



Journal of Nigerian Languages and Culture



Volume 10, No 1 March, 2008

ISSN 1595-4730

Published by
**Association for promoting
Nigerian Languages and Culture**

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN THE MASS MEDIA

BY

OGBITEN BRICKINS OGBEMI

DEPARTMENT OF MASS COMMUNICATION

DELTA STATE POLYTECHNIC, P.M.B. 1030

OGWASHI-UKU

e-mail: ogbemib@yahoo.com

AND

EMMANUEL EJOMAFUVWE AKPOVETA

DEPARTMENT OF MASS COMMUNICATION

DELTA STATE POLYTECHNIC, P.M.B. 1030

OGWASHI-UKU

Abstract

This paper has been able to x-ray the explicit role of Language in the Mass Media. It has been revealed that language is central to the Mass Media. The paper establishes that for the Mass Media to function effectively in society, they must use language to disseminate information to their audience. The paper also looks at the different roles that language plays in the Mass Media. It was revealed that various types of noise interfere with communication at all levels. As a result of this, the practitioners in the media are therefore encouraged to package their messages in a way to avoid negative feedback from their audience.

Introduction

Communication is basic to human existence and in one way or the other affects practically everything we do in life as human beings. To human beings, communication is as natural as the leaves to the tree. Children, immediately they are born cry to announce their arrival to the world. A child that does not, is as good as dead. That is what is referred to as still birth. From morning to night, from life till death, and as some traditionalists believe, even after death, man is continually involved in the process of communication. Even when living humans are asleep, they are still involve in communication, as psychologists and other observers or experts can easily confirm. (Nwosu and Idemili 1992:123).

To communicate is natural, and this is the reason why even animals and plants communicate. The only difference between man and them is that man has the ability to create symbols, giving meanings to them, and interpreting messages. Communication actually is a

social process and it makes use of signs, symbols and other such means for the interchange of thoughts and meanings. This could be among individuals and groups. Communication is an ongoing and reciprocal process, with all participants working to create meanings by encoding and decoding messages. According to Baran (2002:6):

A message is first encoded, that is transformed into an understandable sign and symbol system. Speaking is encoding, as are writing, printing and filming a television programme. Once received, the message is decoded; that is, the signs and symbols are interpreted. Decoding occurs through listening, reading, or watching the television show.

From Baran's assertion, it can be seen that Language one way or the other in some form has to be involved in the process of communication whether it is verbal, or some sort of sign Language, there has to be some sort of understanding between the source and receiver for communication to be effective. Ibrahim (2003:26) listed the following definitions of communication:

- Communication is the process by which one person shares and impacts information to another person so that both people clearly understand one another.
- The communication process involves all acts of transmitting messages to channels which link people, to the Language and symbols codes, which are used to transmit messages, the means by which messages are received and stored and the rules, customs and convention which define and regulates relationship and events.
- Communication is the Language interaction between individuals by the use of medium and message through a channel to the receiver.
- Communication is the process involving the passing of messages through the use of symbols, which all parties involved in the communication process understand.

The Meaning of Language

Like communication, Language is one of the popular concepts people assume to know so much about. The fact that they use one form of Language or the other on a daily basis does not mean that they can ascribe to themselves the title of "authority" in a particular Language. Language in the real sense is far more than that. Since it is what they speak on a daily basis,

very few people really bother to take time to study and understand the use of English Language, or any other Language whether it is German, French, Italian, Itsekiri, Urhobo and so on.

Sapir (1996:21) defined Language as a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols. From the definition above, it can be deduced that Language involves the communication of ideas through the voluntary production of symbols by human beings.

Language also involves the assignment of meanings to codes in order to achieve a common frame of reference. According to Bettinghaus (1968) it represents those artificially created arbitrary sets of symbols and syntaxes that man usually depend on when he communicates. Language is actually a symbol through which human beings express their feelings. It establishes a universality of meaning for communicants who share the same cultural or technical codes within a specific entity. (Fiske 1990).

There is no doubt that most of the definitions already outlined are somehow linked with each other. However, one of the most acceptable definitions today which the paper will align with is that of John P. Hughes, a renowned linguist. "Language," he said: "is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by which thought is conveyed from one human being to another". Hughes cited by Nwosu and Idemili, 1992:86).

Language, whether English Language, or any of our Nigerian languages is no doubt indispensable in the communication process. In either the electronic or print media to communicate, some sort of language has to be adopted and used. Nigeria as a former British colony has adopted English language. This is the official language and it is what dominates the mass media. Although pidgin English and some of the local languages are used from time to time, English language is still the predominant language used by the mass media in Nigeria.

Origin of Language

A biblical account has it that the development of different languages arose out of the need to disunite men, who were on the verge of constructing a magnificent edifice- Tower of Babel – that would have reached up to heaven. By speaking different tongues, it became difficult for the builders to carryout their assignment effectively (Awe 2006:18). There are however, different theories on the origin of languages among which are the now abandoned Bow-Wow theory, the Ding-Dong theory and others.

According to Nwosu and Idimili (1992) there is the now discredited Bow-Wow theory which attributes the origin of language to the attempts made by early man to imitate the common sounds of nature in his environment through the use of onomatopoeic words. There is also the now abandoned Ding-Dong theory which was popular during the days of Plato and Pythagoras which claims that there are relationships between a word and its sense or sound. The Pooh-Pooh theory on the other hand, states that speech or language originated from the spontaneous ejaculation of derision, fear and similar human emotions and the Yo-Heave theory traces language origin to the grunts and groans of human labour, the Ha-Ha Theory on its own traces language to human laughter and the sing-songs theory tries to relate the origin of language to the songs of early man. The truth is that none of these theories have been able to stand the test of time.

English Language as a Medium of Communication

A recent publication of the United States based research group World Watch Institute, Vital Signs 2006-2007 claims that one language is lost every month. At this rate, 100 years from now, the world could be left with only 2,500 languages of the overall, 7,000 used through out the world today. According to the report, Nigeria has the third largest number of languages with 516 languages in the country. Papua New Guinea has 820, Indonesia 724, Nigeria 516, India 427, US 311, Mexico less than 300, Cameroon less than 300, and Australia less than 300. (Awe, 2006). With 516 languages, in Nigeria, it will be difficult for the mass media to communicate with all these and this makes English more convenient.

English Language is a very prominent and wide-spread language which is used as a medium of international business, politics and other transactions. Available data show that English is today spoken by over 300 million people. There are only 13 languages with 50 or more million speakers and English is only one of the 13, but is second only to Chinese. The 13 languages in their order of number of speakers are Chinese, English, Hindustani, Russian, Spanish, German, Japanese, Arabic, Bengali, Portuguese, Malaya (Indonesia) French and Italian. Chinese presently has 700,000,000 native and non-native speakers, while English has 380,000,000 native and non-native speakers. French and Italian have only about 80,000,000 naïve and non-native speakers.

The main concern of this paper is English Language which is the officially used language in Nigeria. Although there have been the recurring debates about the adoption of a lingua franca in Nigeria, this has been as controversial as any other political issue in the country. Suggestions that any of the major languages like Hausa, Igbo, or Yoruba should be adopted elicited angry reactions from other groups especially the minority tribes who felt their identities as nation states will be eroded. The debate is however not the focus of this paper. What the paper is concerned with are the types of languages or language devices that exist and the ways they are used, including English language.

In public speaking or public communication for instance, non-verbal expressions are very important. These include body and facial movements and all other non-verbal uses that aid the speaker to impress the audience. In verbal and written communication which is the main concern here, words are used to convey meaning or units of thought between and among people. In the mass media, Language is used as a medium of communication and English Language is the dominant language in Nigeria. While in the print media, the written word is used, in the electronic media spoken words are added and even non-verbal expressions are employed in the case of television and films that have the dual characteristics of audio and visual. To have a clearer and better understanding of the subject, it is important to look at the mass media, its structure and functions.

Classification of the Mass Media

There are basically two major ways to classify the mass media. They could be classified based on the type of mechanism. In this case, the print media (for literate) and the electronic media (for both literate and illiterate). They could be also be classified in terms of type of audience. These are Elite, Mass or Specialised audiences. (which are small and homogenous like engineers, architects) people who share professional interests.

The Press or Print Media: All print media involve the pressing of ink on paper (printing). Newspaper is the first popular mass medium for the simple reason that it is ubiquitous. They tend to be agenda setters in society and may be looked at in terms of their frequency of publication, time of publication, physical size, geographical coverage, quantity of circulation, ownership type and so on.

Books on the other hand, can be defined as a collection of pages covered by a hard or soft paper back cover or cloth bound dealing with a particular theme and it is the oldest medium. Types of books include, general, educational and professional. Magazines which are another type of printed medium pay less attention to information relating to day to day events. They are more interested in interpreting and correlating issues in a broader context and are broadly classified into general interest and special interest magazines.

The Electronic Media: These basically involve the conversion of oral and visual signals into electronic impulses before they are reconverted into their original oral and visual state by means of specialized techniques. They include radio, television, motion pictures, records, videos, telephones, telex, fax, computers, internet and so on. The electronic media unlike the print media involves a three-step process of production, transmission and reception.

For a better understanding of the role of language in the mass media, it is important to briefly look at the functions of the mass media. Lasswell (1950) said the functions of communication are surveillance, correlation of parts of society and transmission of cultural heritage. Another scholar, Uyo (1987:3) who tried to expand them creatively rearranged the media functions to produce an acronym PENISE, which is:

- Persuasion: message primarily to convince or convert its receivers.
- Education: message primarily to instruct or to teach.
- News: message primarily to acquaint audiences with some recent events.
- Information: message designed primarily to enrich receivers' stock of knowledge.
- Interpretation: message designed to explain issues and problems involved in events (already known).
- Selling: message primarily aimed at inducing buying.
- Entertainment: message primarily for amusement.

To Uyo's ideas have been added cultural expression and continuity, national interaction and mobilization (McQuail 1978, and Uche 1995). For the mass media to successfully carry out these functions, there must be the use of a language(s) that is, or is generally understood and accepted to their mass audience. Any message sent out that is not understood is as good as useless. Language therefore plays a very prominent role in the mass media in Nigeria, and the world over.

The Role of Language in the Mass Media

Ogbulogo (2004:26) has identified the roles of language in communication to include: informative role, expressive role, phatic role, directive role, ideational role and performative role.

The informative role of language involves the exchange of information and this occurs as messages with which people shape their views. Whether in English language or some other languages that is generally understood by the originator and the receiver, people use language to exchange information and shape the views of others in the mass media.

In Nigeria, and in most other countries, in the world today, people have come to believe whatever they read or hear from the media as the gospel truth. Various governments have also come to realize this, and that is why the mass media have become veritable tools of mass mobilization for national development and selling of government ideas to the people. This can however only be done if a common language understood by the target audience is used.

The expressive role of language involves emotions, feelings and attitudes that are expressed through language. People have come to see the mass media as an avenue to express their emotions and feelings about certain contemporary issues they want other people to share in. Language is an important tool with which they can convey such feelings to others through the mass media.

In the phatic role, language is used to establish and maintain relationships with other people within a speech community. This is what the Public Relations practitioners do by using the mass media to reach their various publics. To be able to establish, sustain and maintain mutual relationship between their organizations and their various publics, they have to make use of a language understood and shared by them.

The directive role of language in the mass media involves using language to influence the behaviour of others by giving orders, instructions, suggestions and commands. The government makes use of these in trying to maintain law and order. The mass media have to be used to inform, interpret and explain laws and inform people about their enforcement. Language of course is very important in the implementation of these.

The ideational role involves the use of language in controlling the force of nature within the peoples' cultural context. Language is used ideationally in rituals, incantations, liberations, prayers etc. Today, it is now common place for us to watch, listen to and read religious sermons and prayers in the mass media. The pastors or traditionalists reach out, preach and write books

to spread their messages and these are done with the use of a language understood by the target audience.

Finally, in the performative role, it involves the use of language to perform certain functions which bring about a sudden change in the state of affairs of the people in the real world. The government does a lot of things which result to changes in the state of affairs of its people and usually language is used to communicate these to the people through the mass media. This is what is referred to as developmental journalism or communication.

From the analysis so far, it could be seen that language plays a very prominent role in the mass media in their efforts to perform their various functions. There is no doubt that language is an indispensable tool in effective communication. For them to be able to carry out their numerous functions, journalists must therefore not only master the principles and practice of effective communication, they must also master whatever language with which they wish to communicate at any particular time and in any particular situation.

The mastering of language involves not just having a working knowledge of the usage and applications of the normal words, phrases, clauses and other such elements of the language, it involves mastering of such elements of the language like its nuances, idioms, proverbs, history and cultural aspects. In the same vein, they should of necessity go beyond just knowing the ordinary principles, techniques or complements of effective communication, the journalist should know how to apply or be guided by each component of the communication process to achieve effective communication. After all, what is the essence of communication if it does not achieve its objective?

Conclusion

The emphasis of this paper has been the fact that language is very vital to the effective functioning of the mass media. It is quite obvious from the discussions so far, that language plays a very vital role in the mass media. Without language as a means of understanding each other, effective communication is almost impossible. Language is therefore important in the mass media or any other means of communication.

There are however a few obstacles that must be seriously avoided if communication has to be effective. Noise is one of such. Technically, noise is interference with communication at any level. It could be physical, psychological or linguistic. The concern of this paper is

however, linguistic noise. According to Ibrahim (2003:12) "Linguistic noise relates to one's inability to effectively use the language of communication. It falls into three categories:

- Semantic – Words with unfamiliar meaning. Words that can be used for different purposes like charge, crops etc.
- Grammatical – Misuse of word and bad language construction
- Phonological – poor pronunciation like putting 'n' in place of 'c' e.g. letter for "netter" or "like" for "nike" (Language interference) etc. Once these interferences are effectively taken care of communication becomes easy. Conclusively, language is an essential requirement to effectively communicate in the mass media.

Recommendations

The practitioners in the mass media should take note of these problem areas in language if they are to communicate effectively with their target audience. It is therefore recommended that journalists in the mass media should make sure that their messages are encoded in such a way that there are no negative feedbacks. There must not be distractions in the environment for there to be effective communication. The fact remains therefore that if language is not correct, what is said is not what is meant, if what is said is not what is meant, what ought to have been done remains undone (Confusius, cited by Ibrahim 2003).

References

- Awe, O. (2006) "Hundred of Nigerian Languages Face Extinction" PUNCH, July 20th 2006, P. 3.
- Baran, S.J. (2002) *Introduction to Mass Communication – Media Literacy and Culture*. Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Bettinghaus, E. (1968) *Persuasive Communication*. San Francisco: Rinehart Press.
- Fiske, J. (1990) *Introduction to Communication Studies* 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- Ibrahim, G. (2003) *Introduction to Mass Communication*. Benin City: Aprik – Coy Press
- Lasswel, H.D. (1949) "The structure and function of Communication in society" In Bryson, L. ed. *The Communication of Ideas*, New York: Harper.
- MacQuail, I.D. (1978) *The Sociology of Mass Communications* London: Harmondsworth
- Nwosu, I.E. and Idemili, S.O. (1992) ed. *Public Relations, Speech, Media Writing and Copy*. Enugu, Pub-Acena Publishers
- Ogbulogo, C. (2004) *Business Communication in Practice*, Lagos: Sam Iroanusi Publication.
- Sapir, E. (1966) *Culture, Language and Personality*: California: University of California Press.
- Uche, L.U. (1995) *Lecture Notes on Theories of Mass Communication*, University of Lagos. Unpublished.
- Uyo, A.O. (1987) *Mass Media Messages In a Nuttshell*, New York: Civiletis International.