

#### **Language:**

Languages is the method of human communication, either spoken or written consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way. Language permeates all facets of human life. It is the social network which fosters unity and integration. The nature of human language, according to Ndimiele (1999) is essentially a communication system in the sense that it associates meaning (that is the message) with a set of signs (that is sounds and symbols)

Language, according to Brosnahan (1962) is a system of symbols which is purely human and non-instructive, and symbols which are conventional and vocal. Similarly, Crystal (1982) defines language as a human vocal noise (or the graphic representation of this noise in writing) used systematically and conventionally by a community for purposes of communication. From the above definitions, we can see clearly that language is essentially a system of human vocal communication. Language is organized into systems which enable it to perform its various functions. A system can be seen as a group of related parts which work together to form a whole. Wallwork (1974) is of the view that language performs its function by means of an interrelating series of different systems- system of sound, system of grammatical patterning, system of word meanings, system of reference to non- linguistic events, all in turn combined and closely enmeshed in larger systems. These various systems constitute the major areas of language study. The system of sounds is studied in phonetics and

phonology, the system of grammatical patterning is studied in morphology and syntax, the system of meaning is studied in semantics and pragmatics. All these systems are interrelated.

Language is defined by Sapir (1921) as purely human, non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols. Bloomfield (1933) sees language as the totality of utterances that can be in a speech community. These definitions seem to place emphasis on speech, but in the view of Emenanjo (1978), language is any system employed in giving, transmitting, sharing, exchanging or finding information. Tongue, according to Asomugha and Ike-Okafor (2009) is a determined system of linguistic signs devised by a social group to realize communication among the members of a social group. But in as much as both words [tongue and language] refer to the phenomenon of cultural transmission, we shall prefer to use the two interchangeably. One incontrovertible fact about human language is that it is not inherited. Rather, human beings acquire a language in a culture with other speakers of the language. A normal child who has no biological or physiological impairment ~~will~~ be able to acquire the language of his environment by interacting actively with his parents and others who speak the language. Through the means of language, the culture of a people is transmitted. There is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture. We are incomplete or unfinished animals who 'complete' or finish ourselves' through culture. But we are cultured through particular traditions or a culture that makes us Nigerians, Africans or Americans as the case may be

### **Culture**

Culture is the totality of people's way of life. By culture of a community, we mean all the learned and shared activities of that community and the results of such activities. Culture is the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempt to meet the challenges of living in their environment which give order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic, religious norms and modes of organization thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours. (Cultural policy for Nigeria, 1988). According to Nnadi (2010), culture is a framework for tradition and social order. It is like a stream that flows from one generation to another. It is therefore a social heritage. Culture is not merely a return to the custom of the past, it embodies the attitudes of a people to the future of their traditional values faced with the demands of modern technology which is an essential factor of development and progress (Cultural policy for Nigeria, 1988). Culture is that man-made part of the environment, including the ideas and symbols used by man everywhere and for all times. The material environment is the basis for objective culture, and the way man-made parts of the environment is perceived. Rapid change is a striking

characteristic of modern society. The growing demand of modern social develop makes rapid, cultural change inevitable. It also has widened the concept of culture, making the notion of culture an interventionist agent increasingly popular. Culture is internally affected by both forces resisting change. These forces are related to both social structure and natural events and are involved in the perpetuation of cultural ideas and practices within current structures which themselves are subject to change. Asomugha and Ike-Okafor (2009) asserts that languages, like any other element of culture is not an invention or creation of one person, but rather the creation of the entire social group. It is a work of art of a group, and as with every work of arts, it reveals the personality, the interest, the ideas and the sentiments of the people that have produced it. According to Peter (1975) the capacity to use language and culture evolved together. Neither could one have developed without the other. Without language there could be neither human society nor culture. The capacity to communicate is essential both for social functioning and for the use of culture. The dialect, grammatical nuances, and the usage of certain words and phrases impact one's thoughts and actions in an extremely subtle manner therefore, language and communication can impact society, culture, as well as personal identity.

### **Social Identity**

Social Identity refers to the ways that people's self-concepts are based on their membership in social groups, examples include sports teams, religious nationalities, occupations, sexual orientation, ethnic groups and gender. <https://www.sciencedirect.com> retrieved [3-10-24.]

It can also be referred to as a set of qualities, beliefs, personality traits, appearance, as well as expressions that characterize a person or a group. Identity emerges during childhood as children start to comprehend their self-concept, and it remains a consistent aspect throughout different stages of life.

Self Identity is the feeling of the 'self' the foundational continuity that makes us what we are. Social Identity is constructed by the lens we cast inwards to classify and judge our own being. While each of us is clearly many things inhabiting the same shell-parents, teachers, doctors, engineers, musicians etc within this there is a persistent self which adopts these roles to a greater or a lesser conscious degree.

Eight major social identities often referred to as ‘the big eight’ are commonly used to describe how a person categorizes themselves and others –ability, age, ethnicity, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation and socioeconomic status.

### **Cohesion:**

This is the action or fact of forming a united whole(Wikipedia. Retrieved 28-7-24} Cohesion is a conscious desire for diverse groups of people to belong together and affirm the condition of mutual dependence.

Communal cohesion is a process and an outcome of instilling and enabling all citizens in the community to have a common sense as well as a feeling that they are members of the same community, engaged in a common enterprise and facing shared challenges. Indeed communal cohesion goes beyond peace keeping and conflict management.

National cohesion is based on the fact that societies and individuals can only achieve their potentials when living and working together. It is the desire for different groups of people to belong together and affirm the condition of mutual dependence. It entails constructing an integrated citizenry with a sense of belonging amongst members of different groups and regions of a country. This is realized through the regulations and reconciliations of differences, competing interest and demands. It encompasses the values of unity, equality, freedom, democracy, peace, social justice and rule of law.

A unified culture makes it very easy for a nation to have cohesion. A sense of National identity like language is a key element of that culture without it there will be no cohesion. community cohesion is based on the fact that societies and individuals can only achieve their potentials when living and working together. This can be realized through the regulations and reconciliations of differences, competing interest and demand.

Baner (1977) social cohesion is commonly known as the glue that holds society together. It is the trusting network of relationships and shared values and norms of residents in a neighborhood that allowed members to achieve shared well-being.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social Identity Theory (SIT.) Social Identity Theory propounded by Tayfel and Turnar (1986) suggests that individuals experience collective identity based on their membership in a group, such as racially, ethnic and gender identities. This theory demonstrates that group membership is so powerful that simply classifying people into groups is enough to make people think of themselves in terms of that group membership. Social Identity theory was developed to explain how individuals create and define their place in a society. The concept of social identity was created as a means to consider the way one conceptualizes the self based on the social groups to which one belongs. Social identity theory specifies three mental processes individuals go through to make in-group /out-group classification.

The first process, Social categorization is the process by which we organize individuals into social world. This process enables us to define people including ourselves, on the basis of the groups to which we belong. The second process Social identification is the process of identifying as a group member. Socially identifying with a group leads individuals to behave in the way that they believe members of that group should behave. For instance, if an individual defines herself as an environmentalist, she may try to conserve water, recycle whenever possible and march in rallies for climate change awareness. Through this process, people can become emotionally invested in their group membership.

The third process, Social comparison is the process by which people compare their group with other groups in terms of prestige and social standing. In order to maintain self-esteem, one must perceive his or her in-group as the best. It is important to note that an in-group member must not compare herself with just any out-group. The comparison must be pertinent to a certain class or social standing.

### **Social Identity Theory has several benefits to communities:**

- Sense of belonging: Individuals feel connected to their community, fostering a sense of belonging and identity.
- Group cohesion: Shared identity strengthens bonds within the community, promoting unity and cooperation.
- Collective pride: Communities can take pride in their shared identity, cultural heritage, and achievements.

- Support network: In-group membership provides a support system, offering emotional support and resources.
- Social change: Social Identity Theory can inspire collective action and social movements, driving positive change.
- Diversity appreciation: Recognizing and valuing diverse social identities can promote understanding and inclusion.
- Community engagement: Shared identity encourages participation in community activities and events.
- Resilience: Strong social identity can help communities cope with adversity and trauma.
- Cultural preservation: Communities can preserve their cultural heritage and traditions through shared identity.
- Social cohesion: Social Identity Theory can bridge gaps between different groups, fostering a sense of shared humanity.

By understanding and embracing social identity, communities can build strength, solidarity, and a sense of purpose.

### **Social Identity**

Identity is the set of qualitative beliefs, personality traits, appearance and/or expressions that characterize a person or a group. Identity emerges during childhood as children start to comprehend their self-concept and it remains a consistent aspect throughout different stages of life.

Social identity reflects how we see ourselves and how others see us with respect to major social categories.

Social identities are labels that people use to categorize or identify themselves and/or others as members of specific groups such as ethnicity, sex, age, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, nation, socio-economic status, emotional and developmental abilities.

Social identity can be defined as an individual's knowledge of belonging to a certain social group together with some emotional and volitional significance of that group membership.

### **Social Identity and Language**

Language symbolizes identity and is used to signal identity by those who speak the same language. People are also categorized by other people according to the language they speak. People belong to many social groups and have many social identities.

Language serves as a symbol of pride, reflecting cultural heritage and social status. The language individuals speak can link them to specific communities, tribes or ethnic groups, forming a significant part of their identities.

The way we talk about ourselves and our experiences shapes our self-perception and general identity. The words and phrases we use to describe our feelings, thought and experiences influence how we see ourselves. Language helps individuals identify with specific social groups.

### **Social Identity and Culture**

Culture plays a fundamental role in shaping individual's identity, influencing our beliefs, values and behaviors. One of the most important functions of cultural identity is to provide a stable and continuous background to the ever-shifting world of human relations. Cultural identity is a part of a person's identity, or their self-conception and self-perception and is related to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality, gender or any kind of social group that has its own distinct culture. Cultural identity is an unfixed process that is continually evolving within the discourses of social cultural and historical experiences. Cultural identity includes a person's cultural knowledge, category, label and social connections.

Culture is a defining feature of a person's identity contributing to how they see themselves and the groups with which they identify.

### **Summary**

Language, culture and identity are inseparable. Any human race that does not wish to become extinct must bequeath its cultural values and identity markers to succeeding generations through language. Communities must doggedly play their role towards the survival of their local languages. English language serves a purpose that does not conflict with our indigenous languages, for instance we think in our indigenous language while expressing ourselves in English, though English Language is the mediating language thus the language of governance, education, journalism and commerce. Despite our linguistic diversity in Nigeria, the indigenous languages must entrench and transmit our cultures and identities from generation to generation.

Parents should speak indigenous languages to their children at home and likewise, teach them the cultural values and practices of their ethnicities. There are over five hundred and twenty-five (525) native languages in Nigeria. The official language and most widely spoken (Lingua Franca) is English Language. Nigerian Pidgin – an English Based Creole – is spoken by 30 million people in Nigeria. The main issue is that we must pay more attention to those things that bind us together as a nation than the things that divide us. A community has a cohesive culture when everyone shares a set of values, goals, attitudes and ways of working. A cohesive society is built on shared values that provide a common foundation for its citizens. Olaniyan (1982) opines that societies have concepts determined by their own culture and expressed in linguistic conventions familiar to members of that culture. The translation of these concepts into a foreign language may pose a problem which can only be solved by familiarity with the world of thought expressed. In other words, those concepts, ideas and values that are only peculiar to a certain group of people, bind them together, add values to their lives and enable them enjoy their small world.

#### Some recommendations to foster community cohesion:

- Establish Community Centers: Create inclusive spaces for socialization, education, and cultural events.
- Organize Community Events: Host festivals, and activities that celebrate diversity and promote unity.
- Develop Cultural Exchange Programs: Encourage cross-cultural interactions and understanding through exchange programs.
- Foster Collaborative Leadership: Encourage diverse community leaders to work together and make collective decisions.
- Implement Inclusive Policies: Develop policies that promote equity, diversity, and inclusion.
- Provide Education and Training: Offer workshops and training on diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Encourage Volunteerism: Promote community service and volunteer opportunities to build connections.
- Support Local Businesses: Encourage local economic growth and development.
- Celebrate Diversity: Recognize and celebrate different cultures, religions, and backgrounds.
- Create Safe Spaces: Establish safe and inclusive environments for community members.
- Foster Partnerships: Collaborate with local organizations, government, and stakeholders to support community cohesion.

These recommendations can help build strong, inclusive communities that value diversity and promote social cohesion.

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