

ENGLISH FOR MASS COMMUNICATIONS AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES- READERS' PERCEPTION

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Abstract

This study was an investigation into the way readers perceive the use of English, for different purposes, and in particular, for mass communication in a second language setting. For this purpose, a simple questionnaire in form of the Likert rating scale was used to generate data. The study involved 337 respondents. A decision rule was set at 3.01 as the agreement level and any item below that was disagreed with. The result revealed that although the use of English for mass communication was considered normal, it should, however, still be simpler than the present level; that there should be a difference between the use of English for mass communication and the use of English for other purposes, bearing in mind that the audience for mass communication products vary from the highly educated to the barely educated who have just a smattering of the vocabulary of the English language in a second language English environment.

Keywords: Perception, comprehensibility, mass communication, second language English.

Introduction

Language remains one human phenomenon that has continued to determine societal peaceful co-existence. When properly used, language can be a useful instrument of social cohesion, while its wrong use can lead to confusion and anarchy. The pragmatists view language as a response to the needs of the immediate environment. Pragmatics itself is the study of the use of language in human communication 'as determined by the conditions of society' (Mey, 2001). Language is an issue of vital importance in any society, because all activities of man are carried out, usually, through the medium of language, either in the oral or in the written form. In a monolingual nation, linguistic problems are minimal and so development is accelerated, but in a multilingual nation, the linguistic problems are legion and these have attendant implications for national development. These problems range from the choice of linguistic code in different domains to proficiency in an agreed language as a result of it neither being a Mother Tongue (MT) nor even indigenous, in most cases. This is the situation in Nigeria and in most

African nations. In Nigeria, where there is no clear policy on language, except the constitutional provision, which confers official status on the English language, the language situation is such that no indigenous language can be used for official purposes. With over 400 indigenous languages, political exigencies make the choice of any of the indigenous languages difficult.

The choice of English for the purpose of official and public communications, in a country such as Nigeria that is predominantly illiterate, multilingual and multi-cultural, is not only politically expedient, but also linguistically fits the bill at the present moment. It is, however, generally believed, by some, that the use of indigenous languages is preferable, if information is to adequately get to the grassroots for the purpose of national development (Nwuneli, 1986; Mohammed, 2003). Some others believe that considering the Nigeria's linguistic situation, English has to be retained as the language of mass communications, at least to cut across the different linguistic divides in Nigeria. This set of people,

however, believes that the English language to be used should not be too academic if the purpose of adopting English as a medium of mass communications is to be achieved (Shobomehin, 2003). For example, it is popularly believed that the English language, as used by Nigerian journalists, is too cerebral and far above the head of the average Nigerian reader of newspapers. Some features and editorials, in particular, have been considered too incomprehensible for Nigerian readers of newspapers, hence the low patronage of editorial columns. (Sanmi, 1985; Odejide, 1986; Owolabi, 2006). Cunningham (1996) says readers may come to another meaning if the use of English is not appropriate. In a situation where English is used as a second language and the majority of the users having a smattering of its vocabulary, high flying English expressions that are, at times, very literary may not engender effective communication with the masses; bearing in mind that communication is effective when the decoder of a message understands the message sent by the encoder with little or no difficulty. Many Nigerian writers for mass communications are not mass communicators, in the real sense of the word, as they do not seem to direct their messages at the masses. They, rather, regale their readers with impressive writings that call attention more to the writer and the writing than to the message, thus negatively impinging on readers' comprehension of the contents of Nigerian newspapers.

There are varieties of English that can be put to different uses, and these uses will be dictated by either the mode or the field of discourse. Our concern in this paper is the written mode in the field of mass communications; but, whatever use a variety of English language is deployed; the ultimate goal is to communicate, by way of information sharing and dissemination, entertainment and education, all for the purpose of development. In this study, the use of English was considered for the purpose of mass communication in sharing information with a wide and disparate

audience in Nigeria, which uses the language in addition to an already acquired one.

The preference for English, as a major means of information dissemination in Nigeria, is hinged on many factors, some of which include the well known pluralistic nature of the linguistic terrain and also the fact that Nigeria is one of the largest ESL users in the world. Citing Gradol (1997), Akere (2009) says 'there are 63 countries in which there are substantial populations of second-language speakers of English. Twelve of this number represents countries with over 5 million second-language speakers of English. Nigeria tops the list with an estimated 43 million L2 speakers of English.' Jowitt (2009), however, puts Nigeria next to India, in the number of those who speak English as second language. Whatever the position, it is not in contention that Nigeria is one of the largest L2 speakers of English in the world. Apart of the factor of the multilingual linguistic terrain warranting the adoption of English for official purposes in Nigeria, every nation in the world that desires development and international recognition, cannot but adopt the use of the English language in one form or the other. The native speakers have it as Native Language (ENL), the former British colonies have it as Second Language (ESL), while many Asian countries now adopt it as Foreign Language (EFL).

Since English is not indigenous to our culture, although it is no longer a stranger to our linguistic ecology (Kachru, 1985), its use is expected to be tailored in a manner that reflects our realities especially through creative and pragmatic approach, especially for the purpose of mass and public communications. Beside the fact that varieties exist in Nigerian English, the English for mass communications, more than any other uses, should be such that will be within the reach of the average user of English as a second language, but without jeopardizing standard. Some forms may be internationally unintelligible, because international intelligibility is a matter of

international interaction, but locally acceptable because of the way it reflects local realities. The form for use, in mass communications, may fall into the category of Banjo's (1971) Variety III which, as cited by Adetugbo (2009), is the home-grown variety that has social acceptability and understood nationally and internationally, close to standard British English in syntax and semantics, but having lexical peculiarities.

The problem

The English language has been in Nigeria for well over two centuries, having been introduced by the colonial masters and popularized by trade and missionary activities. Since its advent, it has risen from the status of a foreign language (EFL) to that of a second language (ESL). The continued use of the language ought to improve its excellence, but this is not the case as standard continues to wane, as seen in the yearly turn out of results of public examinations, which are standard measures of proficiency in the language. If English continues as the official language, and also the language of wider communications in multilingual Nigeria, through which information is disseminated for the purpose of national development, the standard of English used must be such that comprehension, among the different reading audience, with varied educational backgrounds, will be guaranteed. This is more so when newspapers do not seem to be the friend of the masses, for many obvious reasons, notwithstanding the fact that they command more respect than the broadcast media which, until very recently, were controlled by government. The bureaucratic control of the electronics media makes people lose confidence in their reportage. If the reports of newspapers, which 'enjoy considerable readership as well as trust, probably because they were owned and controlled by private individuals whose linkages with government were not visible' (Shobowale, 2006: 135) are to get to the desired audience and have the desired effects, the language must be apt. Therefore,

the way readers believe that English should be used for the purpose of mass dissemination of information for the purpose of development, as distinct from other purposes such as academic, official, scientific, etc in a second language English setting is the essence of this study.

Research objectives

The aims of this investigation were to identify:

- i. the type of English for use for mass communications in a second language situation such as Nigeria;
- ii. the difference between the use of English for mass communications and the use of English for other purposes in a second language English situation, such as Nigeria.

Research questions

The study set out to answer the following research questions based on the objectives of the study:

1. What should be the English used for mass communications in a second language English situation such as Nigeria?
2. What is the difference in the use of English for mass communications and the use of English for other purposes in second language English situation such as Nigeria?

Scope

The study was limited in scope to journalists' use of English in Nigerian newspapers without any consideration for other mass media of communications such as magazines, journals, periodicals, occasional publications and the electronics media.

Method

The study was a simple survey. As in all surveys, the study examined the current status of things by collecting and analyzing data from a section of the population considered representative enough, and generalizing the result to the entire

population. Since a survey does not, usually, provide a basis for testing hypothesis because of lack of variables that can be manipulated, answers are simply provided to research questions, based on available data. This we did in this study. It had a population of 338 respondents drawn purposively across various walks of life with varying educational qualifications and social backgrounds. The fairly large sample was informed by Jen's (2004: 67) suggestion that 'researchers employing the use of surveys should use large samples and record their findings as found.' The study was carried out, basically, to access readers' perception of use of English for mass communications and for other purposes. The instrument, a questionnaire, was pilot-tested for test-retest reliability using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient. This yielded a correlation coefficient of 0.09 showing a high degree of correlation, thus making the instrument very reliable.

The instrument was administered personally and with the aid of two research assistants. The data generated were regrouped. They were later subjected to descriptive statistical

analysis to answer the research questions. For the analysis of data, a mean cut-off point of 3.01 was chosen for each of the items in the instrument. Any item in the instrument with a mean score of 3.01 and above was agreed with while anything below that was disagreed with. This was informed by the fact that 3.01 is higher than 60% and on the positive side; below that would be below 40% and on the negative divide. Apart from this, 3.01 is the next value higher than undecided '3' on the rating scale used for this study and falls on the 'agree' side.

Analysis and discussion of data

The table below shows the responses on what the use of English for mass communications should be in a second language situation, such as Nigeria and the difference between the use of English for mass communications and the use of English for other purposes in English as second language situation. It is to answer the two research questions in the study. Items 1, 2 and 5 relate to the first research question, while the remaining items 3 and 4 relate directly to the second research question.

Table 1: Responses on the difference between the use of English for mass communication and the use of English for other purposes in a second language English situation and what the use of English should be in a second language English setting such as Nigeria.

Item	Statements	Respondents' Qualifications and Scores								
		First School Leaving Cert.	GCE O' level	OND	NCE	HN D	First Degree	Above First Degree	PhD	Grand Total
		x/R	x/R	x/R	x/R	x/R	x/R	x/R	x/R	x/R
1	The use of English for mass communication in English as a second language situation should be simpler than for other	3.57/A	2.86/D	3.35/A	4.75/A	3.81/A	3.51/A	3.70/A	4.50/A	3.71/A

	purposes									
2	The use of English by Nigerian journalists in the Nigerian press is normal in English as a second language situation	3.29/A	3.61/A	3.74/A	4.00/A	3.22/A	3.38/A	3.43/A	2.75/D	3.52/A
3	There should be a difference between the use of English for other purposes and the use of English for mass communication in English as second language situation	3.43/A	3.41/A	3.10/A	4.13/A	2.84/D	3.84/A	3.39/A	2.25/D	3.35/A
4	The use of English for mass communication is all right but can be better than it is in Nigeria	3.57/A	2.87/D	2.67/D	3.88/A	2.75/D	3.35/A	2.72/D	1.75/D	3.01/A
5.	Flowery use of English, in form of idioms and figurative expression, hinders understanding of the contents of Nigerian newspapers	3.29/A	3.20/A	3.13/A	4.38/A	3.16/A	3.00/A	3.20/A	3.25/A	3.24/A

The table shows that except holders of GCE O'level, all other respondents who are holders of First school Leaving Certificates, OND, NCE, HND, First Degree, above first degree and PhD agreed with item 1, that the use of English for mass communications in English as a second language situation should be simpler than for other purposes. These other purposes may be academic, research, technical, official, etc. The fact was also generally agreed upon, with 3.71 final score above the 3.01 cut-off point set. However, the final agreement with item 2 with 3.52, above 3.01 cut-off point set, that the use of English by Nigerian journalists in the Nigerian press is normal in English as second language situation, negates the first item. This may be borne out of the fact that many of the respondents share the same world view with the writers. As Widdowson (1998:5) has noted: 'simplicity of language is not to be equated with accessibility of meaning', that what usually causes problem is 'disparity in perception of the world'. When a writer and the reader do not have the same world view, even the simple use of language may not yield easy understanding to the reader. This may also be in agreement with a communication model: Schram's Field of Experience, where it is postulated that communication can only take place, effectively, when the encoder and the decoder share the same field of experience. This is what makes it possible for people in the same profession to easily comprehend and exchange information, notwithstanding the disparity in educational qualifications, while others outside the profession remain perplexed. For example a medical doctor's prescription is comprehensible to a less educated pharmacy technician, while a professor in another field remains puzzled. Many newspaper readers are not likely to share the same world view with journalists, for so many reasons. To this extent, simplicity of language should be cultivated by print media journalists if they are to communicate for the purpose of development. Otherwise, it will be a case of the falcon's inability to hear the falconer,

thus making things to fall apart and lack of cohesion at the centre (W. B. Yeats).

Notwithstanding the above, the agreement with items 3 and 4 that there should be a difference between the use of English for other purposes and the use of English for mass communications in second language situation (item 3, with 3.35 score) and that the use of English for mass communication is all right but can be better than it is now in the Nigerian press (item 4 with 3.01 score) confirms the fact that there should be a difference between the use of English for mass communication and the English language used for other purposes in second language English situation. In other words, the use of English should be simpler for the purpose of mass communications than for other purposes such as research, official, academic discourse, etc. Further, item 5 on the flowery use of English in the form of idioms and figurative expressions as hindrance to understanding the contents of Nigerian newspapers, had only first degree holders with a score of 3.00 disagreeing while all the other holders of first school leaving certificate with 3.29; GCE O'level with 3.20; OND, with 3.13; NCE with 4.38; HND with 3.16; above First Degree with 3.20; PhD with 3.25 and an aggregate score of 3.24 all above the 3.01 cut-off score, agreed that flowery use of the English language, in the form of idioms and figurative expressions, hinders understanding of the contents of Nigerian newspapers. This is in line with Oguntuase's (2006) submission on the avoidance of jargons and meaninglessness or ambiguity like journalese so that all sections of our newspapers and magazines will be readable and intelligible to all readers. This is also the basis of the opinion of Hicks (1998) in his advice to journalists to write for their readers, using a clear form of English and avoiding jargon, slang, pomposity, obscurity and academic complexity. This, it is generally believed, is the best way to reach as many people as possible with information necessary for their participation in matters that pertain to them.

Summary of findings

Based on the questions asked and answered, the present study found that the use of English is all right for the purpose of mass communications to bridge the gaps among the ethno-linguistic groups in Nigeria; however, there should be a difference between General English, with all its finesse, for other official and academic purposes and English for the special purpose of mass communications. This is in conformity with pragmatists' belief that language should be made to adapt to its setting. As Alo (1998) has noted that the pragmatic use of English in non-native cultural environments should involve the establishment of local identities in style and other areas to reflect local realities. Ability to do this is effectiveness in language use, and it matters a lot, because 'if an expression is confusing, ambiguous or unintentionally vague it can hardly be an efficient use of language' (Parker, 1977: 2), and efficient use of language is germane in the mass media, because it is through the mass media that people get to know of new ideas and information that can help them contribute meaningfully to national development. If the media are to do this, 'then the mass communicators need to package the message effectively for the ultimate users' (Mohammed, 2003:647).

Conclusion

This study has shown that there ought to be a clear dividing line between General English that strives for finesse and English for the special purpose of communicating with the masses. This is because while the English for some other purposes such as official, academic, judicial, etc, may have an identifiable audience, English for mass communications has no such as it is the use of English by a small number of professionals disseminating information to a large anonymous and heterogeneous audience scattered everywhere. If this small number of professionals is to achieve its set goal, of information dissemination to disparate audience, especially for the purpose of development, there must be pragmatic use of English as the preferred language in a

heterogeneous linguistic community, such as Nigeria. This, however, does not preclude the use of specialized English for reporting professional information targeted at a specific audience that will be familiar with the associative jargon.

Recommendations

Based on the result of this study, it is hereby recommended that flowery use of English which falls into the same category with specialized language that does not communicate with the non-initiate should be avoided. At this point the much vilified Nigerian English may come handy for the purpose of mass communications. This is a domesticated kind of English, which is a natural response to yawning linguistic and socio-cultural needs; a kind of English that is capable of creating new ideas and new modes of thought, not found in native variety of English, so that as a domestic servant does what the master requires, English, in Nigeria, can be made to do precisely what Nigerians want it to do (Adegbija, 2004). This is not likely to affect international intelligibility, since 'to a very large extent, the grammar of English in Nigeria is still in conformity with the grammar of native varieties of English' (Adegbija, 2004), because no diatopic variety can interfere with certain aspects of the grammar of English, without doing so at its own peril (Banjo, 1996). In the final analysis, international intelligibility will be nourished and sustained by international interaction that keeps the standards in Britain, the USA and Australia mutually intelligible in spite of the vast geographical separations (Banjo, 1996). Only specialized diction without an immediate better alternative could be allowed for the purpose of mass communications, and such diction should be comprehensible within the context of use, or should be followed with comprehensible explanation. To this extent, training institutions for journalists or for those intending to write for mass communications should emphasize simplicity as a mark of good writing (Eko, 2002), by designing courses in their curriculum that will teach effective writing for the specific purpose of

mass communications in the interest of national development.

Adopting the Nigerian variety of English for the purpose of mass communications will also be a means of popularizing and promoting this variety of English, which is 'simply English the way Nigerians speak and write it!' (Okoro, 2004). This can be done without necessarily sheepishly aping the style of foreign authors to the detriment of achieving the goal of information dissemination through mass communications. Pragmatism demands that language should be used with due consideration for social contexts of usage. Not only that, since language is a reflection of a society, it is expected that changes in society are bound to produce corresponding changes in the use of language. In this wise, the use of Nigerian English will help Nigerians, as a community of second language English users to preserve their world view and externalizing it by expressing it in a language that may not be indigenous, but has been domesticated to allow them to preserve their cultural identity.

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