

Chapter Sixteen

THE DWINDLING STANDARD OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE: A CHALLENGE TO THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER

Macpherson Nkem Azuike

Introduction

This paper presupposes that there is a wealth of knowledge on the role and place of English language in Nigeria and in the world, and would therefore, not rehearse them for the sake of space. The semantic presentation of the topic deserves more than a passing glance. No doubt, the reference here reminds us of such familiar and trite clichés as falling, declining, deteriorating, reducing and decreasing standard of English language. Two fundamental questions become instantly apparent. Is the standard of English referred to here measurable in absolute terms? In a world of ever- evolving mutually intelligible dialects of English, native and foreign, can speakers of English still be restrained by or tethered to the apron string of one inviolable, immutable standard deserving of sacerdotal reverence? The interest here, definitely, is not in the advocacy for grammatical permissiveness but rather, the recognition of the productive creativity of the emerging standards of English all over the world. “Dwindling standard” of English language presents us with cline, a halting gradation and luckily, not a free fall which would have recreated for the English language speaking world, the linguistic confusion of the biblical Tower of Babel (See Gen. Xi: 1-9). The topic therefore suggests that what we are dealing with is a gradual but inexorably continuous slide in the standard of the English language. If this is the case, the need for strategies to halt and remedy the slide becomes acute. We shall borrow from Peter Strevens, an operational definition of Standard English just for its referential value; “a particular dialect of English, being the only non-localized dialect of global currency without significant variation, universally accepted as the appropriate and educational target in teaching English.”

Jowitt (1991: 25-26) opines that when people complain *about falling standard of English* language they are actually referring to *falling performance* and not the *standard per se*. The implication is that one’s inability to attain a set standard does not amount to a lowering of that standard but a reflection of the individual’s difficulty to achieve the set goal. Jowitt notes that similar anxiety over falling standard “has for years been voiced by British teachers about their own students’ performance...” If we say that the standard of the English language is not dwindling or falling, how do we account for the centuries-old anxieties and daily strictures

Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Jos.

whose decibel is exponentially magnified by each passing generation? For sure, there is cause for concern.

Change is Constant

When we grieve the dwindling standard of English language, are we per chance expressing nostalgia for the good old days — a golden era reminiscent of untainted grammatical usage? Was there ever a period when there was a generally acknowledged, nationally prescribed and devotedly and religiously observed perfect standard — a touchstone? Aitchison (1981:26) cautions that:

Purists behave as if there was a vintage year when language achieved a measure of excellence which we should all strive to maintain. In fact, there never was such a year. The language of Chaucer or Shakespeare's time was no better and no worse than that of our own —just different.

In her book, *Language Change: Progress or Decay?* Aitchison (1981:6) reminds us of the inevitability of change and that “in a world where humans grow old, tadpoles change into frogs, and milk turns into cheese, it would be strange if language alone remained unaltered.” Change, indeed, is constant and affects all things — language inclusive. It is, therefore, not strange that the standard of English language is prone to continual vacillation. It can be said that, like all things, the language is responding to a universal law.

There is no doubt that man sometimes, is mulishly obdurate about change perhaps for no better reason than the lethargy of disrupting his comfort zone. A sudden re-adjustment of life style and an unpractised re-orientation of perception are either totally resisted or slowly accommodated. When language is affected, attitudes harden and people hold tenaciously to their linguistic beliefs. Aitchison (1981:16) estimates that:

Large numbers of intelligent people condemn and resent language change, regarding alterations as due to unnecessary sloppiness, laziness or ignorance. Letters are written to newspapers and indignant articles are published, all deploring the fact that new pronunciations are continuation.

This is just a foretaste of the umbrage expressed by many at the brazen or incipient, perhaps, insidious change they notice in English language. The resistant spirit has always been alive in all generations dating back to dim antiquity. Below is a sprinkling of the views which stand Canute-like against the unstoppable waves of linguistic change — a forlorn hope indeed. A reviewer of the Pocket Oxford Dictionary of English in 1978 announced that his “only sadness” was the current editor's preparedness “to bow to every slaphappy and slipshod

change of meaning” (Aitchison) p.17. Another, in (1972) condemned the “blind surrender to the momentum or inertia of slovenly and tasteless ignorance and insensitivity (p.17). Yet, another in (1979) compared a word which changed its meaning to “a piece of wreckage with a ship’s name on it floating away from a sunken hulk”. But the ultimate reaction came from Ogden Nash who devoted a whole poetic stanza in his dirge appropriately entitled “*Laments for a Dying Language*” to mourn the changes taking place in English.

Coin brassy words at will, debase the coinage;
 We’re in an if-you-cannot-lick-them-join age,
 A slovenliness provides its own excuse age,
 Where usage overnight condones misusage
 Farewell, farewell to my beloved language,
 Once English, now a vile orangutanguage.

All the commentators above are inextricably yoked in their revulsion to change. They represent the centurion and gatekeepers of the status quo. Unfortunately for them, change is the only universal constant in human affairs.

The Dwindling Standard of the English Language

The claim that the standard of English language is dwindling appears to be an international affliction reverberating from one English-speaking border post to another, native and foreign. Since this is an international concern, all those in a position to make this judgement and who have done so, cannot all be wrong. There must be something untoward happening to the language which has persistently irritated its users to warrant the past and present hue and cry. If indeed, the standard of English is dwindling — and we can say it is — is it not possible that this is because its historical progenitor was also prone to positive eclecticism. The historical interaction of the speakers of Dutch, Latin, French and English for instance, enriched the vocabulary of modern English. The grace, subtlety and charm supplied by French, and the ornateness of Latin, a language Ben Johnson was so enamoured with that he described it as the “queen of tongues”, are just two examples of the positive influences of these languages on English. One can argue, with some justification that English has always been prone to variation as it freely adopts and adapts features of other languages it comes in contact with. It is this kind of internal momentum that lends to English the receptive dynamics for change — be it positive or negative. Quirk (1962) acknowledges that:

Standards of acceptable speech will vary — as they do in Britain itself. The language’s assets may indeed be increased rather than diminished by wider use, overseas varieties of English may continue to contribute to the richness and resources of the language/ as a whole, as they have done in the past.

Those who are so embittered about the dwindling standard of English language in Nigeria for instance, also insist that the decline in the success rate in other subjects offered by students is traceable to the decline in the standard of English. This is arguable, but they have a point, because other school subjects, except the indigenous languages, are taught in English. Obanya (1981:21) agrees that the students' "lack of mastery of English also tends to make the mastery of other subjects which are taught in English difficult." He is, therefore, convinced that "the Nigerian child would perform better in school if the English language barrier to his understanding of other subjects was removed." Since our topic does not localize the incidence of the dwindling standard of English language, it provides for us the latitude to examine the scenario in other parts of the English speaking world. Let us now trace the trajectory of complaints of dwindling standard of English starting with Nigeria.

At the inaugural conference of the Nigeria English Studies Association held in Jos in April 1966, proceedings of which were published in 1968, Adebisi Salami stated with considerable conviction that:

It is common knowledge that the standard of English in the country is steadily declining. This is a serious situation which calls for urgent and serious attention. The standard is declining in the elementary and secondary schools as well as in our post secondary institutions. Some university faculties, for instance, have relaxed their admission requirements simply because they are finding difficulties in obtaining enough fully qualified candidates. Thus, many candidates without a pass in English are admitted; after three or four years most of them pass out of the University as graduates.

Salami believes that although such candidates are put through a remedial programme in their first year at the university, for several systemic and structural reasons, they are "never completely cured of their language deficiencies." It is from this pool of English language-deficient graduates that new teachers are recruited to teach English language and other school subjects to a new generation of learners. The new teachers, in turn, unabashedly, infect their wards with what this writer would refer to as an English Language Deficiency Syndrome (ELDS) and the process is perpetuated. Jowitt (1991:25), and Adej are in Freeman and Munzali (eds) (1986) have also joined in the mantra of dwindling standard of English language. For Jowitt, it is indeed, a paradox that "though the general position of English in national life is perhaps stronger than it has ever been, the quality of the English spoken and written by Nigerians is perceived by most Nigerians qualified to judge, to have been deteriorating over a long period." This paradox is not only disturbing but poses a great challenge to us as English language teachers. No doubt, there are more Nigerians today who are exposed to English language in the numerous primary, secondary and tertiary institutions in the country. In spite of the large population undergoing one form of education or another in English, and the paradoxical likelihood that more Nigerians today than ever before have

benefited directly from native-speaker-driven education, we are still confronted by declining competence in the language. New Universities have been founded and the old ones are oversubscribed by qualified candidates who yearly, cannot all be admitted because of space constraint. The candidates are qualified because they possess, and some anticipate, an O' Level credit pass in English. When the lucky ones are finally admitted, they all undergo the training in *Use of English* made compulsory for freshmen in our universities. So what are we doing wrongly? This is a worrisome situation indeed. With this number of people benefiting from education through the medium of English language, why is there no appreciable progress in the standard of English language in Nigeria? While we do not subscribe to the sacrifice of quality for quantity, we suspect that there might be some corresponding leap in the former, no matter the infinitesimal percentage.

Similarly, Adejare regrets that “the nation’s huge investment in the English language appears not to be yielding any substantial dividends.” His justification for this claim is anchored on the fact that “the percentage and quality of passes in the subject at primary and secondary school levels are disconcertingly low nation-wide.” Although it was not possible to secure current statistics to corroborate this claim with new realities, at the time of writing this paper because of systemic limitations, the persistent national outcry on the subject may lend credence to its authenticity. Other commentators who have expressed opinions on the subject at different times include Adekunle (1974), Banjo (1974, 1981), Ubahakwe (1980), Adesanoye (1976) to mention just four. We shall conclude the Nigerian segment with a felicitous observation by Oji (1984), not because it is the last word on the subject, - there are torrents of disquiet on the issue — but for its magisterial finality. “It is self-evident truth that the standard of English in this country is at rock bottom, and cannot go any further.” Call this educated pessimism or informed clairvoyance, the point has definitely been made that all is not well with the standard of English in Nigeria.

The situation described for Nigeria is not too different from the concern expressed in the Philippines over the dwindling standard of English language. For instance, Sol Jose Vanzi, the Chief News Editor of Philippines Headline News Online [PHNO], on 23' May 2006, reported that graduating High School students who took an official achievement test in 2004-2005 performed abysmally in English language. The result showed that only 6.59 per cent could read, speak and comprehend English sufficiently to deserve college placement. About 44.25 per cent had no English skills whatsoever. This disturbing revelation was all a Representative in the House of Assembly, Eduardo Gullas, needed to sponsor a bill which sought to make English the medium of instruction at all levels of education in the Philippines. He further warned that if the dwindling standard of the English language remained unchecked, it “would eventually erode the competitiveness of the country’s human resources, both here and

English equally alarmed the Philippines government and elicited direct Presidential intervention. President Gloria Aroyo (Mrs.) ordered the Education Department to make English the primary medium of instruction nation-wide.

After the use of Malay in Malaysia as the medium of instruction in schools for nearly twenty years, the damage done and its consequences were more than apparent. Malaysia has now reverted to the use of English language as the medium of education. This policy decision was made amidst “widespread concern over the perceived falling standards of English language proficiency.” www.socialsciencesconference.com.

In Hong Kong where the Deputy Secretary for Education and Manpower, Chris Wardlaw, challenged the “dwindling standard” paradigm, his defence, if anything, confirmed the general concern over the matter.

Almost daily there is commentary, informal and anecdotal or selective use, even misuse of emerging data which paints a depressing view about our so called “falling English standards.” Any ‘evidence’ to the contrary is given less prominence or disbelieved. <http://www.news.gov.hk/en/category/ontherecord>.

We can only say here that one man’s optimism does not efface the pessimism of the majority. Chris Wardlaw appears to be the lone voice in the wilderness. Having seen the situation in EFL/ESL countries we now ask: what are the native speakers of English saying on the matter? If we are expecting a different response in the native speaker environment, a huge disappointment awaits us.

The U.K. is not immune to linguistic erosion. The bug of dwindling standard is also biting hard in the U.K. Examiners now complain of students writing examinations in text message style. It is obvious that the standard of English is not faring better here, nativity notwithstanding. Dr Ken Lodge of the University of East Anglia had cause to complain that “the quantity of communication is increasing but the quality is rapidly decreasing. There are problems with University students struggling with English.” www.tes.co.uk/search/searchdisplay. The political authorities in the U.K. are not unaware of the decline. For instance,

Sarah Teaher, the Education spokeswoman for the Liberal Democrats was piqued about the situation as reported by Richard Garner in an article entitled “School tests show decline in standard of English”. She declares:

This is simply unacceptable. That so many boys reach their with such poor language skills is utterly depressing. It barely needs saying that without a command of English they will struggle to either further education or work (google search 14/9/2006).

Similar concerns are not unknown in America. Dr Edward Finegan, a University of Southern California Professor who is also a *Do You Speak American?* Online expert quips wittily in one of his monthly response sessions, “Forget mudslides, earthquakes, hurricanes, and tornadoes: The alleged downward spiral of English is our peril.” He admits that “too many high school graduates cannot adequately understand the standard English” in a magazine like *Newsweek* and a newspaper like *The Cincinnati Enquirer*. <http://www.pbs.org/speaklask> This shows that the story is the same on both sides of the Atlantic. Before we draw the curtain on this section of this paper, it is necessary to demonstrate that the complaint about dwindling standard of English is not the exclusive preserve of Anglo-phone speech communities. As long ago as 1858, Jakob Grimm stated with nostalgia that “Six hundred years ago every rustic knew, that is to say, practised daily, perfections and niceties in the German language of which the best grammarians nowadays do not even dream.” If a German feels this way about German, as many of us feel about English, it then means there must be some quirk of human tendency to romanticize the past and fulminate against the present. That is perhaps why mankind periodically, takes the temperature of “the good old days.” Aitchison (1981:20) captures succinctly, the spirit of the times when she notes that:

Every generation inevitably believes that the clothes, manners and speech of the following one have deteriorated. We would therefore expect to find a respect for conservative language in every century, and every culture and, in literate societies, a reverence for the language of the ‘best authors’ of the past.

The Challenge to the English Language Teacher

From the discussions above, there is no doubt that the English language teacher can be seen as a victim, a culprit, an accomplice, an adjudicator or a self-appointed grammar policeman that has failed in his duty. Head or tail, he is culpable. If he is a product of the dwindling standard of English, then he is half-baked and cannot impart what he does not have. If he is well trained in the English language, he is still blameworthy for producing graduates majority of whom the society considers to be illiterate. This is the dilemma of the English language teacher at every level of the educational system in Nigeria. Part of the problem of the teaching of English in our schools, no doubt, arises from the use of ill-equipped teachers most of whom are in the profession for want of better things to do. The teaching profession thus,

becomes a dumping ground of last resort or a “waiting room” from where such teachers move on to more alluring and lucrative ventures and professions. This is sad because teaching is indeed, a noble profession! Often, the teachers who remain are ill-motivated, poorly paid, uninspired and uninspiring. This condition creates palpable discontent which often boils over to the usual debilitating labour unrest with its attendant disruption of the school calendar. Well trained English language teachers are also insufficient in number for the geometrically, expanding educational institutions in the country. At best, their impact is minimal or totally eclipsed by the negative influence of their reluctant counterparts who accelerate the decline in the standard of English. This situation produces a vicious circle in the country’s educational system. Since the English language teacher is also blamed for poor performances in other school subjects, the seriousness and challenge of his role and responsibility in education become more acute.

To tackle the inherent problems identified, the conscientious English language teacher must re-strategize his approach and methodology in order to motivate and inspire the learner. He should re-design his teaching procedure to suit the needs of the Nigerian learner in terms of the prescribed texts, the curriculum content and teaching goals. The wide gulf between the target language milieu and the second language environment can be bridged or narrowed by the domestication of examples which reflect the socio-cultural context of the learners. The continuous re-training of the English language teachers through seminars, workshops and conferences will ensure rejuvenation of interest in the job on hand and in the task ahead. Examination agencies should discourage and discontinue the use of non-English language graduate teachers who are often engaged to mark English language examinations for the simple fact that they speak English.

The heterogeneity, multilingual and multi-social background of the learner must be deliberately accommodated in the pedagogical strategies adopted by the teacher. Failure to do this may be counterproductive.

Conclusion

This paper recognizes the international relevance of the topic treated. The complaint about the dwindling standard of English cannot be wished away in a hurry. The generation after this will join in the song, and that, after the next, will also not surrender the mantra. We believe that the English language will maintain and increase its strangle-hold as the most vibrant international language of the world. Through the internet and pop culture, more people will embrace English in whatever form they encounter it, in places where some other major languages now hold sway.

It will also inevitably suffer mutilations and adulterations especially where the need for it is tangential. This will ensure that the complaint about dwindling or falling standard will continue for a long time to come. Unlike Samuel Johnson who boasted that he laboured to refine the English language “to grammatical purity, and to clear it from colloquial

barbarisms, licentious idioms, and irregular combinations”, the Emeritus Professor Ayo Banjo (1974) advises that:

The question we should be asking ... is not whether we speak and write better or poorer English than our forebears, immediate or remote, but rather whether our total proficiency in English is equal to the task demanded of it in present-day Nigeria.

Perhaps, this is what is pragmatic and more important for us.

The English language teacher holds the key to the moderation of the disparities in the standards that will develop. But this will depend on how well trained and motivated the relevant authorities make the teacher. Provision of and exposure to better teaching equipment, conducive environment, appropriate financial recompense for their suffering and sacrifice, periodic recognition and acknowledgement of their efforts through national awards and cash rewards, job guarantee for the hard working and conscientious; these and more will provide the tonic for the teachers to excel in their duties. And this is expected to rub off positively on the learners under their care. We want to end our discussion on a positive note by agreeing with Jowitt (2006:20) who affirms that:

English in Nigeria is alive, an ever greater number of Nigerians are speaking and writing it with some degree of competence, and some are continuing an established tradition of using it with such originality that they are able to make their mark, on the international) scene.

Nigeria’s Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Helon Habila are some of our nationals to whom the English language has surrendered its mystery and sophistication in spite of its dwindling standard all over the world. These Nigerian torch bearers have left indelible literary footprints in the sands of time.

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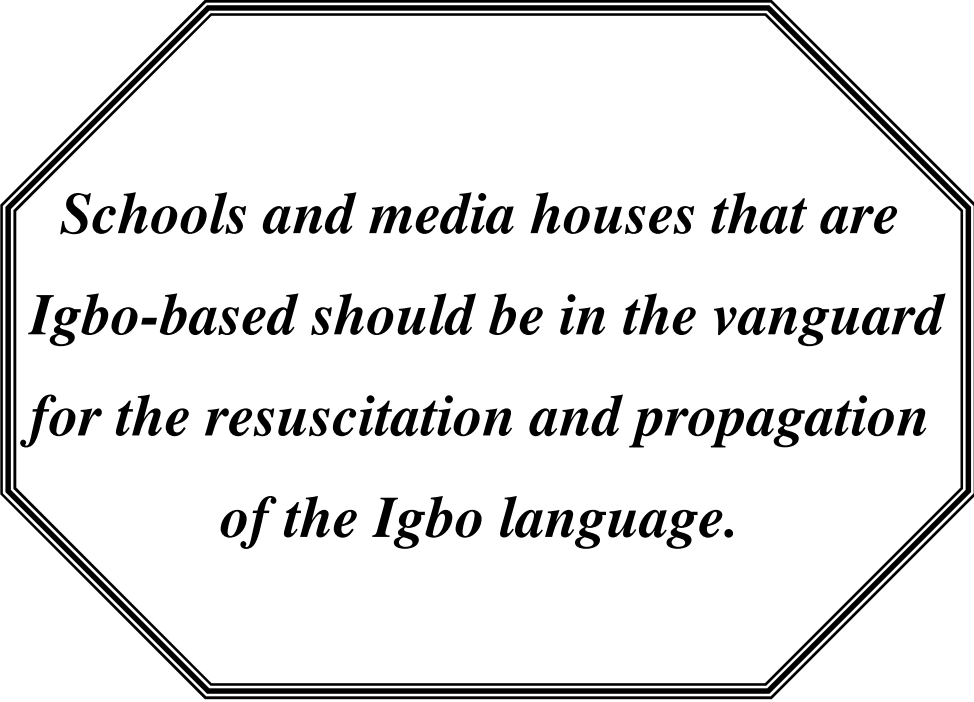
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*Schools and media houses that are
Igbo-based should be in the vanguard
for the resuscitation and propagation
of the Igbo language.*