# The English Language and Communicability: The Nigerian Experience

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## Abstract

Nigeria is blessed with many indigenous languages that are mainly used in communication, including English as her second language. These languages had never remained static; they develop simultaneously with the developing nature of Nigeria. Communication therefore dominates the various functions performed by language in different societies. Through communication, language helps to ensure social cohesion. Against this background, the importance of language is often assessed from its ability to solve the complex human interactive possibilities. Even in multilingual society where languages co-exist, some languages attract higher recognitions than others, arising from possibility of use in the ever elastic human transactions. Similarly, standardization is a prime index in according a language respect and recognition. Although the history and status of English language in Nigeria may no longer form a new discourse, the extent and manner it has responded to the dynamics in the Nigerian society form the thrust of this paper. It examines the state of the language against the background of current influences like telecom messaging, peer group language use, with emphasis on intelligibility. This paper therefore submits that given the noticeable effects of these influences, Nigeria is heading to a state of great linguistic confusion in the name of language development.

## Introduction

Over the years, many people have shown varying interest in language development in Nigeria. This has triggered the interest of philosophers, psychologists, linguists, sociolinguists and researchers from various disciplines who had attempted explanations of language development, particularly English in Nigeria. Significantly, because of the deterministic function of language, each of these researchers specially views the world from different perspectives. The resultant explanation can be quite varied. The motive in this present effort is not to duplicate their explanations but to complement them while drawing from their perspectives of the linguistic history in order to ascertain the state of the art. The value of a language lies in its communicability – ability to use the words of a language to do things in particular situations; express intentions, achieve purposes, beliefs and desires that one has in communicating.

Nigeria is blessed with many languages which are mainly used in communication. Previous researchers like Babajide (2001:1) citing Bamgbose (1971) and Osaji (1979) feel that "there are about four (400)

hundred native languages in Nigeria, many of them are vernaculars, out of which only three are recognized as major: Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa". Nevertheless, the recognition of these three did not solve the problem of having an official unifying language because of political rivalry, hence the adoption of English language as a lingua franca in Nigeria. What actually gave this work its impetus is the curiosity to reexamine the sojourn and development of English language in Nigeria since its advent and its use in communication at various areas of human endeavour.

The English language has had a remarkable history globally. Historically, it is the speech of some none-too-civilized tribes on the continent of Europe along the North-Sea and having suffered series of invasions and linguistic influences, it has become the most widespread language in the world, used by more peoples for more purposes than any other language on Earth. It is in this regard that efforts shall be made here to re-examine the communication relevance of the English language since its advent in Nigeria. There are, however, basic concepts in this study that need explications such as language, communication and communicability.

### Language

That we could communicate our ideas, feelings, and intentions is because we possess language. This is why Fromkin et al (2003:2) assert that "the possession of language, perhaps more than any other attribute, distinguishes human from other animals" Yes, animals use language (animal language) but it is only humans that have the capability of stringing together discrete units of sounds to form meaningful words arranged in coherent manner. Man can also order and re-order words and sentences to achieve different forms and meanings the way animals could not. Animals can only imitate the words without actually remarking the time and place of use.

Language is so important to human beings that it has been regarded as the source of human life and power. By possession of language, we approach what some might call "human essence", the distinctive qualities of mind that are unique to man (Noam Chomsky, in Fromkin et al (2003:2). According to Algeo and Pyles (2004:2), language is "a system of conventional vocal signs by means of which human beings communicate". Also, Anyanwu (2002:138) sees language as "a system composed of symbols, signs and vocal acts arbitrarily created and conventionally used in communication". From these definitions, we can deduce five characteristics of language:

- language is conventional

- language is a system

- language is habitual

- language is a vocal behaviour and

- language is a means of communication.

To say that language is conventional means that it is generally accepted to be used as a form of communication in particular community, having a force of law although it is not law. When we say that language is a system, we mean that it has some internal principles governing its use. The knowledge of these internal principles will enable a user to string together, in a systematic way, discrete units of sounds into larger ones and be able to assign meanings to them. Again, to say that language is habitual means that one acquires a settled practice that cannot easily be given up like smoking cigarette or drinking alcohol. Language habits once formed become one's self identity. Then, to say that language is a vocal behaviour means that voice is used in language realization which starts from a child's first cry. Language is primarily oral (speech), an unavoidable behaviour formed before writing. Finally, to say that language is a means of communication simply indicates that we use it to transfer information to others. Language enables man to actualize his essence as he communicates with others.

Although language differs from community to community, there is a way in which human languages share universal features in common. Thus, Anyanwu (2002:140) says that the features common to human languages are usually called "language universals", indicating that all languages have "form" and meaning." Form means that every language has sounds and written marks that represent those sounds. Meaning is the idea, which the form inheres to the hearer or reader of the form. Another universal feature of language is that it is primarily vocal or oral having a sound system and the rules guiding the combination of sound elements; a follow up to the universal feature of speech is writing. All human languages can be written in one graphic form or another depending on the graphic conventions of a language community. Thus, language is a means of communicating our ideas, feelings, etc through a conventional system, to other people with whom we are mutually intelligible.

## Communication

Humans in their daily lives busily interact in various ways. Sometimes, we talk to particular persons, sometimes to anyone who would listen, and when we could not find anyone to listen, we talk to ourselves. In our most important and even our most insignificant social transactions, our actions affect the behaviour of those around us. We act in a variety of ways, including gestures, facial expressions and talks to influence others' behaviour. Whenever we do these, we are communicating meaningful information to the decoder.

According to Mclaughlin (2006:3), communication from a theoretical perspective, "is a process of sending and receiving messages that serve to transmit information between persons or groups". In his view, "when someone successfully transmits a message that is understood by someone else, communication has occurred". He further defines communication from a linguistic viewpoint as "a rule-based mental system of language codes for expressing and understanding thought, feelings, and ideas" (McLaughlin 2006 3-4). By code in this definition, it means a system of rules for arranging arbitrary symbols in an orderly, predictable manner that allows anyone who also knows the code to interpret its meaning. Thus, communication is a two-way, continuous process which breaks down when either the sender or receiver fails to do what people use language to do. This leads us to the important issue of communicability – linguistic and communicative competence – which concerns with what people are doing with words of a language in particular situations; expressing intentions, beliefs, and desires that people have in communicating.

Talking is very common and effortless to men but using language successfully is a very complex enterprise. Akmajian et al (2001:363) believe that much goes into using a language besides knowing it and being able to produce and recognize sentences in it. According to them:

> Communication is also a social affair usually taking place within the context of a fairly well defined social situation. In such a context, we rely on one another to share our conception of what the situation is. With people we know, rather than spell everything out, we rely on shared understanding to facilitate communication.

Thus, communication demands that the interlocutors should be knowledgeable in the language development and change so as to achieve fidelity as we share our conception of the different situations in which we interact. In view of this, Bloor and Bloor (2004: 228) confirm that "since language is a human social phenomenon, it develops and changes as people use it for social purposes". This implies that much of our understanding of the world and activities we involve in depend on language. An interlocutor therefore is communicable when he attains both linguistic and communicative competence in a specific language used in his community such that he could express understandable (intelligible) ideas through the appropriate language and in the suitable context.

Now, let us examine the English language and the Nigerian experience.

### The English Language and the Nigerian Experience

The English language is evidently the most colonial legacy of the British colonial masters to Nigeria in addition to the already existing multiplicity of languages. The story of the history of the English language in Nigeria is like Oral Literature in Africa that is transmitted from generation to generation. In the same way, people have traced and recorded the history of English language in Nigeria although none is sure about its actual advent since it was not recorded. This is why Ogu (1992:65) feels that "the exact advent of the English language in Nigeria is not recorded, neither do we know the first Nigerian to speak the English language". According to Babajide (2001:3), Osuafor (2002: 2005: 105), Ogu (1992:65), the advent of the English language in Nigeria dates back to 1472 (15$^{th}$ century) in places like Warri, Calabar, when they started having contact with Europe. Osuafor (2005:105), however, locates the three popular phases of Nigeria's socio-political history: the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras and observes that "Nigeria during the pre-colonial period was influenced by such factors as missionary activities, trade and commerce.

The Portuguese were the first people from Europe to enter the West Coast of Africa. They encountered communication problems with the natives as they tried to understand themselves. Ogu (1992:66) records that:

> The Portuguese Merchants did not speak much of the English language and were more interested in commerce, but as good traders they realized the need to communicate with their customers. The mixture of the indigenous

languages and the Portuguese dialect of English and their own language gave rise to what today we call 'pidgin'.

Thus, 'pidgin' English developed rapidly when the English displaced the Portuguese in the pepper trade since English traders: sea captains and the governors of the English ports were not content to use any form of Portuguese in their dealings with Africans.

To facilitate mutual intelligibility in the use of English language in Nigeria, professional interpreters were involved. They were the freed slaves from Sierra-Leone and Liberia and were already converts to Christianity and Western culture and settled in Freetown in Africa. They promoted the use of English in African countries, particularly Nigeria. This is because, as Crowder (1968) cited in Ogu (1992:68) reveals:

> In the 1930s, many freed slaves from Freetown came back to their original homes in Lagos, Badagry and Abeokuta. Their arrival changed the linguistic typology and the West Coast … some of them settled down to teach the new language to their families and relations.

Little wonder then that English language was taught in Lagos and Calabar as Omolewa (1981) records in Otagburuagu (2002:83):

> The Efik of Calabar who recognized the use of English in trading founded schools to train their children, among other things, in English. Traders made individual efforts to learn and those who had little facility of exposure to sophisticated teaching, improvised with the non-standard, or pidgin English … English became the language of business. And at Calabar it was observed that English was the only European language spoken by Calabar traders.

A situation like this created a struggle for supremacy between English and the numerous native languages spoken in Nigeria. Eventually, the English language was officially adopted as the country's lingua franca. Its adoption as a channel of instruction in 1882 enhanced the training of manpower to run the important government services. According to Baldeh (1990:2), "For these, the English language was a sine qua non. In quick succession the education ordinances and codes of 1882, 1896, 1918 and 1926 were enacted with a view to promoting the new language for general internal use". Thereafter, the colonial administration was determined to train men and

women to effectively and proficiently use English language in various walks of life. Ogu (1992:72) rightly notes that: "Those systems like the legal, the educational, the governmental and the commercial that are part of the colonial set-up were conducted in the English language". The attitudes of the Africans in thinking that their native languages are inferior to English necessitated its adoption without opposition.

### The Influence of English Language in Nigeria: a Functional Perspective

The multiplicity of native languages in Nigeria actually created a problem of understanding in communication among the different ethnic groups and at the question of choosing the official language among these languages, the concept of WAZOBIA was formed. But because of political and ethnic rivalry, it was difficult for Nigerians to adopt any of the three languages: Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa as their official language. It was in this controversial situation that English came as a 'savior' to the language needs of Nigerians hence its adoption as the country's official language. Bamgbose (1995:9) notes that "the present form and status of English language in Nigeria are a result of the contact between English and Nigerian languages in the socio-cultural and political situations".

As soon as English language was converted into a second language, Nigerians reshaped it with a distinctive flavour to suit their experiences. Bamgbose (1995:9) recognizes five dimensions of the influences of English in Nigeria: educational, political, cultural, socio-cultural and linguistic. According to him, educationally, the changing role of the English language as a medium and subject of instruction affected educational language policy aimed at entrenching English as the language of education per excellence, particularly with the requirements of pass in English for certification at most levels of education and credit in it for admission to most humanities – based programmes.

Similarly, Otagburuagu (2002:86) observes that: "…for higher education, it was mandatory to pass qualifying test in the use of English before one could be allowed to register for the General Certificate of Education ordinary level Education. This practice persisted up till 1960 or so". Today in Nigeria, English language is an essential instructional  tool in the educational sector from Nursery school to higher institutions of learning, it is even studied as a subject or as a second language learning and teaching (ESL/EST).

Nigeria also adopted English as a second language because of its role in government affairs. Bamgbose (1995:10) asserts that Nigeria enthusiastically accepted the English language seeing its advantages in terms of political participation and employment. Thus, Otagburuagu (2002:87) confirms that: "the mastery of the English language provided a handy tool for the Nigerian nationalist movement and helped the leadership to initiate and sustain the political struggles that later led to the emergence of an independent sovereign nation". The role English language plays in the Nigerian politics can not be over emphasized as up till today, it is the language used in political campaigns, government news, policies, budgets etc. It is said that language helps a nation to project her culture to the outer world. Nigerian culture is greatly affected as they try to exhibit their culture through a second language. The result is that as they use Nigerian English, they introduce new ways of life, modes of dressing, eating (table manners and food) etc dates, years and months could be expressed through code-mixing of vernacular and English. Thus, an Igbo speaker will say 'Ubochi Tuesday', 'Aro 2011' and 'Onwa July' as they lack words in Igbo language to replace them. Nevertheless, English language is used in transmitting of our culture through spoken or written medium and through such channels as radio, television etc.

Again, English language influences the socio-linguistic perspective of every Nigerian such that everyone aspires to learn it for its role in several domains. In most social gatherings involving different ethnic groups, English is often used. Again, all official transactions, higher education, legislature, entertainment are dominated by the use of English because of the official position it is accorded with.

Linguistically also, Nigerian languages were influenced resulting in code-mixing and lexical borrowing. However, Nigerians resort to English language to ease communication in the case differences in language, to transact business, social gatherings, give instructions in schools at all levels, write literary works, laws, budgets, minutes of meetings, etc. Therefore the role of English is summarized in the following terms of Olagoke (1984) in Osuafor (2002:22):

> Because of the extreme multiplicity of languages in most ELS countries and the relatively underdeveloped state of the indigenous languages, and also for reason of colonialism which has given a lot of prestige and bread and butter advantage to the study and learning of English, the

language is used for official purposes and for education, commerce, administration, the media and for national and international communications.

By international communication, it is meant that English language necessitates international politics, trade, sports, diplomacy, technology transfer and other related matters (Osuafor, 2002:23).

### The English Language and Communicability: The Journey So Far

When we talk of what people use language to do, we also talk of what they do with words in particular situations as they try to express their intentions, purposes, beliefs and desires that they have in communicating. Actually, much goes into using a language besides knowing it and being able to produce and recognize sentences in it. In other words, being linguistically competent does not guarantee communicative competence. Hymes (1972) in Cook (2003:42) like Yule (1996:197) suggests that possibility, feasibility, appropriateness and attestedness are what one needs for successful communication. In this sense, a communicatively competent person knows what is formally possible in a language, that is, whether an instance conforms to the rules of grammar and pronunciation. To Cook (2003:42), "knowledge of possibility is not sufficient in itself in communication". Sometimes however, a communicatively competent user of a language may know the rules, be capable of following them, but nevertheless break them deliberately as he wants to be witty, creative, intimate etc.

By being communicatively feasible, a good user of language should avoid using concepts that cannot easily be processed by the receiver. Being communicable demands that a user of language should use sentences that are feasible and which should not unnecessarily obscure important information. Significantly too, attainment of communicative competence entails knowledge of using language appropriately by considering the context and norms as well as topic of discourse.

One should also be capable of attesting whether or not something has been done – whether it is possible to use a kind of slang or jargon in certain contexts, and making sure such usage does not break any conventional rule; whether his language use is feasible – easily processed and readily understood, and appropriate - ensuring that it does not deviate from sensitive social conventions.

Leech and Svartvit (2002:10-11) rightly say that: "Writing is transmitted by letters and other visible marks, produced in writing and received in reading. Good, all-round communicative competence involves all four skills: speaking and writing (production), hearing and reading (reception)". In trying to attain communicative competence in English language in Nigeria, the two channels of communication should be given equal importance although writing is seen by Otagburuagu (1997:4) as a higher order communication skill. Similarly, Leech and Svartvit (2002:10) affirm this in their words: "Normal speech is processed in real time and is transitory, leaving no trace other than what we may remember … writing, on the other hand, takes longer to produce and can be read not just once but many times. Writing leaves a permanent record".

Thus, students in particular should in speaking and writing adhere strictly to the grammatical norms, especially in writing that is made public in some way, such as printed books, term papers, assignments and other academic work and which leave a record that can be read by thousands of cotemporary readers, and also by later generations.

Considering the foregoing explications, it behooves us to pause and ask ourselves this pertinent question, "Where exactly are we in the journey so far?" The journey being referred to here is our quest to learn English language as our second language in Nigeria. The development of any language (Like English) is always geared towards standardization and as individuals undergo the learning processes of that language, they encounter series of influences that inhibit their attainment of communicative competence. In the learning of English language, such influences are located, among others, in the use of text messaging, slang, pidgin, code-mixture etc which have corrupted the standard of English language usage in various communication situations in Nigeria especially in education. This research is however disturbed by the extent of the influence text messaging is having on the academic performances of Nigerian students in speaking, reading, listening, especially in their written English.

Text messaging simply refers to the art of exchanging concise written information, texts or messages among texters, using short message service (SMS). Its use, of course, started in Nigeria in 2001 during Olusegun Obasanjo's leadership and people started using it for different communication purposes as exchanging information on certain events, invitation to religious, social, political, academic meetings, making business

contacts and sending goodwill messages, (Taiwo: 2009:102). However, it has been observed that the use of text messaging is common among youths – students in secondary and tertiary institutions in Nigeria, and will it raise doubts if we say that primary school pupils are already involved in text messaging?

Text messaging habit is like language habit, which when formed becomes one's second self and difficult to stop. Thus, our teaching experience has revealed that most students in the higher institutions of learning in Nigeria, especially students of English, had earlier formed the habit of using text messages in most of their communications. The reasons are obvious: it is quick, relatively cheap, allows privacy, more conveniently, allows creativity, used in establishing new and re-enforcing old relationships etc.

Text messaging is characterized by word shortening, abbreviation, capitalization, acronyms, poor punctuation, bad grammar, poor spelling, wrong use of small letters, word symbols, and other forms of text lingo. Some of these are illustrated in the texts below:

> T1:    I'I liv 4 skl @ 8:00am. I hop U' r goin (I will leave for school at 8:00am I hope you are going?)

> T2:    It's gr8 2 hia dt U've logd out of 200 lvl and abt 2 browz 2ru 300 levl. May u doblclick gudnes, meci, & danload success, gud helt & favo.ai wish u a Sucesfl Nw SESN. (It is great to hear that you have logged out of 200 level and about to browse through 300 level. May you double click goodness, mercy, and download success, good health and favour. I wish you a successful new session).

> T3:    Dis xmas season, jehova o bu ngwongwo'll carry al ur problems, U'I ova tek ur enemies. Hapi xmas IJN (This Christmas season, Jehova, carrier of all yokes will carry your problems. You will overtake your enemies. Happy Christmas in Jesus name).

Incidentally, this habit of using text linguistic features is not controlled as students transfer (unconsciously) the use to their academic work and this influences how they are subsequently evaluated. Ironically, the creativity which text users achieve makes them less intelligent, responsible, motivated, studious, dependable and hard working if they fail to control the use during formal academic writings.

Although text messaging enhances communication (informally), this paper expresses the fear that it has more negative influences on Nigerians as regards communicability in English language. It is true that text messaging allows for creativity among text users but to what extent does it enhance mutual intelligibility (when the receiver could not decode the text lingo)? And to what extent do text users achieve possibility, feasibility, appropriateness and accuracy which are needed for successful communication in English?

A close examination of students' academic performance in our schools will attest to the degree of the influence of text messaging on their proficiency in written English. The reason is because they spend a greater period texting messages, making and receiving calls, saving answers to likely exam questions to be used in cheating than reading. Thus, they misappropriate the opportunities they would have used in learning to write formal, semi-formal and proper informal letters, and even essays, to texting messages. This habit invariably affects their speech as students hardly have adequate responses to questions in classes. In exams, quizzes, and assignments, they cause confusion for their examiner by using unconventional features of text messaging such as using symbols to represent the word whose name sounds like a syllable of the words, as in 2day (today) b4 (before) gr8 (great) @ (at) 9t (night) bcos (because) etc. They also use capital and small letters indiscriminately, as writing first person pronoun 'I' in small letter, 'i' and using capital letters in the middle of sentences as 'i wish u success in ALL ur papers'

In view of this, Rosen et al (2009: 3) feel that: "Young adults who used more language-based textisms (short cuts such as LOL,, 2nite, etc) in daily writing produced worst formal writing than young adults who used fewer linguistic textisms in daily writing". This is true because, if one fails to consciously avoid its use in formal writing, the inevitable resultant effect is poor performance in academic assessment. Text messaging destroys the ways students read, think and write. It makes them to show lazy attitude towards reading and writing as they are incapable of thinking rightly as to decode ideas accurately. Again, they find it difficult separating formal and informal English as they freely use "U" for "you", "4" for "for", "pls" for "please", "2mrw" for "tomorrow" etc during formal academic work. However, such students believe that they write well in assignments and exams as they come back to question their low grades as soon as results are published.

Text messaging is therefore, harming students' writing and grammar as their spellings are atrocious. Incidentally, some of the abbreviations they use, which sometimes they do not know the full meanings, are assaulting written English. Their academic work are being written with poor punctuation, bad grammar, wrong spellings and inappropriate abbreviations which they hardly realize they use even after re-reading them. According to Holloway (2011: 10-11):

> … SMS gained its distinctive language, often called SMS speak, text speak or text spk. Writers and language experts have come out against the use of SMS abbreviations. British journalist and broadcaster, John Humphry has said that texting is "wrecking our language" and has called its users "vandals". Linguistic traditionalists worry that text speak will reduce users' ability to write correct English sentences, and will harm their spelling and vocabulary. Because SMS speak originated from the need to send very short messages, it discourages complex vocabulary and prevents the creation of longer, more sophisticated phrases.

The situation noted above is the worry of this paper that students use text messaging to bastardize and deform the English language worst than bilinguals have done with code-mixing of our indigenous languages with English. What is more, students lack an in- depth knowledge of their discipline and can not involve in independent academic work.

### Recommendations

The success of this paper derives from its significance without which it would have been written in isolation. In view of the observations made in this paper, the following recommendations are therefore made in order to achieve communicability in the English language:

   a. Students should not only see text messaging as the easier and quicker means of communication but should realize its negative effects on their academic works. They should imbibe the practice of writing formal letters and essays, adhering to grammatical conventions and writing mechanics.

   b. They should be conscious to distinguish between informal and formal writing so that the uses of text message features are not transferred to formal academic work.

c. Parents should avoid giving phones to their children as early as primary and secondary schools as symbol of their love for them. They should rather motivate them to learn to write with their pen and paper both at home and in schools.

d. Lecturers should emphasize the avoidance of text messaging among students by organizing public enlightenment lectures where such habits will be discouraged by telling them the educational implications. They should also give and assess students' works properly. This is in line with what Otagburuagu (1997:10) means when he cites Broughton and Brumfit (1980:20) as saying that: "The ability to put sentences together effectively needs systematic encouragement and sometimes explicit teaching and part of the work in a writing course involves teaching students to be sensitive to the rules of discourse in English".

e. Students and Nigerians in general should ensure that their written English is communicatively possible, feasible, appropriate and attestable to avoid linguistic confusion and unintelligibility.

If these recommendations are effected, it is believed that our quest for communicability in English would be achieved.

## Conclusion

This paper concludes that text messaging is a universal phenomenon commonly used in communication and unconsciously transferred to most academic writing by Nigerian students. Text message users resort to it mostly because of limited space, maintaining a desired speed, lack of the knowledge of appropriate words and spellings etc. The consequences are obvious – poor performance in academic activities among Nigerian students and in general language use linguistic confusion leading to unintelligibility among interlocutors etc.

Therefore, students and in general, language users, should not be overwhelmed or mislead by the social relevance of text messaging. They should rather aim at attaining mastery of and communicability in the target language because bastardization of a language cannot enhance its development. Anything worth doing is worth doing well.

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