

THE MEDIA AND PROMOTION OF NIGERIA'S INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

By

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Abstract

Language is the lifeblood of the media. Language is to the media what the blood is to the human body. It is, therefore, extremely difficult for the media to exist or function without what gives it life and sustains it, namely, language. Among the roles played by the mass media include using language to inform people about its (language) existence and growth. The media educate the public on the need to develop and preserve their language by means of broadcasts, printed materials and other socio-political activities. When a language is facing endangerment, gradually disappearing or becoming extinction, it is the media that may raise alarm. Thus, the media institutions are readily available and reliable avenues through which people know about their language and its status. They are, therefore, veritable tools for the promotion and sustenance of languages. But, the extent to which the media have fared in popularising and sustaining the indigenous languages of Nigeria through their different outlets and activities leaves much to be desired. The goal of this paper is to examine ways the Nigerian media can utilise their different outlets to enhance the various native languages of Nigeria. Using library information and expository research methods, this paper examined the activities of the media in Nigeria and how they can further advance the promotion of the indigenous languages.

Keywords: media, broadcast, indigenous language, promotion, sustainability

Introduction

Language is a cultural value as well as a cultural element. It is the identification mark of a people. Language is a most powerful tool for the expression of the cultural, spiritual, moral and intellectual life and activities of a people. It is an essential means of communication and indispensable in the dissemination of information, transfer of knowledge and skill, establishment of relationships and enhancement of cohesion amongst people. Language serves as means of promoting social interaction and national unity as well as preserving culture. Human life would be inconceivable without language and effective communication. Thus, proper linguistic communication is at the centre of human existence. It is what makes life meaningful and worth living. Language pervades all human engagements such as political, social, religious, educational, economic processes.

Human beings possess inalienable right to acquire and use language. In actual sense, the rights to freedom of speech, communication, interaction or association are all implied in this fact. According to UNESCO, on Universal Declaration on Linguistic Rights (1996), claims for language are among the first rights that minorities have voiced when there have been situations of political change and evolution. Such claims for linguistic rights range from the official and legal status of the minority and indigenous language, to language teaching and use in schools and other institutions, as well as the media (Articles 2, 3). As a matter of fact, every individual has the right to learn and use language

or be communicated to in the language which is close (native) to the person and which he understands better. This is what is referred to as indigenous peoples' language right.

The right to own and use an indigenous language is recognised in many countries. Some countries have also moved a step further by making official legislations for the use of indigenous languages at different levels of their national life. In Nigeria this right is enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution of 1999, Section 55 where it states that "the business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, and in Hausa, Igbo (sic) and Yoruba when adequate arrangement have been made therefor". There is equally a recognition of this right in the National Policy on Education, which instructs that "every child shall be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba" (NPE, 2004, 10a). This recognition of right is also extended to the other non-major indigenous languages.

Despite these provisions, there are clear indications that the right to establish and have access to media information in indigenous languages has not yet been adhered to or fully explored by both the Nigerian media practitioners and the consumers of media services. As a result, majority of the Nigerian people are seriously disadvantaged in political, social, educational, economic issues where they should have played direct and important roles. The more worrisome aspect is that the people cannot access the services of the various media institutions through languages in which they have greater facility and knowledge namely, the indigenous languages, for the fact that the native languages have been in parlous state and the discriminated lot amongst other supposedly more influential and prestigious foreign languages like English and French, among others.

The Problem

Indigenous languages are irreplaceable cultural heritages and values of the indigenous people. Like culture, they are legacies that are handed down from generation to generation, from parents to their children. At present, this legacy is experiencing gradual death and with it are those cultural values that sustain a people and the society like artifacts, traditional wisdom and heritage, norms, terminologies, spirituality, etc. On the other hand, the media is an important agent apart from the home and school that play essential roles in keeping languages alive. But, an examination of their activities shows that there are not enough indigenous language programmes that can keep this legacy alive or sustain it. This brings up the question of what can the media do to bring these abandoned indigenous languages to public purview and acceptability so that they can enjoy similar patronage like their foreign counterparts. What are the roles of the media in their revitalisation and promotion of the indigenous languages?

The State of Indigenous Languages in Nigeria

Nigeria is an extremely diverse ethnic and multicultural society (Alaba, 2000, p.1). There are numerous languages (foreign and indigenous) spoken in the country, which makes the linguistic situation a complex one. Amongst these languages, a foreign language namely, English is accorded pride of place, being recognised as the nation's official language. English enjoys high prestige and remains the official language in Nigeria. It is the preferred language used in documentation, administration, education, media, international trade, etc. English is the predominant language in urban communities and the most acceptable medium of disseminating information amongst political, social, academic, religious, entertainment groups, at the expense of the native languages.

In many modern cities and families in Nigeria, English is the only acceptable language of communication between parents and their children. It is adorned with such power as the only language that can foster national unity and cultural integration in a multi-ethnic country like Nigeria. Amongst elite groups and political associations, at social gatherings and religious meetings, English is the preferred language of interaction. The pride of place accorded the English Language is such that Nigeria's indigenous languages are relegated to the background. They are hardly used in any formal interaction, except amongst few elderly people. Is it, therefore, any surprise that Nigeria's indigenous languages are fast dying off?

Indigenous language, by definition, refers to a language that is native to a region and spoken by indigenous people. It is the language of the immediate environment of the speaker. It is also called mother tongue because it is the language in which a person is born, grows, conducts his or her everyday life and activities and, even dies with. Indigenous language is a language in which a person has the greatest unhindered linguistic facility or intuitive knowledge, the language with which the people formulate their thoughts and ideas and express their needs.

Nigeria has well over 400 indigenous languages (Crozier & Blench, 1992; Bamgboye, 1977). These languages are scattered across the six geopolitical zones of the country. These languages are categorised into two broad groups: major and minor. The major/national languages are the three languages Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and the non-major/minority/small languages comprise all other indigenous languages (Aziza, 2015, p. 19; Adeniyi & Bello, 2006). The major languages have developed standard orthography and texts, serve as regional lingua franca and are widely used. The non-major ones are without orthography and texts.

Whether major or minor, the fact remains that the indigenous languages of Nigeria are not accorded enough prestige and recognition. They are discriminated against and diminished and their speakers are made to seem inferior. In many schools, for instance, the English Language is still preferred as medium of instruction right from the kindergarten. No one thinks of using any indigenous language to teach the children. At home, many parents frown at their children whenever they speak the native language. They reason that speaking in native language will run counter to their interests of having their children acquire the official language as early as possible.

Granted that some languages like English are said to be superior to indigenous languages because they are more developed and spoken, yet Ushie and Uduk (2013, p. 94) note that human languages are basically the same in terms of their function in relation to their speakers. This makes the question of superiority or inferiority of languages to be of less emphasis in current language studies. Thus, what English Language is doing for its native speakers is exactly what the indigenous languages can do for their people if orthographies and literatures on them are developed properly.

The view expressed above is an encouragement to working towards the development and promotion of the indigenous languages. Obviously, many indigenous languages of Nigeria are moribund presently and some are fast dying off every day as there are no people who speak them or want to associate with them. However, these languages can be revived if parents, schools, media institutions, government, etc., encourage their transmission to the upcoming generation. According to Fishman (1991) in his book *Reversing Language Shift*, the importance of intergenerational

transmission of a mother tongue to ensure the success of language reversal cannot be overemphasised. According to him the lack of language transmission from generation to generation is a significant contributing factor to the loss of that language, since lack of transmission leads to fewer and fewer speakers in each generation.

Researchers have shown that many indigenous languages are faced with serious marginalisation and threats of extinction, and even, death. The UNESCO, for instance, in 2012 warned that the number of these indigenous languages is dwindling by the day, overwhelmed by the influence of foreign languages, especially English and French. Contemporary linguistic research has it that currently there are nearly seven thousand languages in the world (Evans, 2001). It is believed that more than half of these will disappear in the next century (Abley, 2003). The vast majority of languages called “endangered” or “moribund” languages (Krauss, 1992) fall into the categories of the indigenous languages.

Coming to Nigeria, it is estimated that about 200 Nigerian indigenous languages are severely endangered, while 20 are moribund (Crozier & Blench, 1992). This raises the question of what could be done to save the indigenous languages from extinction to a higher level of concern. Today, the proficient use of English as a language of communication in the Nigerian media either in the print or electronic (Omoera, 2008), is central to effective communication whereby what is intended is what is received without any form of ambiguity.

As Obinyan (2008) notes “For any language to meet the requirements for effective communication and professional use, such a language must be well developed and standardised” (p. 17). Wuster in Felber (1980), also, observes that the improvement of professional communication could be achieved only by developing an adequate instrument, i.e. terminology; which in a sense will not only assist creativity and innovation, but will aid effective and clear management of information and knowledge in either tacit or explicit forms for the benefit of all.

The Role of the Media in the Development of Indigenous Languages

The media refers to the different communication outlets through which information like news, entertainment, educative materials, data, or promotional messages are disseminated. They include everyday broadcasting and narrowcasting media and can be classified into two main groups: the print and the electronic media. The print media engage in the production of visible materials such as newspapers, magazines, billboards, books, pamphlets, leaflets, handbills, flyers, neon signs, etc. Information in these materials are assessed by the public through sensual contacts with the hand or eyes, hence they leave lasting impressions on the recipients. The electronic media, on the other hand, make use of electromagnetic waves and visual aids to disseminate information and they include television, radio, cinemas, direct mails, telephone, fax, internet, etc.

From earliest times, the media have remained the primary means of communication used to reach or influence the vast majority of the general public. Information regarding political activities, social matters, economic issues, entertainment and news are dispersed through the media. During election campaigns in Nigeria, for instance, all the media platforms come alive and become more creative, vibrant, appealing and dynamic (Adeniyi & Bello, 2006). The print media become very attractive by displaying all types and manners of colourful billboards, handbills, leaflets, flyers, etc. The

newspapers and magazines come alive and enjoy more patronage, while adverts become ubiquitous. From the electronic media new jingles and slogans are aired through the radio and television. Thus, the media, both the print and electronic, have always been and remain veritable and reliable sources of information gathering and dissemination.

Nigeria has numerous media organisations through which the masses are informed, entertained, mobilised, and educated. The media in the country, both public and private, play enormous roles while utilising linguistic resources to reach the people wherever they are. It is, therefore, not an exaggeration to state that the various media outfits depend on language for their existence and operation. From another perspective, the media are indispensable tools in the promotion of language, identity, culture and thought of the people. The media are means through which the people can be heard as well as reached. They are dependable channels when it comes to passing on information of any sort to the public. The media facilitate relationships, influence activities and promote interactions amongst people. The media are at the centre of the life of the people and what is life without information and communication.

In their different capacities, the media function as teacher, guide and voice of the people and institutions. The media play intermediary role of dispersing information to and from the people. Adeniyi and Bello (2006) observe that the media is “a fast means through which we could get anything promoted”. The media enhance the promotion of language and culture, contribute to national development, help in economic growth, foster social cohesion, enhance education, etc. But, how has the media fared in the development and sustenance of indigenous languages of Nigeria? What areas of media services can facilitate, enhance and ensure that Nigeria’s indigenous languages are relevant in today’s fast growing, technological and changing world? With the increasing awareness of indigenous languages attrition and subsequent extinction, what contributions can the media make to develop, safeguard and promote the indigenous languages of Nigeria?

A little hindsight shows that the media, in all their forms, developed in Africa as a result of direct or indirect contact with Europe. Printing, for instance, developed in Nigeria when the Missionaries acquired the first printing press in 1846. In 1859, Reverend Henry Townsend published the first newspaper in Nigeria in Yoruba language (Abudulahi, 2000). Ever since then the media have been playing important roles in the political, economic, social and educational life of Africa in general and Nigeria, in particular. This fact has, inadvertently, influenced and affected media practices which have continued to tilt towards conveying the foreign masters’ ideas and desires and satisfying their needs.

Again, for the fact that most indigenous languages are not known and many of the known ones do not have developed and standard orthography, all media activities, both communication and printing engagements have remained in English, a European language. The above realities have compounded the already gory situation of continued neglect and setback suffered by the indigenous languages. But, is the time not ripe for the media in Nigeria to sever from this confined foreign language hegemony and look towards developing the indigenous languages to make their services more relevant to the Nigerian people and thus serve the people better?

Unarguably, the different media platforms in Nigeria are meant to serve the needs of the citizens of the country who are the primary beneficiaries or target audience and principal consumers of their services. This being the case, then, the major challenge of the media is to ensure that the people or recipients of the media information are familiar with the content of their products. Speaking specifically about the impact the (communication) media ought to have on recipients, Leitner (2000) remarks that “in order to gain and maintain a stable audience, communication media must include recipients’ needs and expectations early on in message production”. Which means that for any information to be understood and appreciated the language of dissemination must be accessible to the audience. The first place to start is in developing orthographies for the indigenous languages of Nigeria.

One can hardly talk of accessibility to media information through the linguistic dimension in the absence of the orthography of a language, which is “the symbols and rules that are used in writing a language” (Williamson, 1984, p. 69). Most indigenous languages of Nigeria do not have developed or standard orthography which makes writing in them extremely difficult. But, this problem can be overcome if the media come in and help in developing orthographies, spelling and vocabulary of indigenous languages to ensure their survival. The orthography of a language sets the rules and guidelines by which the writing system of that language is governed. No language can be truly so called or survive many generations of use if it is not committed into writing and orthography is what makes this possible. Among other things, the orthography of a language not only serves as useful leverage and guide to excellent writing of cultural and educational books, but prevents overextension of terms to cover more grounds by placing restrictions on vocabularies (Obinyan, 2008, p. 20). As noted by Essien (2006), “peoples whose languages are unwritten are said to be at a very low level of civilization and that is why far sighted people continue to work towards mass literacy”.

It is not enough to develop orthographies for the indigenous languages, the greater demand and need is to create awareness of the existence of such orthographies. In this regard, the media as very powerful and reliable agents for information gathering and dissemination would help by publishing texts, pamphlets, leaflets, and handbills containing such orthographies and distributing same to schools, institutions and the general public. This function, in the domain of applied linguistics, is what is called “language engineering” which, according to Capo (1990, p. 2) include “orthography design, corpus planning, material development, encouragement of language use at all levels to account for and communicate the changing experiences of the speakers as well as aspects of human legacy called knowledge”.

Modern society of science and technology has ushered in many words and terminologies that were not there before. This poses a lot of challenges to the indigenous languages, especially the undeveloped ones. One of the criticisms levelled against indigenous languages is that they are too impoverished to accommodate emerging ideas from languages like English. Owolabi (2006, p. 17) notes that most of the indigenous languages are not developed enough to accommodate the intricacies and inflections that a dynamic language should have. New ways of doing things especially in the areas of science and technology as well as information technology can hardly be captured by the lexis and structures of the indigenous languages. As a way out, the media have to engage in and encourage the development and publication of a metalanguage for various concepts

and notions that are supposedly of different language origin. Metalanguage is designed to take care of medical and scientific terms in English and other international languages which we do not know their equivalent in Nigerian languages (Olalekan, 2001). The media can sponsor the production of vocabularies and terminologies in science and mathematics to accommodate new scientific and technological concepts.

The media are to help in developing indigenous languages by working hand in hand with institutions designed and committed to the study, development and revitalisation of indigenous languages in the country. In this regard, the media have to partner with such institutions like the National Institute for Nigerian Languages, National Educational Research Development Council, Linguistic Association of Nigeria, and departments of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages in the different universities, to fund researches in indigenous languages. It would be recalled that one of the major reasons for the establishment of the National Institute for Nigerian Languages, Aba, for instance, by the then Federal Military Government in 1992 is to produce teachers of Nigerian languages (Asuoha, 2017, p. 39). The media can partner with the Institute to train these teachers and fund, produce and promote their research findings thus, contributing to the development of indigenous languages.

The media helps in the promotion of indigenous languages by encouraging authors who write books and articles in such languages, publicising and popularising their ideas and helping them to sell their works. They should equally take up the production, publication and marketing of these works, organise seminars, workshops, competitions and promotions for indigenous language book authors. Furthermore, the media can give incentive to teachers, students and researchers who engage in studying indigenous languages at all levels of education as a way of promoting interest in the languages. The media can go further to organise symposium where experts on linguistics, language renewal, and language teaching and engineering come together to lay out a blueprint of policy changes, educational reforms, and community initiative to stabilise and revitalise the indigenous languages. Creating a published written literature of poems, plays and stories is another way the media can help in promoting the indigenous languages. In this way, children will learn the language, speak it through their teenage years until they become parents and can pass it on to their children.

From the political angle, the media are not just at the centre, but the back bone of every political engagement. The media are vehicles that carry messages and teach roles in governance and political participation to the citizens. Often, when the people fail to participate fully and actively in governance or government programmes like voting during elections, it is because the media limit or refuse to allow the use of indigenous language in spreading government activities to the public. When issues like resource control, for instance, or justice, fairness and equity in the society are discussed, how would the uneducated in the villages understand and get involved? Undoubtedly, how they respond will depend on their understanding of the programmes in their native languages. It is, therefore, important that the media diversify their functions of informing, educating and mobilising the citizens through the use of more indigenous languages. The media are to create awareness to the native people about government programmes, educate the citizens on their civic responsibilities, teach them about their right to vote and be voted for, inform them about the need to participate in national issues, educate them on the gains and the negative effects of non-

participation or compliance to government policies, etc., using the native languages the people are familiar with or which they understand better.

Through positive propaganda and advocacy, the media in Nigeria can influence the government to tow the path of dignity and honour already trodden by some other African countries like Ghana, Tanzania and Zimbabwe in revealing bold plans to remove English as a medium of instruction in schools. This will give the indigenous languages the opportunity to be used as languages of communication, education, administration, economy, politics, commerce, etc. The examples of countries like Japan, Russia, South Korea and India clearly indicate that the development of their indigenous languages was the needed magic wand by their natives to more easily grasp studies in science and technology. Also, the experiences of successful non-Anglophone countries such as Germany, France, China, Finland and many others are clear proofs that English is not the almighty language of education sophistry we erroneously construe it to be.

Recommendations

1. The media should encourage the development of orthographies, engage in publishing materials in indigenous languages, and grant research aids to scholars engaged in the study of indigenous languages in the universities.
2. The media should develop written transcripts using phonetic alphabets that catch the nuances of the language's sound system and engage in the documentation and archiving of indigenous languages by recording speakers using media devices like VHS videotapes that are not subject to degeneration over time.
3. The media must emphasise, through their various outlets, that the intergenerational transmission of indigenous languages in the home is an important factor in keeping these languages alive.
4. Proactive measures should be taken in developing indigenous languages for administrative political, social, educational and economic empowerment. As Adeniyi and Bello (2006) note, government, through the National Broadcasting Commission, should as a matter of urgency, take steps that will compel the various media houses in Nigeria to broadcast and transmit majority of their programmes in languages indigenous to its people.
5. The media should not only develop, but also help in sustaining indigenous languages by creating awareness to the public about not just the possibility, but the reality of the death of these languages if they are not used.
6. The media can contribute immensely to the development and sustenance of Nigerian indigenous languages through information gathering and transmissionsome of their programmes in the native languages.

Conclusion

This paper examined the role of the media in the development of Nigeria's indigenous languages. It discovered that many indigenous languages are becoming moribund and approaching extinction due to nonuse. It noted that the only remedy to keeping the indigenous languages of Nigeria alive and in use is to revitalise them through intergenerational transmission and documentation. To this end, the media have great roles to play. However, the paper observed that they have not done much. Conscious of the fact that "the loss or death of some indigenous languages is an irretrievable loss of people's collective wisdom, that is people's cultures, traditional conceptions, medicine,

technology and terminologies” (Olaoye, 2013), the paper recommends that the media must remain proactive in developing indigenous languages for empowerment, sustainability and national development.

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