

Indigenous Language News and the Marginalization of Some Ethnic Groups in the Nigerian Broadcast Media

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ABSTRACT There are more than 250 distinct ethnic groups and languages in Nigeria. Only a few of these languages are used in news presentation in the broadcast media. Such 'privileged' languages are those spoken by bigger ethnic groups. English, the official language of the country also dominates in media presentations. This trend has led to the marginalization of the languages spoken by smaller ethnic groups in the country. This paper surveys eight schools and four Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) stations in Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River and Rivers States to ascertain how many indigenous languages are used in the broadcast media or taught in both primary and secondary schools. The study made use of two research methods that is, content analysis and survey. The content analysis was used to examine the programme schedules and content of the television stations while the survey was used to gather information from the schools. Findings indicate that the near absence of indigenous languages in the broadcast media, particularly those spoken in these four states can be traced to their non inclusion in the school curricula. This practice does not favour Nigerian Television Authority's news indigenization policy which stresses the need to promote news presentation in local languages. The goal is for majority of Nigerians to benefit from such presentations. The study recommends a more plural and diversified language use in the Nigerian broadcast media. Attention should be given particularly to those languages considered as minority.

INTRODUCTION

When the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) introduced the news indigenization policy in 2007, the aim was to bring television as close to the people at the grassroots as possible. It was believed that news presentation in indigenous languages would enable the masses (whether educated or not) understand the content of the news. This was particularly useful to the federal government as it had set a goal to effectively communicate its developmental efforts to the people. Government believed the move would make people to identify more with the administration. However, it is one thing to formulate policies and another to make them work. Policies are achievable if the right atmosphere is put in place.

The current situation in the country is far from being the ideal for a policy of that nature to thrive. The English language is still predominantly used for presentations and sometimes, a few indigenous languages, in the more than 50 NTA television stations in Nigeria. This is to the neglect of a plethora of indigenous languages available in the country. Nigeria's official language is no doubt English, a language understood and spoken by the elites and the literate. This group of people unfortunately is in the minority. The other group – the majority – who understand very little English or none at all, but more of their mother

tongue are invariably excluded from mass media fare.

As Melkote and Steeves (2001) note, "issues of words and language are certainly issues of communication." Language plays an important role in the life of a people. It is both the main vehicle through which information is conveyed to people and a symbol of identity and solidarity (Dozie and Madu 2012). Besides, people's needs and aspirations find their expression in language. The language used in presenting an issue and the manner in which it is presented, determines to a large extent who receives the message, how it is received and probably what the individual does with it. Because the media hold the power of authority over the public, particularly the non-elite group, they (media) must therefore exercise caution with what they present and how they present it to the public (Salawu 2013). Complaints abound on how some segments of the population are neglected in the daily operations of the media. These include: the physically challenged, minorities of all sorts, particularly, the linguistic minority groups, women and sometimes the elderly. Of all the forms of marginalization available in the media, the aspect of language seems the most worrisome. It is all encompassing, because everybody is affected.

In an attempt to ensure compliance with an earlier directive to all NTA stations in the country, that is, indigenizing local news (presenting

news in indigenous languages), the then Executive Director News at NTA Headquarters, Usman Magawata in September 2007, sent a letter containing the following information to the stations.

I wish to know the position of local language(s) broadcast in your station both in news and local news programmes.... In addition, I will like to draw your attention to the need to seriously de-emphasize the use of English as vehicle for communication in your domain and come up with many more news programmes in the local language(s) of your community. This is with immediate effect.

The primary emphasis of this directive was for local languages to take preeminence over the English language in every broadcast news presentation considering who the primary audience for the programme often is. However, this is hardly taken into account when the news crew carries out its duties. In fact since the inception of television broadcasting in Nigeria in 1959, English has been the predominant language used in that medium of mass communication. The colonial government actually introduced all forms of broadcasting in the country. It would therefore not be a surprise why this trend has persisted. There is need for Nigeria and other African countries to adopt a journalism standard that differs substantially from what is practiced by other countries of the world, particularly from the West. The idea for an indigenous journalism standard dates back to the late 1950s when national liberation started in the African continent (Skjerdal 2012). Journalism then was seen as a vehicle for national unity and a tool for breaking with the colonial past. One way of breaking with the past is to develop deliberate policies to enable people identify with their linguistic groups. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic/lingual society with as many as 515 identified and distinct languages, spoken by 373 ethnic groups (Grimes 2000 and Otite 2001). Although a few of these languages are extinct, majority are still alive. Nigeria's case is so peculiar that one would not but agree with Udo (2003) who says "the linguistic situation in Nigeria is simply chaotic." Not many countries, even in Africa, can match Nigeria's language situation. Blench (1998) observes that, it is "one of the most complex in the world".

Unfortunately, very few of these languages are taught in schools (primary, secondary and tertiary levels). The reason for this may be attributed to the non-existence of standard orthogra-

phy and a settled literary tradition in many of the languages. This also probably explains why even fewer find their way into the media houses. There are actually several problems facing the minority languages in Nigeria. Olayemi (1990) mentions five of such sociolinguistic problems - linguistic inadequacy, societal acceptability, lack of personnel, materials, and finance. Challenges associated with linguistic inadequacy include non-standardization in the different components of the language, like the orthography and vocabulary, and difficulties with translation. Closely related to these issues is the problem of raising the personnel and materials needed to teach these languages in schools.

This aspect has for long remained a very big challenge to the growth and development of indigenous languages in the country. The younger generation of Nigerians does not think it is important to spend time, energy and resources to enrol in indigenous languages classes. The reason for this disinterest may not be unconnected with the wrong notion among young people that anything indigenous is outmoded. To them modernization means imbibing everything Western - the culture, the language, the mind set and their worldview. It is actually fashionable for them to act western, sound western, and generally feel western. Sometimes, parents and guardians make rules in their homes that forbid the speaking of any kind of indigenous language. Where couples do not share the same ethnic group/ language, the choice of what indigenous language to speak in such homes becomes a major issue.

Even in families where both parents come from the same ethnic group, the question of whether or not to allow their children speak their indigenous language at home is still sometimes a major issue. Convincing children from such backgrounds to develop or show more interest in a language they have been discouraged to speak from home is not only a herculean task but a punishment of some sort. Public schools where pupils have the privilege to be exposed to these languages at the primary level are fast becoming endangered. Privately owned schools are replacing the public ones at a speed that should raise concerns. At the level of primary education in public schools, the pupils are made to study or learn all the subjects they are taught including indigenous languages. This is not the case in private schools. The emphasis on indigenous languages may be negligible or completely non-exis-

tent. This minimizes the possibility of encouraging child learners in these languages or grooming future teachers for them. It also reduces the chances of discovering potential linguists. A situation of this nature further exposes such languages to possible death.

Unfortunately, community leaders who should know the importance of promoting and preserving their indigenous languages/ cultures, also fall into the trap of not encouraging child learners. Such leaders according to Udo (1999) may have been at the forefront in the advocacy for the use of indigenous languages as lingua franca but would almost go into fits if their children were asked to study those same languages in school. She thinks this disposition is more related to the idea of prestige than knowledge. Many uninformed persons think certain languages are more prestigious than others for instance the modern European languages (particularly the English language). Thus parents will readily encourage their children to study the more "civilized" languages. We acknowledge that not all the languages currently spoken in the world today are at the same level of development and acceptance. Several factors may have contributed to this, but no language is definitely better than the other. If some African languages were to be exposed to the same kind of privileges that European languages have enjoyed, they would not be thought of today as "uncivilized".

The wrong notion of considering some languages as being superior to others has affected even the way several indigenous languages are perceived in the country, especially the minority languages. There exists a subtle and yet destructive discrimination between the "majority" and "minority" languages. The "majority languages" are those spoken by the major ethnic groups – Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba – while the "minority languages" are spoken by other smaller ethnic groups in the country. This syndrome according to Udo (1999) creates a dichotomy that limits the level to which the study of the "minority" languages could be encouraged or discouraged. The discriminatory treatment has also led to a situation where the "majority" languages can be studied beyond the Senior Secondary School level, while the "minority" languages could only be studied at the Junior Secondary School level and not beyond that. Terminating the study of the minority languages at the Junior Secondary School level is one way of hampering their growth/development. It is equally another way

of unconsciously encouraging the dearth of personnel and material for those languages. When no real opportunity is given to these to grow or develop further, there will be no yardstick for evaluating if any improvement has taken place or not. It also implies that such languages will always be termed developing or underdeveloped.

These limitations will inadvertently affect even the development of the speakers of the languages and sometimes could lead to loss of their collective identity and cultural continuity. No group of people would want to watch their kind go extinct. Languages and their speakers could go extinct for several reasons. One of such reasons is language shift (Rivenburgh 2004). This occurs when dominant groups either force (forced assimilation) or encourage the abandonment of minority languages as a result of certain policies (monolingual educational policies) put in place that favour the dominant groups to the detriment of the smaller groups. Another reason is the strong wave of modernity and globalization sweeping across the entire world forcing some traditional societies to succumb to its dictates. Certain historical factors like colonialism and the decisions taken at that time brought retrogression to the development of indigenous cultures and thus, the languages. Blench (1998) believes some languages disappeared in Nigeria as a result of demographic crises caused by labour migration/urbanism.

Finding a solution to the issue of language loss requires more than acknowledging the existence of the problem. What the situation needs is the will and a firm commitment on the part of the major stakeholders in this language business to show sufficient interest in the development of the minority languages and be ready to fund efforts even by private individuals in this direction.

Television broadcasting in Nigeria has for long remained an elite phenomenon. Most of the television stations in the country are sited in the urban areas where only a little percentage of Nigerians resides. The rural areas of the country where majority of the citizens live are barely part of such a privilege. Moreover, the "real" rural dwellers scarcely own television sets.

A more disturbing and sad situation is that of electricity supply in the country. This sector has never been able to meet the challenges of making electric power available to Nigerians. Since Nigeria gained political independence in 1960, different governments have come up with diverse

policies to enable them tackle the problem, but sadly, none seems to have succeeded. This further reduces television ownership and viewership to the small number of people who can afford alternative source of power supply (private electricity generating plant).

Media and Language use

Language is the major tool with which the mass media carry out their daily operations. In fact, language is the mainstay of mass communication. It is so important in information dissemination, that it can determine how much mass mediated messages achieve in terms of reach. McQuail (2005) agrees with this idea by noting that the main mechanism of control in the media is not policy or law or even economics but audience demand for their 'own' media content in their own language. Language creates reality and provides a means through which we learn about ourselves, others, and our culture. Language also mediates our lived experiences and the way we evaluate those experiences manifest in the manner we use language. Language is indeed a great asset to the society. It is a tool for social identity and ethnic affiliation. People's needs (in and outside the society) depend on it (Dozie and Madu 2012). Thus, language can not be neutral because it reflects and structures our ideologies and world views. In addition, language helps develop conceptual thinking and provides a means to manipulate ideas, transmit culture, and deal with abstraction (Dominick 2011).

People act towards other people or things on the basis of the meaning they assign to their actions or those objects involved. Although meaning may not be inherent in objects, that is, it does not preexist in them, meaning is however negotiated through the use of language. Journalists seem to do their work with little or no thought given to how language works and human beings use it. Most of them consider language as a conduit that easily carries words and ideas across to media audience to enable them experience reality as portrayed by the words. Members of the audience may share the same conceptual system or even the same language, but sometimes dialects, denotations, and connotations of concepts, lived experiences, and ideologies differ.

No matter how much we may try to ignore this fact, language is an important issue in mass communication. If differences in understanding and interpretation of media messages exist be-

cause of the factors mentioned earlier, the situation could be worse when there is a total lack of understanding resulting from the use of an unfamiliar language. This simply strengthens the idea that the best way to reach media audiences is by the use of a language they not only understand but are familiar with its nuances, denotations and connotations. We are familiar with the fact that language can be used or manipulated to change public opinion on many issues. The media have a way of achieving this. It could be by endless repetition of whatever it is, careful choice of words or any other means that makes us feel the enormous sway the media have on public perception of events. The media are capable of shaping and directing public understanding of the world (Ehiwario 2013).

Objectives

The predominant use of the English language in news presentation in the Nigerian broadcast media to the neglect of indigenous languages should bother anyone who means well for the country and its citizens. The fact that most of these languages are not taught in schools helps in complicating matters. It can actually hasten the process of language loss. Once a language is lost, speakers suffer loss of cultural continuity and social cohesion necessary to maintain meaningful cultural identity. The loss of indigenous languages suggests some dangerous trends in the environment.

According to Nettle and Romaine (2000), languages are like the miners canary; if they are in danger, it is an indication of environmental stress. The dominant use of the English language tends to encourage the abandonment of other minority languages. Where there is no linguistic diversity, there will likely be a reduction in the gene pool which will in turn weaken all our linguistic lives and linguistic potentials as human beings (Scobbie 1994). It is on this premise that this study examined the languages used in news presentation in four television stations in Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River and Rivers States in Nigeria. There was also an attempt to determine if any link exists between the absence of these indigenous languages in the curriculum of schools and their dearth in the media.

Theoretical Framework

Any form of marginalization whether within the confines of the media or not can give rise to

discontentment with source of the problem. Cases abound of how individuals, groups, communities, and nations have reacted to perceived injustices. Sometimes the reaction may be covert or overt. When people are dissatisfied with established (mainstream) media, for instance, they tend to turn to an alternative system that will give them a voice. The Emancipatory Media theory upon which this study is based brings to the fore the possibility of creating, owning and using an alternative channel to pass information across to the general public or a group of persons on issues that affect them. The emphasis is on the potential for this system to provide small-scale, grass-roots participation in communication channels independent of the dominant mass media. Communication liberation is thus put in the hands of the people instead of the big publishing or broadcasting conglomerates.

The emancipation advocated in this paper, is that of freedom from the dominant use of the English language in the Nigerian media. A process that keeps the mass media audience from the message intended for them is to say the least unfair.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used for this study was survey. Eight secondary schools – two from each state and four television stations were chosen for the study. The eight schools are public schools and following their status, indigenous language should ordinarily be taught in such schools. The four television stations selected are the major NTA stations in those states and normally should be at the vanguard of the news indigenization policy.

Data Presentation

The four states which form the focus of this paper belong to the South-South geo-political

zone of Nigeria (there are actually six states in this zone). The choice of this part of the country for the study is premised on the fact that it has the largest concentration of languages. Udo (2003) puts the number of languages here at about 119. However, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River and Rivers States have a total of 98 recognized languages. A break down of this is as follows: Akwa Ibom State has ten languages with Ibibio, Anaang and Oro as the dominant languages. Bayelsa State has 30 languages with Ijaw(Izon), Nembe and Ogbia as the dominant languages. Cross River State has 37 languages with Efik, Ejagham and Bekwarra as the dominant ones. Rivers States has 21 with Izon, Ikwerre, Khana, Kalabari and Okrika as the dominant ones.

Table 1 presents the languages spoken in Akwa Ibom State. It also shows whether they are taught in schools or used in the media. As it stands, only the Ibibio language out of the ten languages spoken in the state is taught in schools and used for news presentation on NTA Uyo.

Table 1: Akwa Ibom State language situation

<i>State</i>	<i>Languages available</i>	<i>Languages taught in schools</i>	<i>Languages used in the media</i>
Akwa Ibom	Ibibio, Anaang, Oro, Obolo, Iko, Ekit, Ebughu, Okobo Ibani, Ibino	Ibibio	NTA Channel 12, Uyo-Ibibio

Table 2 shows that there are 30 indigenous languages in Bayelsa State. Only one TV station operates in Bayelsa state, NTA Channel 28 (UHF) Yenegoa. Izon is the only language taught in schools while Izon, Nembe, Epie and Ogbia (a combination of four languages) are used in the media for news presentation.

Table 2: Bayelsa State language situation

<i>State</i>	<i>Languages available</i>	<i>Languages taught in schools</i>	<i>Languages used in the media</i>
Bayelsa	Izon, Nembe, Ogbia, Zarama-Engenni, Gbarain, Abueni, Ekpetiama Kolokuma Iduwini, West Tarakiri, Oiakiri, Opokuma, Kugbo, Agholo, Ayama, Oloibiri, Oruma, Isoko, Urhobo, Tungbo, Kabo, Kumbo, Mein, Bumo, East Tarakiri, East Olodiana, Basan, Biseni, Akita, Epie -Atisa	Izon	NTA Channel 28-Izon, Nembe, Epie and Ogbia

Table 3: Cross River State language situation

<i>State</i>	<i>Languages available</i>	<i>Languages taught in schools</i>	<i>Languages used in the media</i>
Cross River	Efik, Ejagham, Bekwarra, Leggbo, Bahumono, Korop, Ukwa, Ito, Derop, Afrike, Kukelle, Nne, Ubagara, Umon, Mehu, Isanginyoinyo, Iyonyong, Bokyi, Ekajuk, Eruan, Efut, Olulumo, Ikom, Mbembe, Yala, Obanliku, Bette, Alege, Utugwang, Ukpe, Ubang, Okworogung, Mgbenege, Ishibori, Mbube, Nko, Yache	Efik	NTA Calabar uses Efik, Bekwarra and Ejagham.

Table 3 indicates that Cross River State has 37 indigenous languages. Three of them are used in NTA Channel 9 Calabar – Bekwarra, Efik and Ejagham for news presentation. Only Efik is taught in schools.

Table 4 presents the language situation in Rivers State. Only three of these languages – Ikwerre, Kalabari, Khana and sometimes a fourth one – Okrika are used in NTA Channel 10 Port Harcourt for news presentation.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

From the foregoing, one cannot but see the danger Nigeria faces as a nation in terms of the possibility of the death of several indigenous languages in the country. Two schools were surveyed in Akwa Ibom State and only the Ibibio language is taught in those schools to the neglect of the other nine languages spoken in the state. Ibibio is also the only indigenous language used for news presentation in NTA Uyo. Bayelsa State has 30 languages. Only Izon is taught in schools and predominantly used in the broadcast media for news presentation. Nembe, Epie and Ogbia could sometimes be used in the media too. Cross River State has the highest number of languages (37) among the states chosen for this research. Only Efik is taught in schools and mainly used in the media for news presentation. Other indigenous

languages used for the same purpose are Bekwarra and Ejagham. Rivers State has a total of 21 languages, none is taught in schools and only three – Ikwerre, Khana and Kalabari are used in the media for news presentation.

Every society tends to have a political or social arrangement that keeps that society moving forward. Language and by extension communication is often used as a tool to achieve socio-economic and political development (Dozie and Madu 2012). When communication succeeds, power is assumed to have moved from the sender to the receiver. If someone therefore has more or better opportunities to be heard, he tends to dominate others. The languages that feature more in the media enjoy this privilege. Here lies Krippendorf's call for emancipation. The emancipation in this case comes in the form of giving these marginalized languages more opportunities in schools and in the media. Their continuous exclusion could lead to the loss of those languages.

When a language dies, nobody speaks it anymore (Crystal 2000) and a unique way of viewing the world is lost. Indigenous languages and their speakers possess a wealth of information about their existence, local plants, animal species, and other ecological and archeological knowledge within their community that can assist scientists in their research. Thus, if a lan-

Table 4: Rivers State language situation

<i>State</i>	<i>Languages available</i>	<i>Languages taught in schools</i>	<i>Languages used in the media</i>
Rivers	Ikwerre, Kalabari, Khana, Okrika, Ikpeya, Ekpeye, Ido-Obolo, Izon, Igbo, Ibani, Eleme, Ogoni, Egbema, Nkoro, Defaka, Ogba, Ndoni, Etche, Ogoi, Abua.	None	NTA Channel 10, Port Harcourt uses Ikwerre, Kalabari, Khana and sometimes Okrika.

guage is lost, that knowledge is gone. Linguists equally lose useful data that could enable them identify more, the similarities and differences in human disposition resulting from diversities in language.

The experience from the beginning of time is for languages to appear and disappear in what linguists call "linguistic equilibrium." That is, for every language that dies another is born. In the case of Nigeria, one wonders how many of such lost languages were replaced by another. Rivenburgh (2004) warns that languages are dying at such a pace that would see at least half the world's languages becoming extinct within this century.

It is distressing to note that stronger or metropolitan languages such as English, French, Spanish, German, and Arabic are expanding at the expense of the weak and indigenous ones. Diverse languages broaden our understanding of what human language can be and how we can deal with dissimilar cultural manifestations. The expansion of stronger languages at the cost of the weak ones is definitely not a good omen for the contemporary society or for the diversity that characterizes it. The loss of indigenous languages is an indication that the environment is experiencing very serious threats. These threats could portend evil for a community or an entire society. For instance, when the socio-economic factors that once supported a vibrant indigenous culture disintegrate, that community starts to disperse and along with it goes their language. The death of a language is the final stage of a long line up of symptoms of environmental stress that was either not noticed or noticed but neglected. For the community so affected, the tendency is for it to drift into annihilation.

CONCLUSION

Languages are dying at a pace that makes most minority languages likely targets. Some reasons usually offered for such deaths may appear so natural that people would hardly question the authenticity of the claim. Linguists believe languages emerge and re-emerge in the process of "linguistic equilibrium". This means for every language that dies, another is born. Logical as it may sound, the question is, how many new languages have replaced the ones we know no longer exists in Nigeria? The mass media as agents of socialization and vehicles for information dis-

semination and education for the masses can prove very useful in taking care of the issue of marginalization on the basis of language. But a situation where the English language and other bigger indigenous languages are predominantly used in the mass media at the expense of the minority languages does not permit the media to function at full capacity. This also does not augur well for national unity and integration. The Nigerian government adopted monolingual education policies that favour the use of the English language in all forms of instruction in educational institutions. People are forced to assimilate whatever is offered by the system. This further polarizes the younger generation from the mainstream indigenous processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is believed that one of the ways to minimize this downward trend including language loss is to encourage child learners. Another is the creation of language data base and language dictionaries that could assist learners grapple with the vocabularies of those languages. Different cultural groups and communities will need to be empowered to use resources in sustainable ways to interact with global partners using their own language or one generally spoken and understood by the majority of the people. In that way, bilingualism or multilingualism is encouraged and seen as a normal aspect/way of life.

At a point (1980's) in Nigeria's quest for nationhood, a language policy to use the mother tongue to instruct children in primary schools as their first language failed completely. Several reasons were attributed to that failure. Among them were that, most of the teachers were not schooled in those languages and therefore were ill-prepared for the change. Some things/ words in English had no mother tongue equivalents. It was difficult to start developing words at that point to match those things. Despite the failure of past attempts, encouraging children to learn or study in their indigenous languages is one way to ensure the continuity of those languages. The efforts of the management of the Nigerian Television Authority in indigenizing news are commendable. However, more programmes should be produced in indigenous languages. For instance, drama presentations, current affairs discussions on topical and contemporary issues should form part of the programme content.

In addition, staff in the presentation department of TV stations should undertake trainings especially refresher courses on the languages, spoken and used in that part of the country. The trainings should involve both the usage and current status of the languages since these aspects could change slightly with time. There is a need to deemphasize locating media houses in the urban areas only to enable the rural dwellers also have a feel of what the media can offer.

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