ANALYSIS OF USE OF ENGLISH
AND INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES BY THE PRESS IN SELECTED
AFRICAN COUNTRIES

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Abstract
The paper examines the use of English language and indigenous language by the press in selected countries in Africa. The countries are Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya and South Africa. Using qualitative descriptive method, the paper notes that the predominant place English language enjoys as a medium of expression in many African countries was as a result of colonization and evangelical efforts of Christian missionaries. It establishes that the major problem facing indigenous media in Africa is the choice of English as the official language which invariably relegates the local languages to the background. The paper concludes that for the indigenous language press to thrive, the affected countries in Africa should intensify the promotion of indigenous languages and reading culture through educational policies, mandating the broadcast media to increase their local content to suit African needs and adoption of African languages as official language in addition to English language for transaction.

INTRODUCTION
English has been defined by the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary as the language of Britain, Ireland, North America, Australia and some other countries.

Thus, English language is the language spoken by the citizens of the aforementioned countries including many countries in Africa which use it as official language of transaction.

On the other hand, local or indigenous language can be construed to mean a language spoken or belonging or connected with a particular place or area which one is talking about or with the place where one lives.

In Africa, although English language has been adopted by many countries especially former colonies of Britain, the countries have many indigenous or local languages which are still being used to communicate.
However, because of colonial influence, many of these English speaking African countries have relegated their local languages to the background and this has greatly influenced the language chosen by the media to disseminate information to African people.

Scholars like Salawu (2004) see the urgent need to promote African languages and direct attention to the study of the media using African languages. He is of the opinion that “this can help Africans become more appreciative of their languages” and erase colonialism and the hisperception that Western languages and cultures are more civilized than their indigenous languages and cultures.

Statement of the Problem

All over Africa, foreign languages especially English and French have dominated the media scene as language of the media. This has invariably relegated the indigenous languages of Africa to the background. This situation as many have observed does not augur well for the continent. The paper therefore tries to find out only those foreign languages have dominated the media scene inspite of hundreds of local or indigenous languages that abound in the continent.

Theoretical Framework

The theory that drives this paper is the Inter-language Pragmatic Theory. The developmental basis of the theory is anchored on three theories namely, Speech Act Theory, Conversational Implicature Theory and Politeness Theory.

The Speech Act Theory which is a sub-Field of Pragmatics holds that people use language and the purpose is not only to speak or express a thought but by talking to achieve certain goals.

It is concerned with the ways in which words can be used not only to present information but also to carry out actions. The theory was introduced by Oxford Philosopher J.L Austin and further developed by American Philosopher J.R Searle. The Theory of Speech Act aims to justify the fact that although words (phrases, sentences) encode information, people do more things with words than convey information and that when people do this, they often convey more than their words encode.

Although the focus of speech act theory has been on utterances especially in face-to-face situations, the phrase is taken as a generic term for any sort of language use – oral or otherwise.

The theory is relevant to this paper because publishers who choose indigenous languages instead of English and other international languages aim to convey more than words to their readers something that may not be possible when other foreign languages are used.

Methodology

Qualitative descriptive method was used to obtain data for the paper. Both primary and secondary data were used to gather data. These include direct observation of publications and unstructured interviews with editors and newspaper readers (primary data) and books, journals, newspaper, magazines as well as the internet.
Definition of Language

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines language as “the system of expression by means of words” a particular system of words as used by a people or nation, or “a system of signs, movements and so on used to express meanings or feelings” or “a particular style or manner of expression such as in poetic language”.

Language can also be defined as “a communicative system consisting of formal units that are integrated through processes of combination”. (Bonvillain, 2000:7). On his part, Omojuyigbe (2004:12) describes language as “a series of sounds strung together in groups to convey meaning to listeners”.

From the various definitions of language, one can infer that language is an integral part of human behaviour and it serves as the primary means of interaction between people.

As noted by (Bonvillain, 2000:1)

“Speakers use language to convey their thoughts, feelings, interactions and desires to others. Language links interlocutors in a dynamic, reflexive process. We learn about people through what they say and how they say it; we learn about ourselves through the ways that other people react to what we say; and we learn about our relationships with others through the give-and-take of communicative interactions”.

According to her, language is enriched by the uses that people make of it and these uses and the meanings transmitted, are situational, social and cultural.

Types of Language

There are different types of languages, we have;

i. Artificial language, such as language of mathematics using signs ($<$, $>$, $r^2$ and so on.
ii. Sign language, which is used for the deaf and for road signs.
iii. Non-human language, such as language of animals, birds and insects e.g. (bees, apes, dogs, cocks and so on.
iv. Human language, which is used by human beings living within a particular society.

Functions of Human Language

i. Communication Function: The most important function of human language is to communicate information, ideas, attitudes as well as facilitate thoughts. It also helps to encode our ability to remember those things we had met before.
ii. Expressive Function: We use language to express our emotions or feelings. It enables us to get rid of stress.
iii. Social Interaction: Language enables us to interact with people in the same speech community. People appear to be more friendly when they can engage in discussions affecting their lives.
iv. Expression of Identity: It is through language that our political beliefs and ideologies are expressed.
v. **Education:** It is through language that knowledge is passed from one generation to another (Ogunbiyi, 2007:22-23).

**Language and the Media**

The media occupies a very influential position in society. For this singular reason, its practitioners should make their language usage conform to the rules of the game. Anything different is likely to affect society negatively, either in the misinterpretation or misunderstanding of meaning (Omojuyigbe, 2004).

As noted by Oso (2006: 175-176) “the mass media have become probably the most important social institution in the construction and circulation of meaning in any modern society. The mass media permeate our daily lives. They have become the main source of leisure activities. And for most people, they are “main source of information about, and explanation of social and political processes, and also a major fund of images and suggestions concerning modes of self-presentation and general life styles”.

He further posits that, “language and the way it is used in the mass media, structure our views of the world and that the use of language and the type of language used have ideological implications and they form part of the overarching structure of power and subordination in a particular society”.

The language of broadcast media is warm and personal while in print media, the writer has to make himself explicit without being unnecessarily superfluous. This is regardless of the language being used, that is, whether English, local or any other language.

For the avoidance of doubt and to prevent errors in language usage, each journalist on assumption of duty is assumed to be given the style book which takes care of typographical, spelling, capitalization, grammar and other rules in order to assure uniformity and good taste in a particular publication.

Moreover, part of their tools are standard English dictionary (where applicable) and the thesaurus book of synonyms.

**English Language Use and the Press in Africa**

Africa is a continent in which almost all the countries have been colonized in the past except for a few countries like Liberia and Ethiopia. This invariably means that the citizens had to learn the language of the colonialists especially English and French and relegate their own to second position.

As noted by Adedeji (1987) citing Sommerlad (1966) there are about 800 African languages and dialects in Africa, fifty of which are spoken by half a million people or more. English is spoken in 18 countries and French in 21. Almost all these former colonies have made English or French their official language and this has reflected in the language of the press in these countries.

The countries of Africa in which English is spoken and used as official language include:
Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Gambia, Liberia, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. Others are, Namibia, Zambia, Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, Uganda and Tanzania.

In the English speaking countries of Africa, English language newspapers are dominant while indigenous language ones are few.

As Salawu rightly puts it, “indigenous languages are not highly esteemed and for example, in Nigeria, English and western education remain the vehicles of power and progress in life”.

And as observed by Odebunmi (2007: 106)“English language more than many other languages in the world, performs more functions because of its international status. According to him, “English performs peculiar roles and has the ability to adapt easily to contextual variables”.

Reasoning along the same line (Oso, 2006) is of the opinion that English language is over and above the indigenous language in English speaking countries in Africa. According to him, “though a foreign language imposed on the country (Nigeria in this case) as part of the colonial conquest, it has become the official language of the country as in many other former British colonies.

A close look at the press in four African countries would further buttress the point. The countries are; Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya and South Africa.

**The Press in Nigeria**

In Nigeria, although there are between 200-400 local languages, the English language press had dominated the media scene. Apart from *Iwe Irohin* which later became bilingual, most other newspapers that emerged after that were English language newspapers. This was attributed to the fact that most publishers at that time were actually non-Nigerians including Henry Townsend himself.


Within the period when the first newspaper was established (1859) and today, there were just a handful of indigenous or local newspapers most of which are dead. They are “ *The IweIrohin* (1859), *EkoAkete* (1922), *EletiOfe* (1923), *IweIrohinOse* (1925), *EkoIgbehin* (1926), and *AkedeEko* (1928). Others are; *UnwanaEfik* (1885), *ObukpongEfik* (1886) *GaskiyaTafiKwabo* (1939), *Isokan, IweIroyin Yoruba, Gbohungbohun, Amana,Udoka* and *Alaroye* (1996).

Comparing the two lists, one can see that in Nigeria, the English language press had dominated the media scene while the few local ones had gone into extinction except *Alaroye*. 


Magazines: Almost all magazines in Nigeria are published using the English language.

The Broadcast Media: There is no broadcasting station in Nigeria that has been licensed to use only indigenous language as the main language, of broadcasting. What we have is a mixture of both English and the local languages depending on the location and philosophy of the station.

The Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) apart from the official language casts news and relay many programmes in other major Nigerian languages such as Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo.

The Press in Ghana:

As a former British Colony, English is the official language in Ghana and all newspapers are published in English.

The First newspaper, the Gold Coast Gazette and Commercial Intelligencer was published from 1822-25 by Sir Charles Mac Carthy, governor of the British Gold Coast Settlements. Other newspapers in the past are; The Accra Herald, Gold Coast Times, Western Echo, Gold Coast Assize, Gold Coast News, Gold Coast Abongins, Gold Coast Chronicle, Gold Coast People, Gold Coast Independent and Gold Coast Express.

Obviously, all these newspapers were published using the English language.


Currently, there are about 40 newspapers published in Ghana including 16 independent newspapers and as at 2007, there were seven broadcast stations.

Indigenous Press:

Although English is the language of state in Ghana, some newspapers had been published in local languages in the past, especially in the Akan languages of Southern Ghana. After independence, local language newspapers were produced in literacy campaigns by the Bureau of Ghana languages or else by churches for evangelical purposes. These papers had limited circulation and life span.

However, while the newspapers had neglected local languages, many FM stations have introduced very popular local language programmes in Accra and in the regions. (Ghana Press, 2012).

From the history of the press in Ghana, one can see that English had been the dominant language of the press in the country just like in the Nigerian case.

The Press in Kenya

The print media in Kenya can be divided into four sectors: The regular daily newspapers, the magazines, the regional newspapers and the printed sheets that also seek to pass for newspapers in the urban centre streets. (Kenyan Press, 2012).
Kenya has four daily national newspapers in English and one in Kiswahili all published in Nairobi with a combined circulation of almost 400,000.

The oldest mass circulating newspaper is the Standard founded in 1902 by a Parsee migrant. Others are the Mombasa Mail and Nairobi News, The Nation, The People, and The Kenya Times.

The magazine industry has been vibrant not so much in its longevity as much as the frequency of magazines that have gone under. The Weekly Review founded in 1976 is probably the premier news magazine. Indigenous publications are few in Kenya. We have the Taifa Leo and Kenya Leo which are published in Kiswahili.

The history of the press in Kenya in relation to the use of English is similar to that of Nigeria and Ghana, where the local language newspapers are relegated to the background.

**The Press in South Africa**

The history of newspapers in South Africa dates back to 1800 when the governor of the Cape Colony initiated the publishing of the government controlled Cape Town Gazette and Africa Advertiser. The first privately-owned newspaper, the SACommercialAdvertiser was published in 1824 while the first Dutch language newspaper De ZuidAfrikaan was published in 1830. The first African language newspaper, Umshumayeli Wendaba was established in 1837 and the first Afrikaans language newspaper, Die Afrikaanse Patriot was published in 1876.

According to South Africa Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) survey in 1996, there were 36 daily and weekly urban newspapers in the country -29 in English, four in Afrikaans, two in Zulu and one in Xhosa.


In South Africa, there is widespread popular use of English language and this perhaps explains the large number of English language newspapers. Almost all South African newspapers are published in English or Afrikaans.

The magazine industry in South Africa is robust with an estimated 280 locally published titles. The same goes for the broadcast media which is highly developed.

There are only four free-to-air terrestrial television channels; the South African Broadcasting Corporation’s SABC 1, SABC 2 and SABC 3 as well as e.tv. For radio, there are 40 radio stations in Johannesburg alone. However, majority of the radio stations broadcast in English and Afrikaans although the other nine official languages of South Africa are represented on the air waves.

**Indigenous Newspapers:**

There are several local newspapers in South Africa that are still circulating unlike the situation in many other African countries where these publications are few or are completely dead. These include Beeld, published in Johannesburg and DieBurger published in Cape Town. Both of them
have daily circulations in 100,000 to 125,000 range and represent the largest and most influential Afrikaans newspapers in South Africa. We also have the Rapport— a weekly Afrikaans language paper established in Johannesburg in 1970 which circulates 250,000 to 300,000 copies.

However, there is still the prevalence of English language newspapers inspite of the 10 indigenous languages that are recognized by the South African state as official languages.

**Local Language use and the Press in Africa**

In many African countries, indigenous press like its English counterpart, had its origin in the evangelical efforts of the Christian missionaries to spread the gospel among the natives (Olukotun, 2006) According to him, in pursuit of this objective, it was deemed necessary to establish printing presses, which spawned publications and newspapers.

In Nigeria for example, most of the early indigenous language newspapers were established by one Christian mission or another. Reverend Henry Townsend of the Anglican mission started *Iwe Irohin* in 1859 to cultivate the habit of reading for the purpose of information acquisition among the Egba and the Yoruba people. The church of Scotland Mission began the publication of *Unwana Efik* and *Obukpon Efik* in Calabar.

Similarly, Yoruba publications such as *Eko Akete* (1926) *Eleti Ofe* (1923), *Iwe Irohin Osose* (1925) and *Eko Igbehin* (1926) were founded as part of the evangelical project of the African Church established by nationalists who broke away from the Anglican Church protesting the injustice being meted out to the African clergy in particular by the established church of England mission (Folarin & Mohammed, 1996:104).

In Malawi, *Mtenga Watu*, the first indigenous language newspaper was founded by the Universities Mission to Central Africa (UMCA) in 1895 while in Ghana, missionaries published materials in local languages and a few indigenous entrepreneurs published in the Akan languages of Southern Ghana. But in Kenya, according to Salawu (2006) it was the nationalist struggle which was responsible for the development of the indigenous language press in the country with the establishment of *Muigwithania* in 1928.

He further writes that in 1930, in South Africa, there were 19 registered, African language newspapers. Today, most of these newspapers are non-existent. However, just like in the other countries mentioned earlier, the indigenous language press in South Africa also has a remarkable involvement of the missionary.

If we juxtapose the English language and local language press in Africa, the obvious result is that the former is dominant and farahead of the latter.

**Problems of Local/Indigenous Press in Africa**

As noted by Salawu (2006), problems facing indigenous language media in Africa are a reflection of problems facing the languages of the continent in general. According to him, in
most parts of Africa, communication in indigenous languages has been adversely affected by the choice of the colonial language as the official language.

This choice of English as the official language of all English speaking countries in Africa has played a role in the relegation of local languages in these countries which invariably has given English language newspapers an edge.

Other problems include:

i. **Multiplication of Languages:** For instance, there are about 200-400 dialects in Nigeria and 800 languages spoken in Africa. This poses enormous problems as a local publication in one language may not be favourably disposed to by people speaking other languages.

ii. **Elite Attitudes to the use Indigenous Languages:** Since in most English speaking African countries, English has been adopted as the official language of transaction. Elites and educated people in these countries always abhor speaking the local language in order to demonstrate their enhanced status as educated people as opposed to the illiterates when they make policies. Their attitudes are reflected in the kind of policies they make.

iii. **Illiteracy:** For the people to patronize local or indigenous press, with the exception of radio and television, they need to be able to read and write. Africa is a continent with low literacy rate. This obviously would affect the ability to comprehend local publications not to talk of English language ones.

iv. **Largely Unwritten Languages:** Many of the African languages and dialects are still unwritten. In essence, if a language is only spoken but not written, no one would be able to publish in such a language.

v. **Lack of Professional Translators:** Even where an African language is in written form, the problem of professional translators is still there as there are so many technical terms that an average person may not be able to translate into local language.

vi. Other problems may be general ones such as lack of solid financial base, qualified personnel, high cost of new print and other materials, as well as low advertising revenue.

**Prospects of Local/Indigenous Press in Africa**

Although a myriad of problems face the local press in Africa, all hope is not lost as there are still many surviving local language newspapers.

For example in Nigeria, the *Alaroye* newspaper established in 1990 is still waxing stronger with a circulation of about 150,000 a week and it sells in Europe and other parts of West Africa where the language is spoken.

The publishers, World Information Agents have added other publications to the stable. These are, *AlaroyeMagasini, Atoka Alaroye, Iriri Aye Alaroye and Akede Agbaye*.

In South Africa, the Isolezwe, a Zulu newspaper, established in 2002 is making waves and challenging the English language newspapers in the country.
According to Salawu (2006) of the 125 newspapers in Ethiopia, 108 are in Amharic, two in Oromo and one in Tigre.

Moreover, radio and television stations on the continent have programmes in local languages which have attracted huge viewership and listenership. For example, Salawu a Yoruba programme on Bond FM, Lagos which translates the major headline news in Nigerian newspapers has a large followership among Yoruba speaking people in Nigeria. This has attracted huge advertising revenue for the station.

But as he rightly pointed out, “the fact still remains that indigenous languages fare better in the broadcast media than in the print media, indicating that African culture still remains, largely an oral culture”.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the discourse so far, one can safely conclude that English language press is huge in Africa because of what a scholar calls “the power of English “while the local press plays a second fiddle. This is largely attributed to a number of factors one of which is the adoption of English as the official language in all English speaking former colonies of Britain. For the local language press to survive, a number of things have to be put in place.

These include;

i. Promotion of local language through educational policy. For example, local languages should be made compulsory at all levels of education.

ii. Promotion of reading culture in African languages. This would enhance high literacy level.

iii. African media, especially broadcast media, should be mandated to increase their local contents to suit African needs.

iv. African languages should be adopted as official languages in addition to English as languages for transaction.

v. Governments of various African countries should encourage interested publishers in local language by subsidizing the cost of producing newspapers.

References


