

LINGUISTIC GAFFES IN THE NIGERIAN MEDIA NEWSCAST: AN EXPLORATORY DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

The Nigerian broadcast media has grown in leaps and bounds since the first radio re-diffusion station was set up in the early 1930s and the first television station (Western Nigerian Television) was established in 1959. Today, the number of radio and television stations in Nigeria is well over 200 and the principal language used in the communication of messages, particularly news broadcast is English. This calls for a proficient use of English as a language of communication in the Nigerian media, be it in the print or electronic broadcast. This paper busies itself with miscommunication as regards the former. It particularly explores cases of linguistic gaffes- wrong usage of English in newscast programmes which emanate from some Nigerian broadcast media stations. It argues that the identified cases are not consistent with the best global media practices as well as literate understanding of English as an international language of expression. Therefore, the paper recommends that broadcast media outfits in Nigeria should keep abreast of the constant changes in English through training and retraining of staff in relevant areas. Besides, it gives some suggestions to the identified cases of linguistic gaffes, with a view to making the Nigerian broadcast media healthier.

INTRODUCTION

In a McLuhaneque world where the media certainly delivers most of the messages (Martin and Girard xiii), clear and accurate news reporting is no longer negotiable. Achieving clear communication is one of the prime objectives of mass communication. In the main, mass communication involves communication aimed at the largest possible audience through the mass media channels of radio, television, film, print (RTFP), among others. To attain this, the media person/ journalist must give news reports by presenting ideas in an orderly manner. He/she must express ideas smoothly and precisely in words, sentences, idioms and other expressive grammatical constructions while writing for the print or presenting on the broadcast media. It has been posited that miscommunication involves a piece of communication (whether in the print or electronic media) which bears linguistic signs that do not express the intended and acceptable literate meaning it wishes to communicate (Omoera 2008). The prevalence of the problem of miscommunication in the broadcast media, particularly in the area of newscast programmes impels this paper's reflection on some recurrent English language blunders in the news broadcast of some radio and television stations in Nigeria.

Newscast or news broadcast is a standard programme type on radio or television (Uyo 30). It is made to inform, educate and entertain listeners/viewers/audience. The formal nature of this programme type compels broadcast stations to adopt the use of Standard English in news presentations. This is what obtains in all countries where English is the language of official business. In other words, it is expected that broadcast stations such as Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN), British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), African Independent Television (AIT), Ondo State Radio-Vision Corporation (OSRC), Edo Broadcasting Service (EBS) Radio and Television Stations, among many others, use current and generally acceptable English in their newscast presentations. Where this is not obtainable or flagrantly undermined, miscommunication sets in. Agreed that different media houses may have their different styles of presentations but that does not grant any one the permission to brazenly break the law of English grammar, especially in formal presentations such as news broadcasts. In fact, the listener/ viewer/ audience, both young and old ought to learn good and impeccable English from news broadcast programmes. In recent times, in Nigeria, the reverse seems to be the case. Most educated listeners/ viewers/ audience find the frequent mispronunciations, wrong collocations, clichés, colloquial expressions and many other language gaffes in news broadcast as upsetting and foreboding of a sub literacy culture. Take for example the simple word “says” whose Standard English pronunciation is /sez/. Many a Nigerian newscaster or presenter pronounces it as /seiz/. This is just one out of the numerous English language errors on the Nigerian airwaves. This trend needs to be checked for obvious reasons. As part of the effort to curb this problem, the National Broadcasting Commission, NBC (1990) in one of its workshops issued some presentation tips. These include, among other things, that the good presenter:

Inflects and modulates the voice properly

Speaks at comfortable pace

Aims for a smooth flow

Chooses simple words

Uses a script if necessary

Rehearses the script
Sticks to correct pronunciation of words
Pronounces names properly
Avoid slang
Apologises for an error
Identifies the station clearly
Refrains from being chatty
Never makes dry and expensive jokes
Sounds warm and friendly always ...

By using words clearly and logically, the journalist/ broadcaster leads the listener/viewer/ audience smoothly from thought to thought while presenting any programme on air. The ultimate aim is to make the task of listening/ viewing an agreeable and enjoyable experience for the listener/viewer/audience. This is because the listener/viewer is the “monarch” in the broadcasting industry. In this regard, Okhakhu (2-3) asserts that:

Broadcasting, whether as a public or private enterprise, is held in trust for the people. Simply put, without the audience, there is no broadcasting. The audience, that is society, is therefore a key consideration in the broadcast exercise... it is in fact more so to recognize that the broadcast audience is very sensitive – whether that audience is active or passive. It is on account of this that broadcast houses must be careful in their handling of programmes, particularly news and current affairs programmes.

The point being made is that broadcast stations must, among other things, pay adequate attention to the programmes they beam at the society, particularly the broadcast news programmes with regard to English language usage on the airwaves. It is in the light of the above that we examine some cases of miscommunication which are sampled from some Nigerian broadcast media newscast programmes. In doing this, the discourse is for the most part an exploratory and educative attempt which relies wholly on the parameters of primary and secondary sources of information for its analysis. Along this line, the

primary data collection method was adopted through observation and random sampling modalities. The observatory approach was achieved through non participant observation method of data collection. The secondary sources included articles, books, and journals.

AN APPRAISAL OF THE LINGUISTIC GAFFES IN SOME NIGERIAN NEWS BROADCAST PROGRAMMES

*Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?*
(T.S. Elliot in choruses from the “Rock”, 1934).

The above quote may well set the tone for the discussion in this section. Its aptness lies in the fact that information is critical to the success of any matter and when one is not adequately equipped with relevant information in whatever one does, one’s production may smack of mediocrity. With regard to the business of news reporting for the media in America, Bittner (363) contends that:

Journalism is a serious business. A name misspelled, a false association with the scene of crime...may wind up as a lawsuit in the millions of dollars. There is no substitute for accuracy, regardless of how big the story or how tight the deadline.

The point being made is that accuracy of information is crucial to professional media practice or journalism anywhere, whether in America, in Nigeria or elsewhere. However, the primary concern of this paper is to comment on the accuracy of information with regard to words, phrases or expressions used in broadcast news programmes of some Nigerian radio and television stations. Let us analyze the first set of grammatical errors which comes from the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN). Sample I: “The avian bird flu virus has been reported in Kaduna.” (NTA Network News, Tuesday 14, 2006). The word “avian” is one and the same with “bird” and using them as was done in the above context is a tautology. It should either read “The avian flu...”, “The bird flu...” or “The avian or bird flu...” Sample II: “Residents of Ihimwinhin quarters have decided to take the bull by the horn.” (NTA Benin Main News Broadcast, Saturday 25, January, 2003). The underlined expression should read “to take the bull by the horns”. This is because the expression in question is a fixed idiom in English and thus cannot be changed or altered. Sample III:

“Chiefs of police in West African countries are in Abuja to rub minds on how to curb cybercrime in the sub region”. (NTA News Extra, Wednesday 15, 2006). The underlined expression is not known to Standard English. It ought to read “to meet minds”. This is because people meet minds and never rub minds. Sample VI: “Four armed robbers have been shot dead by the Kogi State Police Command in conjunction with a local vigilante group.” (NTA Network News Broadcast, Friday 28, July, 2006). The underlined expression ought to read “a local vigilante or a local vigilance group”. The reason for this is because the word “group” is already implied in “vigilante” and its use in the instant context is linguistically redundant. Sample V: “The Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) chairman said a situation whereby serious students are blamed for the crime of unserious students is not fair.” (FRCN Network News Broadcast, Tuesday 22, August, 2006). The use of “unserious” in the above text is a serious misconception that is often overlooked in the Nigerian broadcast media environment. However, the fact remains that “unserious” is an un-English word. Hence, “non-serious” or a slight reconstruction which reads “those that are not serious” suffices in the instant context. Sample VI: “Motorists and pedestrians have been feeling the pangs of heavy downpour in Lagos” (NTA Network News Broadcast, Sunday 12, June, 2005). The underlined expression is redundant and smacks of editorial laziness. It ought to simply read “downpour” “rainstorm”, “cloudburst” or “heavy rain” depending on the user’s grammatical preferences.

The second set of language blunders in news broadcast emanates from Edo Broadcasting Service (EBS) Radio and Television Stations. Sample I: “Nine foreign expatriates working in the Niger Delta have been kidnapped.” (EBS Television News Broadcast, Wednesday 22, February, 2006). In the foregoing expression “foreign expatriates” is repetitive and linguistically unsound. It ought to read “Nine foreigners” or “Nine expatriate workers” as the case may be. Sample II: “A total of 145 male and 33 female students matriculated at the occasion.” (EBS Radio News Broadcast, Wednesday 15, March, 2006). In English “at” and “occasion” do not collocate. Therefore, the underlined expression is a gaffe that must be avoided in news broadcast. It should read “on the occasion.” Sample III: “Yesterday marked the onset of the celebration of the New Year ...” (EBS Radio News Broadcast, Monday 2, January, 2006). The word “onset” as

used in the instant context is a serious mistake that presenters/broadcasters must avoid. “Onset” denotes the beginning of something, especially of something unpleasant or horrible. For example: Marvin took ill at the onset of the rains. Therefore, the appropriate word that ought to be used in the sample under investigation is “beginning”, “start” or “outset” as the case may be. Sample VI: “The Sosoliso incident touched the nerves of many a mother who see all children as their own.” (EBS Television News Broadcast, Thursday 29, December 2005). The underlined expression is a common error on the Nigerian airwaves. Though eccentric construction has a place in English grammar, it still obeys the law of subject-verb agreement or the law of concord. So, the singular subject “mother” in the instant context takes the singular verb “sees”. Sample V: “The chairman, House Committee on Judiciary said the opinion of legal experts was also soughted.” (EBS Radio News Broadcast, Wednesday 19, July, 2006). The inappropriateness of the underlined word lies in the fact that “sought” is the past tense of “seek” and adding “ed” suffix in the instant context is ungrammatical. If we are to contend that “sorted” was meant in the text under investigation, the expression would still be incorrect. This is because “sort” takes “ed” suffix in the past tense and means to arrange things in a set order. And, of course, this was not what was meant in the text under scrutiny. Therefore, it ought to read “The chairman, House Committee on Judiciary said the opinion of legal experts was also sought”.

The third set of solecisms comes from the Independent Radio and Television Stations (IDR & ITV). Sample I: “Taiwo Omoregbe who was charged to court in place of his junior brother has been discharged and acquitted...” (IDR News Broadcast, Thursday 9, March, 2006). In current English usage the word “junior” is likely to be used in relation to position of authority or rank in an organization. For example: Levi is a junior staff of Ambrose Alli University. However, the word “younger” is apt for filial relations. For example: Levi is the younger brother of Samuel. The point being made is that “junior” in the underlined expression is inappropriate. It should read “younger brother” since it has to do with family relations. Sample II: “As the saying goes the taste of the pudding is in the eating.” (ITV News Broadcast, Tuesday 17, January, 2005). It ought to read “...the proof of the pudding is in the eating.” This is because the underlined expression is a formal, fixed idiom. “It cannot be changed, altered or rearranged”

(Oguntunase 35). Sample III: “When Independent Television arrived at Egor local government council at about 11 am...” (ITV News Broadcast, Thursday 18, August, 2005). Using “at” and “about” together as shown in the above context is unnecessary and meaningless. It should either read “When Independent Television arrived at Egor local government council at 11 am...” (Indicative of an exact time) or “When Independent Television arrived at Egor local government council about 11 am...” (Not indicative of an exact time). Sample IV: “The supporters of the late honourable Felix Eboigbe point accusing fingers at the local government chairman...” (ITV News Broadcast, Monday 15, August, 2005). In modern English Language usage, people point fingers of guilt or scorn at others. Therefore, the underlined expression amounts to a misuse of words as people cannot “point fingers” and “accuse” at the same time as expressed in the text under investigation. It ought to read “The supporters of honourable Felix Eboigbe point fingers of guilt at the local government chairman...”

The fourth set of misused words comes from Delta Rainbow Television (DRTV) and Ondo State Radio-Vision Corporation (OSRC). Sample I: “Before the Ibori administration in Delta State, education was in shamble.” (DRTV News Broadcast, Saturday 19, August, 2003). The underlined expression should read “in a shambles”. The reason for this is because it is a set expression in English language as in “The government is in a shambles over Europe.”

(Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English 1082). Sample II: “Operatives of the State Security Service (SSS) yesterday sealed up the corporate headquarters of the Insider Weekly magazine on Acme Road, Ikeja, Lagos, sending shock waves through the media industry” (OSRC Main News Broadcast, Sunday 5, September, 2004). The underlined expression is incorrect in the instant context. It should read “sealed off”. This is because an office is not an envelope that could be sealed up. Rather, detectives as intended in the context under examination seal off an office.

FURTHER DISCUSSION / CONCLUSION

The foregoing samples of misused words in broadcast news programmes in some radio and television stations in Nigeria portend that the country is gradually slipping into a certain kind of sub literacy culture. To halt this nosedive there is an urgent need for a re-orientation of all English language users in Nigeria, particularly professionals whose

business is to mass communicate media messages in English. Everyone must realize that “A language is not just a set of words. Each language has its own word combinations, rules, exceptions to these rules, idioms and allusions” (Watchtower 21). This presupposes that the use of language requires absolute attention. This is more so because English language which is at issue here is arguably the most widely spoken or used language in today’s highly globalised world. In fact, English has become overwhelmingly the primary language of global communication and the media.

English language is divided into four historical phases: Old English (around 500 - 1150), Middle English (around 1150 – around 1450), Early Modern English (around 1450 – 1700) and Modern English (around 1700 onward) (Encarta 2007). However, the distance and difference between Old and Modern English is as great as that between Latin and its descendants, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian (Encarta 2007). This implies that aside from being systematic, organized and creative, English language, like other natural languages, is dynamic and subject to contemporary tendencies and influences. Media professionals in Nigeria and elsewhere ought to keep tab on these tendencies and influences in order to keep up their avowed responsibility of informing, entertaining as well as educating large, segmented audiences which rely on the media daily. It is in the light of the above we propose the “Active Volcano Paradigm”. Oftentimes, volcanologists keep tab on earth movements with a view to predicting volcanic eruptions as well as mitigating the dangers they may pose to lives and properties. In a like manner, this theoretical construct contends that media professionals in countries where English is the language of mass communication, should continuously keep tab on the trendiest of developments in the language in order not to lag behind or leave the audience/ listeners/viewers in the lurch. The logic of this analogy is hinged on the thought that as long as active volcanoes are continuously gathering strength and stoking up for eruptions, English language would continuously grow, systematically incorporating tendencies that need to be studied and mastered by media professionals. Besides, there is the notion in some quarters that competence in the use of English language does not require much effort and expertise. Nothing can be farther from the truth. “It is precisely attitudes of this nature that have fostered the banalities and outright incompetence that we have encountered in the Nigerian situation” (Dare 16).

As part of the panoply of strategies to hone one's skills in the use of English, George Orwell wrote *Politics and the English Language* in 1946 (quoted in Boyd 82). His advice still holds true today:

- Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in the print.
- Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out.
- Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

We may as well add, especially with regard to the Nigerian broadcast in English, that media professionals should:

- Avoid the use of redundant words.
- Painstakingly learn how to correctly pronounce words.
- Cut out the know-it-all attitude and make out time to study new tendencies and influences in English language and broadcasting.

By way of conclusion, broadcast stations in Nigeria must take advantage of new media technologies as well as consciously and genuinely invest in the training and retraining of their staff, especially those in the news and current affairs section. Coupled with this is the urgent need to enlist all eligible Theatre and Media Arts students in Nigerian universities and other tertiary institutions in a compulsory industrial attachment/training programme by the National Universities Commission (NUC). The reason for this is because a large number of personnel, who work in the Nigerian media industry today, apart from mass communication graduates, are from Theatre and Media Arts programmes in the various institutions of higher learning. Giving them the opportunity to practise what they have learned in the classroom even when they are still on the programme would certainly and ultimately make them better newscasters/presenters/programme anchors in the Nigerian broadcast media environment.

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