

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MEDIA LANGUAGE: AN APPRAISAL OF THE USE OF ENGLISH AND YORUBA LANGUAGES IN NIGERIAN MEDIA

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Abstract

This article examined the contention for media space and use between the English language, the lingua franca in a plural and multicultural society like Nigeria, and Yoruba, the traditional indigenous language used for communication by a particular ethnic group that occupy the Western region of Nigeria. The article contended and invariably concluded that the only justification for the continued hegemonic privileges that the English language continually enjoys in the Nigerian mass media, despite the use of mother tongue campaign in the media, is the fact that it is the language of the political and social elites, and primarily because it makes more commercial sense. The piece also acknowledged the ascendancy of the Yoruba language in the media, particularly in the home region and noted how the activities of certain media practitioners threaten to deny this genre of communication its inalienable reciprocal quality.

INTRODUCTION

Communication is an indispensable part of human experience, and it constitutes the basis for human relationship. For there to be any remarkable growth in any society, there must be a standard system of communication. Most of the problems that plague human society, if not all, are traceable to ineffective or total communication breakdown as communication indeed is the sustainer of the social system. It is the defining characteristic of human civilization. Communication enables a community of people to create shared meanings through the use of symbols, signs and vocal sound, that foster understanding and lubricates relationship among users towards the achievements of shared goals. It is a communal phenomenon that takes place among humans every day, everywhere and every time. Irrespective of the socio-political and economic situations communication everywhere is functional and adaptive.

Communication has been described and defined from various scholarly perspectives. Bittner (1989) sees communication 'as a system through which people can exchange symbols and thus propagate learning at an accelerated rate'. Littlejohn (1992), posits that communication is not only pervasive, important and involves complex clusters of behavior, communication involves understanding how people behave in creating, exchanging and interpreting messages. On their own part, Schramm and Roberts (1992), posit that

When one studies communication, he is studying people

in relationship with one another, their groups, organizations and societies, influencing each other and being influenced, informing and being informed, teaching and being taught, entertaining and being entertained by means of certain signs which exist separately from either of them.

This definition by Schramm and Roberts seems to capture not only the traditional functions of communication which are information, education and entertainment, but also highlight some of the major attributes of communication. Chief among these features is the transactional nature of communication, which unambiguously portrays a reciprocal relationship between the parties involved in any communication transaction. An elastic interpretation could further imply a symmetrical, egalitarian and mutually impactful intercourse. However, the reality is that communication, nay mass communication, is neither an 'exchange' nor an act of 'influencing each other and being influenced'. The thesis of this article is that the interposition of machine between communication participants has, in modern practice practically subordinates one party- the recipients- and drain communication of its acclaimed democratic credentials.

Among the elements of modern mass communication, the message occupies a central place. Media communication would be incapacitated if there is no message to keep it running. The message, which constitute the fulcrum of communication in whatever form or level, captures and reflects the thoughts and feelings of the source, and if mutual that of the recipient. In this light, there is a need for language, which allows communication participants to effectively share meaning by adapting signs, symbols and any other communication artifact to shared historical communication identity. Language, itself a depository of the historical experience of a particular society, constitutes a vital component of the cultural identity of any group of people. Language is the predominant form of communication adopted by most media of communication and depending on the medium; it may be spoken or written. The concept can be visited from two broad perspectives- verbal and non verbal. This discourse looks at it from the verbal perspective as all media of communication use it in this form. From the biblical parlance, language is a gift from God, and its origin can be traced to the Garden of Eden, where God gave the first man Adam the mandate to name all the animals and other creatures. From logical observations, language is learnt and acquired through listening and then imitation by young children and generally the first stage of the communication process is the intrapersonal mode which constitutes our thoughts. Language is so unique and important in the human society that beyond its primary role of communication it is also an important tool of nation building. This fact is further strengthen when one recalls the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, where with the aid of one voice and language, people attempted what might be jestically referred to as a form of nation building- the construction of a tower that will reach into the heavens and God to escape future incidence of flood. In the words of Ayo Bangbose (1994),

But this did not please the Lord who reasoned that because the people had a common language it was easy for them to join together to do anything they wanted to. In terms of modern political thinking, may be they could even have attempted a coup d'etat. so the Lord decided to confound their language and scatter them all over the face of the earth'

To many scholars this is a myth, but from the Christian perspective this is a true story which marks the beginning or origin of multilingualism in the world. Various outcomes of different researches pointed to the fact that language influences the thoughts and behavior of its speakers i.e. language use affects the way the speakers of the language perceive the world.

MULTI-CULTURAL NIGERIA

Nigeria is a country with diverse people, cultures and languages. Culture has been variously defined as the way of life of a people which, coupled with the language, helps in differentiating one race from another. With over four hundred different languages and diversity in cultures, Nigeria can be classified as a multicultural and multilingual state. To mention just a few, we have up north the Hausas, Gwuaris, Birom, Kanuri, Fulanins, Tapa people and many more. The eastern part of the country is dominated by the Igbo people, who also among them have variations in culture and different dialects and languages. In the western part of the country we have the Yoruba people and their various cultures and languages some of which are Remo, Owo, Akoko, Ijebu, Oyo, Ondo, a variety of Ijesha and Ekiti dialects etc. the Niger Delta area of the country has been identified as the area with the highest concentration of languages and dialect with over 250 variations. Nigeria then is a multilingual state per excellence according to Ayo Bangbose (1994), with almost 400 languages, some of which are spoken by only a few hundred speakers'.

In agreement with the Whorfian language hypothesis which boards on relativity, the structure of a mother language influences the way adherents perceive the world. This inadvertently may account for the emergence of a variety of culture in a multilingual country.

DOMINANT MEDIA LANGUAGE

Because of the multilingual situation of the Nigerian state, it is very difficult to choose an indigenous language out of the so many available ones to function in the capacity of a national and official language. Fishman, (1968) as cited in Bangbose (1994), drew attention to some of the strategies employed by the new world to foster national identity. The predominance of these strategies is the choice of a national language which is often invoked as a unifying symbol. Desirable as one language model may be in fostering national unity and development, this is a luxury that may be elusive in a multilingual state like Nigeria especially if the speculated national language choice is an indigenous language. This is so because language is associated with ethnicity, and in a politically volatile country like Nigeria the choice of an indigenous national language may provoke suspicion by other groups whose languages are not chosen or ethnocentric attitude on the part of those whose language is chosen. Language is not only a communication tool but a phenomenon that has socio-cultural and political undertone.

For the above reason it then becomes imperative to chose a national or official language that cuts across not only linguistic barriers but relegates to the background the issue of ethnicity and political rivalries. Because of its historical roles from colonial times, English language becomes the best choice of national and official language in Nigeria. This language is also being used in administration, instruction at higher levels of education like secondary and tertiary education levels, commerce and between people who are not from the same ethnic group and do not speak the same language.

Due to all the inherent qualities of the language, English has become not only the official national language but the dominant media language in Nigeria. English naturally becomes an option as it not only demonstrate the neutrality of the mass media, it is also the language of the political and social elites that own and operate the media, and that of the middle class that have sufficient education to access media message but more importantly the purchasing power to attract marketers who subsidize and practically sustain media operation. Unlike the pioneering evangelistic newspaper of Henry Townsend, contemporary Nigerian mass media, ostensibly modeled after those in Western economies, are motivated by commercial inducements that justifies producing media message using the most profitable means to gather, process and disseminate the most profitable message for the most profitable target market. In the face of overpowering commercial motive, even the most compelling social objective take the back seat. However, against all these odds, the Yoruba language has gained some respectable acceptability in the Nigerian media.

THE YORUBA MEDIA EXPERIENCE AND PRACTICE

The Yoruba people as an ethnic group occupy the Western part of Nigeria and speak the Yoruba language. Their unique homogenous trait and unifying element is that they trace their origin to a particular ancestor named Oduduwa and they believe the cradle of their civilization is Ile-Ife, a sprawling metropolitan city in the heart of the western region. The swift embrace of Western education and civilization by the Yorubas is eloquently substantiated by the fact that the first mass medium in Nigeria, the *Iwe Iroyin fun awon egha ati Yoruba*, a newspaper in the form of a pamphlet, published by a European Christian evangelist, Rev. Henry Townsend, was for this society(Daramola, 2003). When it was the time of the broadcast media, the region was again at the forefront. The seeming liberalism that is today palpable in the region is a tribute to the historical experience of this group with Western civilization.

In contemporary times, programmes and media exclusively designed and targeted at Yoruba listeners have proliferated in the region. Weekly newspapers like *Osere irawo*, *Alaroye*, *Akede Odua*, *Alaroye* have all sprouted and gained respectable circulation and readership among those who are literate in the language. On local television, magazine programmes like 'Owuro lawa' on *Lagos television* and newspaper headlines' review programmes like 'koko inu iwe iroyin' on *Bond FM* and 'egho n'pa e' on *Choice FM* now renamed *Radio One*, have all developed a cult of highly loyal viewers and listeners respectively. Most noteworthy is their inventive use of language. The fact that all the newspapers reviewed on these programmes are written in English and therefore require translation afford the producers and presenters the latitude to creatively invent hyperbolic words that, in their view, best convey events being reported. Beyond the use of words and concept in common use, some words owned their origin to the presenters of these programmes.

Unpublished empirical studies revealed that receptivity of these programmes cut across demographic lines. This has translated into commercial success as vicariously measured by the number and frequency of advertisements on these programmes. The educated Yoruba elites that prefer to converse in English has found these programme delightful. Publishers who once protested the effect of this practice on newspapers' purchase at newsstands and even threaten litigation against any erring broadcast station, have relax their belligerent posture and subtly encourage the practice. Unverifiable conjecture shows that this mode of presentation creates appetite for the full version and drives the audience to the newsstands.

These programmes' presenters have developed reputation for their uncanny predilection for coining Yoruba words and phrases that cannot be traced to the language, in its original form. Admittedly, these presenters have received accolades for practically rescuing the endangered language from the threat of extinction; their capacity for bringing into everyday use certain words that had already slipped into abeyance is being overstretched. Same trend also characterize the broadcast and home movie media. Many artistes have gained fame, nay notoriety, for not only using scatology with reckless abandon but for also deploying words with creativity. The seeming inexhaustible repertoire of these media figures in Yoruba vocabulary has thrust them into an arrogant pedestal where they invent words and riding on the popularity of their media vehicles, inject it into the lexicon of the Yoruba as neologism. The politics of this is that these presenters are able to coin words and impose it and its meaning on the hapless Yoruba audience. Even if this practice is commendable by the standard of creativity, it undercuts the often vaunted reciprocal nature of communication. A situation where certain privileged few with access to media cockily freely assume the position of linguistic oracle with unquestionable liberty to invent words certainly, undoubtedly, betray the notion of democratic participation in communication.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For better understanding and appreciation, this discus has been hinged on the theory of linguistic relativity, the reception theory which is anchored on uses and gratification, and the participatory communication theories.

LINGUISTICS RELATIVITY

The major proponent of this hypothesis is Benjamin Lee Whorf. His major concern was based on the fact that instead of merely assuming that language influences the thought and behavior of its speakers, there must be a way to account for the ways in which differences in grammatical systems and language use affected the way their speakers perceive the world. According to him,

The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena

we do We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language.

not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscope flux of impressions which has to be organized in our minds- and this means largely by the linguistic

systems of our minds. We cut up nature, organize it into a concepts, and

ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement

to organize it in this way- an agreement that holds throughout our speech

community and is codified in the patterns of our language[....] all observers

are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe,

unless their linguistics backgrounds are similar, or can in some ways be calibrated.

The relevance of this theory to the present discourse lies in the emphasis of the native language especially as it relates to the speakers perception of the world around him. George Lakoff in lending credence to the hypothesis says 'language is often used metaphorically and that different languages use different cultural metaphors that reveals something about how the speakers of that language think'. In essence language use affects the way a speaker of the language perceive the world.

Considering the Nigerian situation and the dominant media language, there are some inherent problems that may be encountered vis-a-vis English language - the dominant media language and the indigenous ones which a native has in his repatoir, basically in semantics and ambiguity as language is deeply rooted in the individual's cultural experiences. This again cannot be divorced from the fact that media messages are always open and polysemic in nature and are interpreted according to the context and culture of receiver

PATICIPATORY COMMUNICATION THEORY

The participatory communication theory is an evolution that came into existence in the bid to replace modernization approach. According to Anaeto et al (2008), 'the theory places its highest value not on transfer of knowledge from outside developing societies, but rather on reliance on local knowledge and local capability. Rather than encourage residents of developing societies to participate in development initiatives planned by outsiders, it encourages residents to make their own plans. This theory which began to gain grounds in the 1970's is based on empowerment and self determination.

The relevance of this theory to the study is primarily based on the promotion of the languages as well as the cultures of the host communities in the media contents of the various identified media of mass communication. However, the argument for promotion is not unbridled license to manipulate a language in order to titillate and consequently attract large audience that is eventually sold as commodities to marketers.

ROLE OF MEDIA IN THE SOCIETY.

The mass media performs various roles in the society. This functions and roles are designated in line with individual and societal needs. For this study the role of mass media is discussed using the Lasswell (1948), functions of mass communication. These three functions are; surveillance, correlation and transmission of socio-cultural heritage. Entertainment is the fourth function of the media.

Correlation can be described as a mutual or complementary relationship in which two or more things are mutual or complementary, or one thing is caused by another (Encarta Dictionary, 2009). From the media perspective, mass communication is concerned with correlation of the different structures of the society. This process involves education, socialization and acculturation of the different unit of the society, e.g. children, youth, adults, old people, male and female with the goal of building in them the same ideals or value system which would constitute a guiding principle for their beliefs and culture. In this wise, Lasswell (1948), says journalist and speakers are correlators who can best perform this role.

CHALLENGES OF THE MEDIA IN A MULTILINGUAL STATE; THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

Nation building according to Ayo Bangbose (1994),

*involves a lot more than physical structures. It involves
a change in the individual, a re-orientation towards national
goals and the harnessing of resources for the development of
the nation and the welfare of its citizen.*

Nigeria has been identified as a multi-lingual state per excellence. As earlier stated, this account for the choice of English language as a dominant media language as it helps to do away with the problems of ethnicity and associated political problems. In the evaluation of the countries in terms of availability of infrastructures and provisions of basic amenities, Nigeria is classified as a third world or developing country as it has not yet attained the internationally accepted level of development.

In line with the provisions in the Nigerian communication, the media is suppose to be a major information tool in the achievement of individual's aspiration, national integration, unity and development. These aspirations may not be realizable in Nigeria with the choice of English as the dominant media language. This first may be founded on the whorfian hypothesis of relativity in which postulates that the native speaker's language influences his perception or world view. Looking at the Nigerian situation, more than 70 % of the rural populace resides in the rural areas, and one of the dominant characteristics of these people is illiteracy. English language is an elitist language that is common among the educated few in the country. If English is then the dominant media language, it then means the total number of people that listen, assimilate, evaluate and make use of the media language and contents for personal or national needs are limited. This is a major factor that can be used to account for the slow development rate in the country.

The high incidence of illiteracy found in the country can be attributed to poverty, especially in the rural areas where there are many low income earners who depend solely on agriculture for their livelihood. Most of the times, people in these areas usually cannot even afford any medium not to talk about their preference in the choice of a dominant language. They rely heavily on the indigenous system and communal means for their communication and information needs. This situation is not peculiar to only Nigeria but most third world countries of Africa. Poverty accounts for high level of illiteracy in these areas again based on the fact that in the people's priorities or hierarchy of needs, the first three basic needs to be met are food, clothing and shelter. Formal education to these people is a luxury that is not available for everybody. And here lies the failure of one of the fundamental stipulations made in the Nigerian communication policy which says, 'in programming, the media shall be a vehicle of mobilization towards the achievement of national development and improving the quality of life, especially those of the rural communities'.

Another problem that is being faced as a result of multilingualism in the performance of the press in Nigeria stems from the fact that, there are limited local resources, technical facilities and know how to create media programs in the indigenous languages at least that of the host communities

of the media. This problem is again compounded by the fact that most indigenous languages have not yet been standardized. This also is a negation against the stance of the participatory model as people are not being reached through a language and medium they are familiar with hence cannot participate in the integration and development process. Because the goal of national development is joint and all inclusive, (involving people both in urban and rural areas), corporative efforts and joint actions may become highly difficult if people in the rural areas are not reached through a medium of mass communication to facilitate speedy development, and in a language they are familiar with for better understanding.

Another negation to the principle of development of cultures and language comes from the adoption of English as the dominant media language. This in principle is not in line with the social responsibility and the development function or role of the media. More guilty of this crime are the privately owned media who virtually do not subscribe to the use of any indigenous language on their media.

WAY FORWARD

Some situations cannot be changed, but can be used to bring about something positive. If properly harnessed the diversity in cultures and languages can be a catalyst for growth and development for these reasons, the following suggestions become imperative if the Nigerian state will progress and meet the millennium development goals targets of 2015 as laid down by the United Nations.

First, there is a need to develop a more participatory approach in media programming which will accommodate more programs that will take into consideration the indigenous cultures and languages, if not all, that of the media's host community. This will go a long way to ensure understanding of the media contents and messages and also move people to corporate in the joint national development efforts.

There is also a great need to look beyond the insurmountable problems posed by multilingualism by taking a bold step towards the standardization of the indigenous languages. To this end, the government must see it as of paramount importance to invest in the standardization process of these languages and promote them to the extent that they can be used in some capacities as administrative language especially at the local levels and language of instruction at least at the primary school levels as suggested by a one time minister for education in Nigeria, late Professor Aliyu Babatunde Fafunwa, to ensure participation by all. To this end Bangbose (1994), says, 'we can no longer be scared by the difficulties of developing technical and scientific vocabularies in African languages'.

To make all these possible, the government should take a bold step towards the eradication of poverty and one of its major effects- poverty. This is necessary as it ensures that when indigenous languages are standardized and texts are made available in them, people are empowered through literacy to consume media contents especially in print forms and are able to make revolutionary steps towards the achievement of the national goals

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