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**USING COMMUNICATION TO PROMOTE NIGERIAN POPULAR ARTS AND
CULTURE**

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Abstract

*This paper focuses on the general role of Communication as a vehicle for driving popular culture. It pays attention to how communication can be deployed to enhance Nigeria's popular culture and increase Nigerian works of art. The paper portrays communication as an important vehicle for promoting Nigerian culture. It argues that various cultures must employ disparate languages appropriately to reflect the works of Nigerian arts and to promote her cultural heritage. To drive this point home, the paper does a content analysis of selected writings of a popular Nigerian author, Amos Tutuola, whose novel, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), is written in Nigerian English. The paper finds a nexus between language and culture. It draws from the Social Responsibility Theory of the Press, which sees the media as agents of nation-building. The paper further argues that the communication vehicle of every culture, such as Nigerian English, is distinctive and not a poor or substandard variant of any other. It posits that users of Nigerian English should feel free to use it the way they want, as long as it approximates their message. The paper recommends that policymakers in Nigeria should put in place frameworks to sustain Nigerian English as a distinctive vehicle of communication devoid of the encumbrances of any other foreign language.*

Keywords: Language, Communication, Popular Culture, Nigerian English.

Introduction

There are many definitions of language and communication, as there are authors on the subject. There is no consensus on what constitutes an exact definition of language and communication and to date,

no definition has proved adequate and acceptable to different authors and writers. The concepts of language and communication are as complex as the attempts to define them. Since the biblical accounts of the multiplicity of language in human communication, as recorded in the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11, pp.1-9), all attempts by authors and scholars to agree on the definition of language and communication have proved inadequate. So, what is language? Foremost linguist Chomsky (2000) defines language as the inherent capability of native speakers to understand and form grammatical sentences. Chomsky goes on to add that a language is a set of (finite or infinite) sentences, each of finite length, constructed out of a limited set of elements. But the problem with this definition is that it restricts language to sentences without considering signs, gestures, and symbols as part of language. Lyons (1981), defines language as “the principal communication systems used by particular groups of human beings within the specific society of which they are members.” This definition may sound good, but it falls short in scope by limiting languages to specific groups, whereas it is possible for people in different socio-linguistic groups to communicate with one another in one form or another. Bloomfield (1914) defines language as “utterances produced by people in a community.” Bloomfield’s definition did not take into account written languages but specifically dwells on “utterances,” as in speech communication only.

English language was introduced into Nigeria by the early colonial merchants and missionaries in the course of plying their trades along the coastal shores of Badagry (Lagos) and Calabar (Cross River). According to Egbe (2019, p.21), “it was in 1841 (sic) [many accounts say 1481], that the first British (English speakers) explorers entered Nigeria through the southern coastal areas.” This set of missionaries and merchants was led by the early Portuguese explorers who, on the one hand, came with the Bible ostensibly to save lost souls but, on the other hand, with a gun to capture slaves and ship them to Europe. Ojelabi (1970, pp.174-190) and Fage (1969, pp.51-62) agree with this account. However, the ascendancy of English as an official language in Nigeria was through the “Education Ordinances of 1918 and 1926, which recognized English language as the official language” (Egbe, p.22). The use of the English language in Nigeria finds its roots in the three sub-themes of the slave trade, the drive for territorial conquest and missionary evangelism. Before the advent of colonialism and the slave trade in Nigeria, citizens of the area known today as Nigeria had their distinctive indigenous languages. Although they still have their disparate local dialects and languages, currently, the official language in Nigeria is English. The inference here is that the use of English as a language of communication in Nigeria was a result of Nigeria’s trade contact with the British, which, according to Dike (1956, pp.1-20), occurred between 1481 and 1830. This contact between the two incongruent cultures signaled a distortion in the existing history and culture of the natives (Emenyonu and Oguzie, 1985).

Out of the English language, many variations have arisen, including what is known today as *patua* or coastal English, or more generally accepted as Nigerian English, an attempt to domesticate the English language to suit local users. Because of the culture of the people and the need to complement local needs, Nigerian English has become widely spoken among the populace. The use of the English language in Nigeria at the time of the British conquest was not widely spread. However, as more Nigerians were converted to the new religion, more were trained as domestic servants such as cooks, interpreters, catechists, drivers and so on to the colonial masters; they began to speak passable English language and the use of the language gained more ground in Nigeria, hence what is today known as Nigerian English.

Methodology

This paper adopts the data generation technique of content analysis of secondary data generated from textbooks, previous research, and online news reports. The study is historical, while the analysis is purely descriptive in nature. Since language is pervasive, it has a great impact on those who speak and understand it. It becomes more cogent to apply it as a vehicle to maintain secure relationships among members of a society. Like society, language is dynamic. The dynamic nature of both

language and society has been hastened by the advent of technology, which has introduced new communication tools as vehicles for social interaction. Arising from the dynamism introduced by contemporary media tools is the urge to use the new languages of social media to communicate with citizens. This means that, in the process, using Nigerian English to communicate with citizens has also become imperative, with potential for national security breaches. The objective of this study is to examine how the usage of Nigerian English by selected writers in textbooks, previous research, and online news reports could impact Nigeria's security and nation-building. The study examines a few online news reports written purely in Nigerian English and how the language usage could impact national security if not well used, or if used well, could enhance law and orderliness in society.

Language and communication are important concepts as agents for the promotion of national security. This is well encapsulated in the social responsibility theory of the mass media, as propounded by Fredrick Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm in 1956. This theory is anchored in using the mass media in a responsible way to serve society. With the social responsibility theory, Siebert et al. (1956, p.101), opine that the media is so powerful and so important to the survival of every society that the media must see itself as a partner with government and society to build an enduring nation and promote as well as safeguard national interests rather than endanger them. The social responsibility theory also argues that while the media should be allowed some freedom to carry out its responsibilities to society by seeking out and publishing unfettered truth, there is also a need to ensure that such freedom goes with measured responsibility in the interest of society. Okoye (2007, p.39), posits that "what gave the greatest boost to the social responsibility theory of the press was the Hutchins Commission in the United States of America at the end of World War 2." The thrust of the mandate of the Hutchins Commission was to seek a modern restatement underscoring the value of a free press with social responsibility in America.

Conceptual Clarifications

Nigerian English

A lot has been said about the place of Nigerian English in the works of art, particularly in literary works. From the time of *patua* (a language believed to have been developed by former slaves within the West African colonies), or coastal languages developed in Nigeria as a variant of the English language to the present day, there have been varied arguments for and against the place of Nigerian English as a means of communication as well as in promoting her culture and national security. As we noted earlier in this paper, what is known today as Nigerian English is a derivative of the English language which the early Europeans brought into the country through trading activities. Nigerian English began to gain acceptance in literary works when a few Nigerian writers began to express themselves in it. After the less valued literary works of the Onitsha market literature genre, which was mainly for entertainment and leisure. Amos Tutuola was the first major fictional writer in what is known today as Nigerian English. His novel, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), is principally a transliteration from Yoruba folklore. Palmer (1982, p.5) suggests that Tutuola "may have been influenced by the works of [D.O] Fagunwa who wrote his tales in Yoruba."

Since Tutuola's debut, there has been an avalanche of criticisms of what is either called Nigerian or West African English. Most of the criticisms deal with whether novels and other official works done in Nigerian English should be acceptable as *correct* or not correct in the pantheon of official and literary works. There is also the argument whether such works should be subjected to the same yardstick for literary criticism as those in the *Standard* English language. It needs to be emphasized that what we have today as Nigerian English is not a corruption of the English language. Even if it developed from what is otherwise called *Standard* English language, Nigerian English is dissimilar and deserves to be accorded recognition as a vehicle for communication. We shall dwell more on this theme subsequently.

Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike (1980, p. 242), posit that “the use of [western languages] is a part of the problem of contemporary African culture. Ideally, African literature should be written in African languages. But the same historical circumstances that presently compel African nations to use Western languages as their official languages also compel African writers to write in them.” This may no longer be the case because we have seen remarkable paradigm shifts in the use of indigenous languages to express African arts. One African writer who has led in this paradigm shift over the years is Kenyan-born Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, who has written some novels in his native Gikuyu language. Ngugi’s notable works in his Gikuyu language include *Caitani Muthara-ba-ini (Devil on the Cross, 1982)*, *Murogi wa Kagoro (Wizard of the Crow, 2004)*, *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want, 1987)*, among others. Chinweizu et al. (1980), also make the same mistake as many of their peers by thinking that there is one standard English language in which every writer must observe the grammatical nuances - lexis, structure and tenses - for pieces of literary works to be qualified as good works of art. Their next position exposes their apparent sympathy for those Afro-centrist writers who think that only works in the English language are acceptable ground norms. “A more immediate issue is how to write well in those [western] languages. And we have agreed all along that to write well in English today, it is necessary to write clearly, using contemporary 20th-century diction and idiom, so that anyone literate in the language can make literal sense out of every sentence or line that is written. It is so little to ask.” (Chinweizu et al., 1980, pp. 242-243). But as we shall see later in this study, the trio of Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike contradict this proposition as they later recommend that writers can write in any variant of the English language for as long as they pass their messages across to their audience.

There is a stronger argument, however, that for achieving national security and cohesiveness, one must not obey the diction associated with the English language to pass on the messages to his or her audience, particularly when the audience is dissimilar in environment and culture. This reality is what is missing in most of the Afro-centric criticisms of works written in Nigerian languages. Again, let us look at *The Palm-Wine Drinkard (1952)*, by Tutuola, whose language was distinctly Nigerian and uniquely Yoruba in nature. The title of the book, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (instead of *Drunkard*) is unique and a personal invention by the author to emphasize the excessive drinking nature of the anonymous main character in the novel. There are many other examples from the book. A few examples will suffice for this study:

1. They saw me lied down (p. 11): *They saw me lying down*
2. We saw a male child came out (p.31): *We saw a male come out.*
3. But I lay down there awake (p. 14): *But I lay down there awake.*
4. The next thing that which she was doing (p.7): *The next thing that she was doing*
5. To safe your life (p.12): *To save your life*
6. He wore several oversized garments for her (p.22): *He dressed her up in several oversized garments.*
7. But when I rose up my head and looked at the top of them. (p.52): *But when I raised my head and looked over them.*

Since Tutuola’s language did not conform to *Standard* English, many Afro-centric critics were at a loss as to how to classify his novel. One of such critics, Palmer, could not hide his frustrations of Tutuola’s non-conformity to the English language that he declares, “Tutuola’s English is demonstrably poor; this is due partly to his ignorance of the more complicated rules of English syntax and partly to interference from Yoruba” (1979, p.25). By his own admission, Palmer accepts unconsciously that the English language has *more complicated rules*, leading one to wonder if communication should be such a complex affair. One would have thought that rather than dwell on Tutuola’s perceived grammatical inadequacies, Palmer’s preoccupation as a literary critic should be whether the author can communicate to his primary audience (Nigeria) and whether he captures the essence of his immediate milieu even in Tutuola’s deployment of Nigerian English in his book, *The*

Palm-Wine Drinkard; after all, Idris (2017, p. 298), asserts that “our culture is embedded in our language.”

In his thought-provoking inaugural lecture titled *Of New Englishes and New Literacies*, Egbe (2019), argues along this line when he opines that there are many variants of the English language including Nigerian English which he baptized as “Niglish” (Egbe, 2019, p.27). According to him, “it is to advocates of Nigerian English that I find fellowship and linguistic repose so that Nigerian English is seen as a variety within the global context of World Englishes.” (pp.26-27). Egbe submits that what we speak in Nigeria is not inferior to what anyone speaks in any part of the world and so our standard cannot be drawn from British English, American English, or any other English in the world, as Palmer appears to have done in his outright condemnation of Amos Tutuola’s use of the Nigerian language in the *Palm-Wine Drinkard*. Egbe believes that no language is inferior to any language and every language is sufficient for those who use it for whatever they want to use it for. Egbe’s assertion resonates with the self-contradicting views of Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike on the same expressed embarrassment and hostility at Tutuola’s “bad English” or at the non-conforming linguistic style of writing by any other African writer:

We would like to point out that the King’s English or the English of schoolmen, is not the only kind of English. Writing in English different from standard English should not be construed as “letting Africa down.” Africans have no business speaking the King’s English indistinguishably from an English don, and they have no business trying to prove to Europeans that Africans can speak or write European languages indistinguishably from Europeans. Therefore, no sense of embarrassment is warranted when an African deviates from standard English by speaking or writing an African variant of it. (Chinweizu et al., 1980, p. 264).

This is no doubt a glaring contradiction from the earlier stand of Chinweizu and his fellow critics, which we noted above. (See Chinweizu et al., 1980, pp.242-243).

Nigerian Popular Culture

But unlike language, popular culture is easier to define since it is inherent in its name – a culture that is popular and enjoys wide acceptance among the people. This encompasses the people’s music, art, literature, fashion, dance, film, and drama; food that is popular within a culture; and mass media tools such as television and radio that are generally accepted and that people in a society are enthusiastic about and that have mass appeal. Furthermore, popular culture as a term tries to distinguish a culture with mass appeal as against culture marred by officialdom. Storey (2019) offers six different definitions of what he considers elaborate definitions of popular culture, namely:

1. Popular culture is simply culture that is widely favored or well-liked by many people: it has no negative connotations.
2. Popular culture is whatever is left after you've identified what "high culture" is: in this definition, pop culture is considered inferior, and it functions as a marker of status and class.
3. Pop culture can be defined as commercial objects that are produced for mass consumption by non-discriminating consumers. In this definition, popular culture is a tool used by the elites to suppress or take advantage of the masses.
4. Popular culture is folk culture, something that arises from the people rather than imposed upon them: pop culture is authentic (created by the people) as opposed to commercial (thrust upon them by commercial enterprises).
5. Pop culture is negotiated: partly imposed on by the dominant classes, and partly resisted or changed by the subordinate classes. Dominants can create culture, but the subordinates decide what they keep or discard.

6. The last definition of pop culture discussed by Storey is that in the postmodern world, in today's world, the distinction between "authentic" versus "commercial" is blurred. In pop culture today, users are free to embrace some manufactured content, alter it for their own use, or reject it entirely and create their own.

These six definitions by Storey may not be exhaustive but they are enough to provide a workable framework for characterization for the purpose of this study. Before the advent of social media, popular culture in media studies was restricted to newspapers, television and radio. However, the evolution of social media has changed the face of popular culture in media studies, with new media tools appearing to assume a more popular stance than what is now known as traditional media – print and broadcast.

Social Media Discourses

Although social media as a communication phenomenon is relatively new when compared to traditional communication platforms, it has also engendered its peculiar language character, which has made communication a bit more complex, particularly because users of social media for communication care less about ethics and proper usage of language in their writings. We shall provide examples in the course of this study.

Social Media is the use of new technology or web-based mobile technologies for interactive communications. Social Media is also known as new or internet media. For this research, we shall stick with the term, social media in discussing the revolutionary phenomenon of the new communication technology which has offered alternative voices to people all over the world to make their opinions count. Nigerians are not left out of this new occurrence. With rapidly converging technology, Social Media have become part of everyday life. The phenomenon of Social Media has brought a number of issues in media studies and media practice, including whether Social Media as an alternative platform is a good or bad omen for citizen-driven media participation in governance. While this is not the focus of this paper, the paper nevertheless focuses on the use of social media as alternative voices by Nigerian citizens and whether the language of social media helps in enhancing security in Nigeria or whether it is a negative influence on the security of the nation. Contents on social media platforms tends to have wide range influences on their consumers. In recent years, the use of language on social media platforms as an instrument of incitement has led to crises in some countries. The 2010 and 2011 Arab Spring in parts of the Arab world and North Africa, as well as the January 2012 #OccupyNigeria in parts of Nigeria are clear reminders of the enormous power of language and that writers and speakers should be careful in their choice of language on social media if national security must be preserved.

Obviously, social media came with some inherent implications, including encouraging public dissent and security breaches in society. This is because social media have transcended the basic principles of mainstream media practice in society. Where the basic theories of mass communication practice provide the scope, content and context of media practice, social media often go beyond these established media theories. As opined by Williams (2003, p.112), the traditional functions of the media include news gathering, news dissemination, news interpretation and their watchdog role. According to him, the traditional functions of the media are simply put under three broad roles: “to collect and publish the news, to interpret and comment on it, to act as a guard dog of the public interest in areas of public concern where executive power may be arbitrarily used.” This often leads to conflict between the executive arms of government and the media. Expanding on the submission of Williams above, another scholar, Lasswell (1949, p.103), similarly groups the functions of the media into three, namely – surveillance, interpretation and socialization of individuals into their cultural settings. In other words, while Lasswell upholds the role of the media to inform and educate, he recognizes their *surveillance* and social responsibility functions within the society in which the media operate. Usually, it is the addition of *surveillance* to the role of the media that often sets them in collusion against the government.

Social Media and Nigerian English

While it is encouraged that Africans, nay, Nigerians, continue to write in what is called *Standard English*, it will be a disservice to Nigerian popular culture and discourses for critics of literary works to continue to disparage the importance of writing in any language, including Nigerian English, that helps the writer to fully express his or her thoughts well. It is in this context that bizarre expressions such as “I watched as bandits burnt my mother, 4 children to ashes,” [https://newsexpressngr.com/news/139895/ dated Saturday, December 11, 2021], can make sense to a Nigerian; otherwise it will be hard to establish ordinarily that corpses can burn to *ashes*. Elsewhere, other expressions such as *night vigil* (vigil), *Christian wake keeping* (Christian wake), *short knickers*, *bending corners*, *repeat*, *swallow* (to describe some categories of food such as pounded yam), and so on are examples of *Nigerian Englishes* as espoused by Egbe (2019), which may appear substandard to the English native speaker but which nonetheless convey the appropriate meanings to a Nigerian speaker of Nigerian English. Therefore, there is nothing linguistically wrong with such Nigerian English expressions. Achebe (1965, p. 30) puts it succinctly when he says that, “The English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be *a new English* (italics, mine), still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings.” However, this paper thinks that even as we drive for a Nigerian English to suit our surroundings, care must be taken not to employ incendiary and emotive hate language that can impinge on national security, a trend that is being encouraged by social media journalism practice in Nigeria as seen in some news reports from selected blogs. We shall content analyze this shortly.

Nigerian English and Social Media as Alternative Voices

As stated in the foregoing sections, the evolution of social media as unregulated media platforms has provided channels for alternative voices by Nigerians to air their views uninhibited. This is more so since the traditional media platforms have proven inadequate for them to voice out their frustrations and contribute to nation-building. This is because the traditional media have been under the overbearing influence and control of government and private ownership. The sudden realization of the enormity of the power of social media in their hands emboldened Nigerians. It became clearer that what Nigerians could not achieve through the over-regulated radio and television stations was achievable through unregulated social media platforms. For example, the 2012 Petrol anti-subsidy removal protests known as #OccupyNigeria, in parts of Nigeria, were the height of this sudden realization by Nigerians that they now have alternative platforms to air their views without political or intelligence inhibition from government and its security agencies. Although the January 2012 petrol anti-subsidy removal protests signaled the rise of social media activism in Nigeria, there were earlier attempts at social media citizen activism in Nigeria before then. Between 2000 and 2010, there were sporadic attempts at social media journalism activism, which was spearheaded by online bloggers such as Sahara Reporters, Gamji.com, Elombah.com, and so on. Since then, social media journalism practice and activism have provided alternative voices to Nigerians. From current trends in media practice, it would appear that the evolution of social media enhanced citizen media activism in Nigeria because of its acceptance, particularly among the younger generations who have access to multiple social media channels such as Facebook, Instagram, email, LinkedIn, blogs, WhatsApp, among others.

What is more worrying is the deliberate use of inciting language by some social media journalists to create panic, generate bad blood, and weaken nationalistic affinity among Nigerians. Let us examine a few more online news reports. “DSS: We saw bodies roasted for eating, decapitated human heads in kidnappers' camps.” This news report quoted the Imo State Director of the Department of State Security Services (DSS), Mr. Wilcox Idaminabo, briefing journalists in Owerri on the outcome of the raid his team carried out in parts of Anambra and Imo states. Ordinarily, the language of this news report is too graphic, going by traditional journalism practice. For example, how the security operatives concluded that the bodies roasted were for *eating* remains unclear. As if this report was

not bad enough to assail the readers' senses, some of the comments that followed the news report were outright hideous and aimed at disparaging an entire ethnic group. One comment said, "*Igbos are cannibals from time immemorial; from the time of civil war till now 21st century, they cannot change...*" The language used in this sensitive report is to say the least, arbitrary, capricious, infantile, uncouth, and provocative and has the potential to cause mayhem in an already volatile country such as Nigeria. This type of news report does not demonstrate journalism practice as an alternative voice with social responsibility.

Similarly, on Saturday, 11th December, 2021, an online blogger, <https://www.newsexpressngr.com/news/139939/>, had the following news headline, "Breaking: Explosion rocks Abuja." The main story is regrettably far from the headline. "*At least five people, including three children, have been seriously injured when a gas cylinder exploded and burst into flames in the Gwagwalada Area Council of the Federal Capital Territory, (FCT) Abuja. The explosion took place at the uncompleted building area of Dagiri, not far from the Lokoja/Abuja road in Gwagwalada.*" How a domestic accident like a gas cylinder exploding in an uncompleted building in a localized environment would translate into an explosion rocks Abuja captures only the careless imagination of the blogger. Needless to say that the blog indulged in over-sensationalism, obviously to attract reading traffic to its website but failed to take into account the social responsibility of the media which includes the sustainability of the country's peace, even as social media provide alternative voices to citizens. This headline, standing alone, has the potential to cause panic among unsuspecting Nigerians. Social media should provide alternative voices. It should also in doing so be a platform for national security.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Language is an indispensable part of human life. The use of languages can make or mar a society. This study traced the origin and significance of what is today called Nigerian English as neither a variant of the *Standard* English nor an inferior language but as a distinct language capable of standing on its own. The paper supports the view that Nigerian English is distinct and influenced by Nigerian culture and environment and not by British or American *Englishes*. As a result, speakers and writers of Nigerian English should feel no inhibitions in using the language the way they deem fit without measuring it against European or American English varieties. What is paramount is that the language is used to convey meanings to the audience appropriately. Therefore, a writer or speaker of Nigerian English should not feel uncomfortable that he or she freely uses such peculiar Nigerian English expressions as *short knickers* or *bending corner* and the like, as long as those in the Nigerian cultural milieu understand and appreciate such expressions. The writings of Tutuola in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* should be seen in this light. In encouraging this, policy makers in Nigeria, particularly those in the areas of developing languages should seek ways to formulate policies that will encourage the learning, writing, speaking and development of Nigerian English as a way towards fully decolonizing the Nigerian mind. It is also encouraged that those who use the language for public consumption should be careful to use it in promoting Nigerian popular culture and ensuring a cohesive society rather than using the language to breach national security.

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