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English as Language of Exclusion in Information Dissemination amidst COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria: Implication for Rural Development

Okechukwu Onyenweaku*

Department of Languages, Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic, Unwana, Ebonyi State, Nigeria

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Abstract: An honest appraisal of the linguistic situation in Nigeria would inevitably acknowledge the fundamental position of the English language and its ascendancy in the country. The contemporary innovation in ICT has further projected the importance of English as not only a hyper-central language that has emerged as a global hub of world language system but also a universal language of science, literacy and public communication. This perhaps accounts for why the majority of relevant information on COVID-19 pandemic were packaged and disseminated in the language, even in Nigeria where a large number of the populace are neither literate in English nor ICT compliant. This paper examines English as language of exclusion in information dissemination amidst COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, with a view to ascertaining its implication for rural development. The study is analytical and utilizes secondary sources. Findings revealed that the majority of Nigerians who were part of the target beneficiaries of the federal government social intervention programmes aimed at cushioning the effects of the pandemic were excluded from benefiting from the programmes due to their inability to access and utilize information packaged and disseminated in the English language, with its far-reaching consequences on rural development. The paper, therefore, recommends among others, that the federal government should endeavour to disseminate vital information in the major local languages in the country via Radio Nigeria; there is also the need to strengthen adult education programmes across the nation so that many adult Nigerians will become literate in English, while information repackaging in respect to language of information dissemination should not be jettisoned by information practitioners.

Keywords: English language, Information dissemination, Exclusion, ICT, COVID-19.

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INTRODUCTION

It is, indubitably, beyond contention that until the question of a national language in Nigeria is settled, the English language would continue to enjoy unchallenged ascendancy over all the indigenous languages in the country. Apart from being the official language of Nigeria, the indispensability of English is further predicated on the fact that it is the only unifying language in the country in the absence of an indigenous lingua franca. English, however, cannot be construed as a lingua franca in Nigeria (a shared language of communication between or among people whose main languages are different). This contention is validated by the fact that a large number of Nigerians are still not literate in the English language. People in this category include the stark illiterates and some semi-literate fellows who mainly reside in various rural communities.

Although no painstaking census of English speakers has been conducted in Nigeria, some language scholars, over the years, have engaged in linguistic researches in this respect. Findings have often revealed that many Nigerians are still unable to use the language in spite of the crucial role it places in the affairs of the nation and its people. For instance, Onuekwusi (2016) found out that 75% of all Nigerians use English in formal and pidgin categories, while about 25% cannot

speak or write it at all, a language that is used for official, business and educational purposes. Corroborating this finding, Jowitt cited in Anyachonkeya (2015) found out that 86% of Nigerians would speak English by 2015, according to the report of the British Council on English Language usage in Nigeria. The consequence of this state of affair is that whenever information is disseminated in English, those Nigerians who have no knowledge of the language would be inevitably excluded. To this end, English can be considered a language of exclusion in Nigeria.

The concept of exclusion can be conceived as “a deliberate denial of participation of persons well placed to be a party to an operation” (Chinyeaka, 2018 citing Oyelaran, 23). Similarly, Hornby (501) defines exclusion as “the act of preventing someone or something from taking part in something.” However, exclusion, in the context of this study, is conceptualized as a conscious or inadvertent denial of a person or group of persons the opportunity to participate and benefit from social, economic, educational or political activities of a community or nation as a result of their inability to understand and use the language of wider communication in their society. Unfortunately, this was the prevailing situation in Nigeria during the active period of the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

As a result of the restriction measures imposed by the federal government to curtail and contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, Nigerians solely relied on information disseminated via radio, television, internet and the social media to keep themselves abreast of major happenings in Nigeria and around the globe. Also, in order to cushion the effects of the pandemic on Nigerians, especially the daily income earners, the rural poor and the vulnerable, the federal government utilized these information packaging and dissemination sources to inform the masses of some social intervention programmes it initiated to this effect. Unfortunately, these pieces of information were packaged and disseminated in the English language and via national radio, television, internet and the social media, without taking cognizance of some of the target audience/beneficiaries who are neither literate in English nor ICT compliant. It is against this background that the present study examines English as language of exclusion amidst COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, with a view to ascertaining its implication for rural development.

English Language, Communication and Competence in the Nigerian Sociolinguistic Milieu

There is no gainsaying the fact that the English Language has become an integral part of life and existence in Nigeria notwithstanding the fact that it operates as a second language in the country. The enviable position of the language in the affairs of Nigerian people transcends being just a medium of interpersonal communication. This is attested to by its ascendancy over all the indigenous languages in the country. Right from the period of its introduction in Nigeria in 1842 by the first batch of the European Missionaries who arrived Badagari, Lagos, for the purpose of evangelism (Azikiwe, 1998), the English language has continued to occupy the position of *primus enter pares* in the Nigerian sociolinguistic space.

Historically, the English language is an “accidental” language in Nigeria. It is a language of historical luck, in that unsolicited circumstances orchestrated its arrival, initiation, acceptance, spread and entrenchment in the country. Initially, the medium of interpersonal communication between the Europeans and the natives was Pidgin English, necessitated by the need to have a mutually understood language for the purpose of commerce and political administration. Given the unwillingness of the Englishmen to learn the language of the natives, English had to be forced on the natives. Consequently, they were taught the English language to enable them carry out some menial responsibilities as clerks, messengers, interpreters, stewards, etc. under the colonial administration. When it became obvious that there was increasing need for more natives that were literate in English to serve in the administration, the missionary stations were directed to commence the teaching of English in their schools in the 1880s (Umera-Okeke, 2009). Consequent upon this,

English became a language of education, trade and political administration. However, it became widely accepted as a unified language of communication after the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914 to form a nation known as Nigeria.

It is expedient to state that the earliest introduction of English in Nigeria was not based on “standard” English, but on the emergence of a fairly communicative English with all its syntactic, morphological and phonetic flaws and dialectal variations. According to Ogu (1992), Lord Lugard was more interested in having effective administration than having Standard English taught in the colonies, and thus, he suggested the use of an adulterated English as a way out of the predicaments of criminal interpreters. This adulterated English, however, became elitist and a status symbol subsequently. The acquisition of the fairly communicative English under the tutorship of the Whitemen became an enormous advantage to Nigerian who took advantage of that opportunity, and they became forces to reckon with in their respective communities. This marked the starting point of the status symbol marker that the English language is today in Nigeria.

Eversince the attainment of independence in 1960, the English language has continued to play the functions of accommodation, participation and social mobility (Adegbite & Akindele, 2005), elevating those who could use it competently to an enviable status in all facets of national life and experience. Today, the English language is the unifying language in Nigeria in the absence of an indigenous lingua franca. It is equally the medium of academic instruction, enabling easy transmission of knowledge in the multilingual Nigeria. Furthermore, English makes inter-ethnic trade possible and also features quite prominently as the language of religion, judiciary, political administration, entertainment, journalism and so on.

In spite of the indispensable roles English plays in the personal and nation life of Nigerians, it is regrettable that a good number of people in the country are currently not yet literate in the language, and so many others use it quite incompetently. The implication is that those who are unable to use the language will never participate in the national affairs of the country; those who perform poorly in the language produce discourses that lack global intelligibility and communicability. Competence in language use is a rigorously acquired skill, especially when the language is not indigenous to the speaker. However, for the native speaker, acquisition and use are almost effortless because of the possession of an innate capacity to use one’s language in one’s sociolinguistic environment.

In Nigeria, competence in the use of English is abysmally low even among some educated people. It

could be attributed to the fact that English is used in a second language status --- where it competes with so many indigenous languages, especially in oral discourse. Consequently, the user is faced with the challenge of effective mastery and use of the language. Explicating the nature and source of the daunting challenges of users of English in Nigeria, Ihejirika (n.d.) states that:

The English language learner in Nigerian context is faced with the inevitable dilemma as a result of the fact that he has to contend with different languages and varieties at different settings. At home, for instance, he basically interacts in his mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment. At school, especially from senior primary, the learner is bound to contend with the almighty English, which, from all indications, is the language of education. At religious worship, the language the learner is confronted with differs depending on his/her religious doctrine. If he/she is a Muslim, it is obvious that the language he/she hears is Arabic. For a Christian, it is either the language of the immediate environments or the English language or both, depending on the location of the church, rural or urban... The learner is bound to be handicapped in his/her bid to attain proficiency in the use of English.

Indeed, the foregoing situations in the linguistic environment of the Nigerian user of English are significantly responsible for his/her abysmal performance in the language both in oral and written forms. They largely affect his/her performance in the language quite negatively. The consequence is that the user produces oral and written discourses in the language which contain errors that affect mutual intelligibility and comprehension in interpersonal communication encounter. In consonance with this contention, Onuekwusi (2016) asserts that users of English in Nigeria, through the process of language acquisition, pick up structures, dictions, syntactic and semantic competence of a widely spoken international language, they do not reach national and international intelligibility, especially in writing. He further states that the label of our warped learning of the English language is everywhere for us to see, observing that there is hardly any brochure, invitation card or poster in our environment that is totally error-free.

Indisputably, the above observation explicates the degree of incompetence being demonstrated in the use of English in Nigeria. This ought to be a source of concern to all stakeholders, especially in the education sector considering the enormous role English plays in the affairs of Nigeria in particular and in the global scene in general. Addressing this ugly trend would ensure that users of English in Nigeria improve in their competency level in the language, while those who are

not literate in the language would have the opportunity to learn the language. This would ultimately forestall the exclusion of such category of Nigerians from participating in national and global affairs as a result of language barriers.

The English Language and Information and Communication Technology in the Digital Age

The consensus view among informed members of the modern society is that the contemporary civilization is an information and digital age characterized by unprecedented knowledge explosion that manifest in multidimensional and amazing ways. This position has been given more impetus by the current innovation in information and communication technology which has revolutionized most human activities, especially in respect to the capacity to store, transmit, access and utilize information. This innovation has apparently projected further the intricate relationship between the English language, science, communication and technology. Over the decades, the world of science and technology, particularly in the areas of information storage, retrieval and dissemination, has advertently or inadvertently adopted the English language as almost an exclusive language to communicate its innovations the world over.

It is perhaps imperative to state that some circumstances prominently account for the deliberate or unconscious elevation of English to the enviable status of language of universal scientific information communication and dissemination. Understanding the reason behind this enthronement entails an investigation of the current status or position of the English language in the global society that is deeply permeated by scientific and technological innovation in ICT. To this end, it is crucial to recall that English is used worldwide and operates in various status, occupying various positions linguistically in various countries of the world either as a mother tongue, a second or foreign language respectively.

English is a mother tongue in those countries where it is used as a first language of the native inhabitants of the countries; it is a second language in those countries where the users were once colonized by the native speakers of English, whereas it is a foreign language in countries where it is spoken as a third language or just as any other language without any special or official importance attached to its usage. In respect to the global status of English, Emezue (2020) states that English is spoken by over 375 million people as a mother tongue in Great Britain, Ireland and the United States of America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand; by over 357 million as a second language, that is as an additional language to the mother tongue, occupying a special position as the official language in countries like Nigeria, South Africa, India etc. Furthermore, English is used as a foreign language by over 370 million people spread across China, Czech

Republic, etc. Indeed, the power and influence of English as a world language is evident in its status as the language for over half of the world's scientific and technological literature and the universal language of literacy and public communication (Emezue, 4).

English is the international language of science as large proportion of scientific networks function in English. This explains the indispensable roles of the English language in information and communication technology in the digital age. Amiri & Branch (2012) notes that that in addition to globalization, the interest in scientific resources available in English, global trade and universal interest in literature [that is largely available in English] are responsible for the worldwide appeal in the learning of the English language. This undeniable status of English underscores the need why everyone who wishes to be part of the digital age must endeavour to be literate in it for easy understanding and utilization of the digital contents and information disseminated in the language. After all, information literacy, according to Ojedokun, presupposes that an individual knows how to find, evaluate, use and subsequently communicate information effectively and efficiently to solve problems and make decisions. Thus, information literacy largely involves a firm knowledge of the digital language.

Information and communication technology involves the application of computers and other technological devices to acquire, store, retrieve and disseminate information for the improvement of the modern man and his environment. It is the term generally employed when describing the use of computers, satellite and other wireless technologies such as radio, television, mobile phones etc. The concept is encompassing as it is often used to refer to the use of mainly internet technologies and computer applications to store, retrieve, exchange, transmit and receive data or information. A click on the internet with the use of a digital device launches the user to a "storehouse" of limitless information for one information need or the other. This linkage or connectivity that works in an amazing speed irrespective of location accounts for why the present society is aptly described as a global village.

A substantial amount of information packaged for consumption by users all over the world can be found in the social media platforms. Information disseminators and seekers have found these platforms quite relevant to meet their varying business, educational, entertainment and emotional needs. These platforms include Facebook, Tweeter, WhatsApp, Instagram, etc., and millions of people utilize these digital spaces daily for one information need or the other. They are sophisticated communication channels that have become relevant in the present age. These online communication channels use special techniques involving participation, conversion, sharing,

collaboration and linkage (Mohammed & Suleiman, 2010, citing Dominick, 25). Obviously, participation and exchange of information between individuals or groups are the major activities currently undertaken via the social media. The implication is that anyone who is deficient in the universal language of literacy and public communication – the English language -- will definitely have no place in the digital age. Such individuals cannot be said to be truly information literate in the contemporary time.

English as Language of Exclusion in Nigeria amidst COVID-19 Pandemic

Language and linguistic items can be exploited as a potent means of excluding an individual or interlocutor from participating in a communicative event in the speech community. In other words, the inability to decode or encode a particular language and its linguistic expressions can exclude one from participating in the linguistic activities of his environment and sharing in the accompanying benefits of such a participation. On the other hand, the use of certain linguistic items and expressions in a language which are not interpretable by a hearer can equally exclude such a hearer from participating in the communicative event. For instance, the use of deictic expressions (deixis) can exclude a language user from participating in a conversation.

Deixis refers to pointing via language, and some linguistic items used to achieve this such as the personal pronouns (you, me, etc.) are referred to as deictic expressions. Yule (2003) explains that deixis are certain words in a language that cannot be interpreted at all unless the physical context, especially context of the speaker, is known (e.g. here, this, that, there, etc.). There must be a full realization of the meaning of deictic expressions in relation to a particular context during communication for one to arrive at the exact meaning of what is communicated. According to Ofordi (2017), deixis or indexicals play traditional roles of referring or pointing via language, but they can also be used by speakers for other purposes such as excluding other people from communication. In other words, by employing certain linguistic items and expressions containing indexicals, some people are intentionally excluded from participating in a communicative event.

The above aspect of exclusion is as it concerns a language one knows and uses. However, exclusion in the context of the present study is examining how a segment of a society (or a category of people) can be excluded (denied participation) from the activities of the community or nation as a result of their inability to understand and communicate in the major language of the community or nation. Generally, the term exclusion can be conceptualized as "a conscious denial of participation to persons well placed to be party to an operation." (Oyelaran, 23 quoted in Chinyeaka, 15). In this study, exclusion implies a deliberate or inadvertent

denial of a category of persons the opportunity to participate fully and benefit from the social, economic, educational and political activities of their nation or community due to their inability to use the language of wider communication in the country or community.

In Nigeria, English is the only unifying language used in communicating national issues in the absence of an indigenous lingua franca. Consequently, any Nigerian citizen who is unable to understand the language and communicate in it is automatically excluded from participating in major activities in the country and benefiting from such an undertaking. This is so because one's illiteracy in the English language cuts one off from significant national issues and makes one incapable of participating in national activities/affairs. It is even more worrisome in contemporary time where most government policies, programmes and activities are communicated online (especially via the internet and the social media), and are exclusively presented in the English language on those platforms.

It is unfortunate that in spite of the crucial role English plays in the national affairs of Nigeria, many Nigerians are still incapable of using the language as a means of communication and information dissemination. Notable language scholars have observed this deficiency in respect to the number of Nigerian populace who are unable to utilize the resources of the English language to enhance their status, wellbeing and opportunity for self-advancement, relevance and growth. Onuekwusi (2016) observes that about 75% of Nigerians use the English language in formal and pidgin categories while about 25% of the population cannot write or speak the language. This linguistic situation, according to him, impairs communication and results in the problem of misunderstanding of policies in government, business and commerce. This also gives rise to the issue of exclusion occasioned by language barrier and its associated loss of opportunities.

Regrettably, this large number of Nigerian citizens are usually unaware of current issues in various sectors of the nation's economy. This is further attributed to illiteracy, place of residence (as many of them reside in remote rural areas), and lack of access to relevant information from government and non-governmental agencies for their own wellbeing and socioeconomic growth. Consequently, a minority of Nigerians by virtue of their competence in English strip the uneducated Nigerians of their meaning, values and opportunities in those undertakings geared towards the promotion of their wellbeing (Oyelaran, 24 cited in Chinyeaka, 2018). In other words, those who have the skill, capacity and access to relevant information quite often exploit the ignorance of the majority of those less-privileged individuals who are illiterate or semi-literate in the English language to further mischievously enrich themselves.

The foregoing situation was evident during the active period of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria when movement of people were restricted through lockdown measures to curtail and contain the spread of the virus. As part of its response mechanisms, government mapped out policies and programmes to cushion the economic effects of the pandemic on the people. However, most of the information from the federal government were disseminated exclusively in the English language and through the national radio, television, internet and the social media. The implication, therefore, is that those Nigerian who are illiterate in English (mostly found in rural areas) were excluded from benefiting from those government intervention programmes aimed at mitigating the impact of the pandemic on the poor and vulnerable Nigerians, owing to their inability to access those information packaged and disseminated in the English language.

Information Packaging and Dissemination in Nigeria in the Era of COVID-19 Pandemic and their Implication for Rural Development

The world was suddenly hit by an unprecedented health crisis in 2020 occasioned by the outbreak of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic, with its significant consequences on health, economy, education and social lives of individuals across the globe. Uhere (2021) citing the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control informs us that the first index case of COVID-19 was recorded in Nigeria on February 27, 2020, and linked to an Italian national who visited Lagos and tested positive to the virus on his arrival. Subsequently, on March 9, 2020, a second index case was recorded involving a man from Ewekoro, Ogun state, who was said to have come in contact with the Italian national. Within a few months from this period, COVID-19 spread across many states of the federation and became a serious health concern in the country.

In order to curtail and contain the spread of the virus, the federal government of Nigeria initiated the idea of lockdown to restrict physical contact between people. And as the virus continued to spread unabated, other restriction measures were adopted such as restriction of inter-state movement of vehicles and persons, social and physical distancing as well as other health measures to check further spread of the virus. As a result of the lockdown restriction measures, life became increasingly difficult for many Nigerians, especially daily income earners. Because the majority of Nigerians earn their living from the informal economy such as the petty traders, artisans, taxi drivers, etc., it became extremely difficult for this category of people to survive during the pandemic period.

In response to the above unfortunate reality, government came up with some social intervention programmes to cushion the economic effects of the pandemic, especially on the daily income earners, the poor and vulnerable Nigerians. Such interventions

initially included conditional cash transfer, cash and food distribution to vulnerable Nigerians, coordinated by the office of the Vice-President and that of the Minister of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management. Subsequently, government initiated other social intervention programmes such as the Tradermoni, Marketmoni and Farmermoni respectively, aimed at making interest-free loans available to traders, market men and women, farmers, artisans and jobless youths etc., to enable them survive the shocking impact of the pandemic. The majority of the target beneficiaries of the above social intervention programmes reside in the rural areas.

Observation shows that during the active period of the pandemic, most of the information disseminated to Nigerians, especially from the federal government, were packaged in the English language. Again, many of such information on health issues, economy, religion etc. were transmitted via the national radio, television, the internet and social media, all presented in the English language. Unfortunately, most of the beneficiaries of these pieces of information are rural farmers, petty traders, artisan, etc. who are neither literate in English nor ICT compliant. Consequently, they could not access and utilize relevant information regarding those federal government social intervention programmes such as the Farmermoni, Marketmoni, Tradermoni and even the conditional cash transfer programme. The implication is that most these target recipients of the intervention programmes were excluded from participating in and benefiting from these schemes designed for their own economic wellbeing.

The reason for the exclusion could partly be attributed to language barrier and inability to access and utilize information due to the nature and media through which it was disseminated. Packaging, in the context of this study, means to present something in a particular way (Hornby, 2010). In this perspective, information packaging connotes an arrangement of information in such a way that it could be understandable, meaningful and suitable to the requirement of a specific information user. In doing this, considerable care is usually taken by information experts to ensure that content, language and medium of information are packaged in a manner that the target audience would benefit maximally from the information disseminated without any impediments. To achieve this usually involves information repackaging to suit the nature, skill, intellectual level and specific needs of the target recipients of the information disseminated.

Information repackaging is the rearrangement of the method and media in which information has been presented and then presents it to the requirements of specific users in a way it would be more understandable, acceptable, meaningful and usable to them. According to Uhegbu (2007), information

repackaging can be done in the areas of content repackaging, medium repackaging and language repackaging. Language repackaging (which is our major concern in this study) involves presenting an information in such a way that the language in which it is presented (which may constitute a barrier to understanding the information) is translated into a language the target recipient really understands for effective communication and utilization.

A case in point (to buttress the need for information repackaging) is a situation where relevant information required by an information seeker/user is presented in a foreign language he/she is not familiar with. In this situation, such information needs to be repackaged linguistically (usually through translation) by presenting it in a language the user truly understands. Thus, an illiterate information user/seeker in Nigeria, for instance, must be presented with an information translated from English to the user's native language – Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Efik, Fulfude, etc., as the case may be, for effective communication to take place between the information disseminator and the target recipient.

It is, therefore, expedient, at this juncture, to state that information packaging and dissemination as witnessed during the active period of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria have far-reaching implication for rural development. This is because the major objective for which the federal government initiated those social intervention programmes was to cushion the economic effect of the pandemic on low and daily income earners, the rural poor and vulnerable Nigerians. Undoubtedly, the majority of the people in this category – the peasant farmers, petty traders, artisans (who mostly reside in the rural areas) contribute significantly to the economic development of their local communities. But because such important information emanating from the government were not accessible to them, the majority of them were excluded from benefiting from those intervention programmes. In the same vein, many of them were equally unable to access other similar crucial information from the federal government in the areas of health care awareness, access and utilization; education and knowledge acquisition; religious and spiritual well-being and development, etc. during the pandemic period. Thus, they were inadvertently excluded from the benefits accruing from having access to such vital information, the overall implication being that the development of the rural areas where these large number of productive Nigerians resident was undermined with its far-reaching socioeconomic consequences.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is imperative to reiterate that the main purpose of this study is to examine how a lack of

knowledge of the English language and consequent inability to access and utilize relevant information packaged and disseminated in the language resulted in the exclusion of many Nigerians from participating in and benefiting from some national schemes during the active period of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. Indubitably, the advent of ICT has not only revolutionized information packaging and dissemination but also has resulted in information being disseminated through radios, televisions, internet and the social media. Furthermore, information presented through these media are exclusively done in the English language for wider audience and communication (being the universal language of science and technology). To this end, information users/seekers in Nigeria who are neither literate in English nor ICT compliant find it difficult to access and utilize relevant information disseminated in the country for their own benefit. The paper, thus, argues that in disseminating information from the federal government, it is crucial that information dissemination media be extended to incorporate the ancient, age-long information dissemination sources such as the use of Town Criers, village meetings, age-grade meetings and even announcements in churches and mosques, all presented in the local language of the rural dwellers. Against the foregoing backdrop, the paper recommends that:

- The federal government should endeavour to disseminate its vital information in major local languages in Nigeria in addition to English via Radio Nigeria.
- There is the need for information repackaging in respect to language of information presentation and dissemination across the country.
- There is also the need to strengthen adult education programmes across the country and ensure their adequate funding so that many adult Nigerians will become literate in the English language.
- The adult education programmes should incorporate preliminary studies in ICT to make their beneficiaries information literate citizens of the 21st century world in the nearest future.

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