GLOBAL PRACTICES OF LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Proceedings of the 2008 International Online Language Conference (IOLC 2008)

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Editors

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Introduction

The first International Online Language Conference was successfully held in September 2008. This event invited professors, master and PhD students, and all academicians around the world to submit papers to this International event in the areas related to the conference theme. The event was organized by International Online Knowledge Service Provider (IOKSP).

Main conference objectives was to provide a platform for language educators, academicians, and researchers from diverse cultural backgrounds to exchange ideas and best practices for effective language teaching and learning, to promote better understanding of cultural diversity in language learning, to encourage language educators to be involved in the research process, in order to achieve Comprehensive Excellence, and to produce a collection of scholarly papers presented at the conference addressing the issue of globalization in language teaching and learning.

A number of papers from around the world were submitted to this International event and some selected papers were presented online. Proactive participation of academicians with the fruitful discussions made this conference a great success.

Sincerely,
Azadeh Shafaei (Conference Manager)
http://www.iolc2008.ioksp.com

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On the Revitalization of Nigeria's Local Languages

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Abstract

In this era of linguistic globalization and the attempt to build monocultural socie-ties, people's cultural and linguistic rights, especially in Africa are seriously violated. The linguistic situation in Nigeria where indigenous languages have been banished from homes, schools and other vital spheres of life is a case in point. Although there has been much call for intensive teaching and learning of the languages with a view to revitalizing them, the basic fact that prospective learners see very little value in learn-ing them is indicative of their neglect. To foster indigenous language teach-ing/learning in Nigeria, this paper posits that equal, if not greater, attention should be paid to a third essential factor – language utility. In this respect, the article dwells on political communication, health and banking as some of the strongholds of national life to find expression for the empowerment of indigenous languages in Nigeria.

Keywords: Indigenous languages, endangerment, language education, utility, revita-lization,   national development

Introduction

The African continent is in the present times beset with diverse challenges that range from revamping the ailing economies of nations, managing social conflicts, tackling the scourge of HIV/AIDS, fixing the daunting problem of leadership, devel-oping in science and technology, to, above all, breaking the jinx of that continent with most of its countries labelled 'Third World'. It must be noted, however, that trying to capture the African condition in the 21st century without touching on the alarming hurricane which is blowing over African cultural values, especially the linguistic rights of the African people would leave us with a warped re/presentation, as foreign languages such as English, French and Portuguese have displaced the local languages in national development processes. No wonder then that 'UNESCO Release on the International Mother Language Day' ranks Africa as 'linguistically the least-known continent' [1], in that most of its local languages are not adequately mobilized and empowered for nation building.

Although linguistic diversity is a phenomenon common to most African countries, Blench (1998, 1) sees Nigeria as 'the most complex country in Africa, linguistically, and one of the most complex in the world'. Aito (2005) also lends credence to the in-nate heterogeneity of the Nigerian linguistic reality, arguing that about 20% of Afri-ca's more than two thousand languages are spoken in Nigeria. But the question of lin-guistic complexity in Africa generally transcends the issue of linguistic plurality. The International Development Research Centre submits:

Linguists disagree about many aspects of the language situation in Africa, but there is no controversy about the fact that, as a continent, Africa presents the most complex linguistic picture in the world. This complexity is due not only to the number of languages spoken by Africans but also to the diversity of the language families and of the functions assigned to the various languages spoken in the same country and, in many cases, by the same individual. Across the continent, the language situation varies widely: some countries have only one indigenous language, such as Burundi, where everyone speaks a dialect of Kirundi; other countries have hundreds of indigenous languages, such as Nigeria, which has at least 400. This internal complexity is not just a matter of the number of languages — it is, above all, also a matter of the relative power and status of the languages. [2]

Thus, experts have observed that of all the numerous languages in Nigeria (estimated about 500) a few are largely spoken; a few are taught in schools and universities while most of them are hardly documented.

Consequently, it is the apprehension of linguists, individuals and emerging cultural organizations that Nigeria's local languages are endangered. Apart from not using the languages in official domains, it is worrisome that many Nigerian families are today confronted with the problem of the use of their mother tongues. Children brought up in their immediate environment do not speak their indigenous languages let alone read or write in them. Their parents who, though understand and use the indigenous languages, discourage their children from doing so and would prefer that they go for English.

How come that Nigeria is in this linguistic situation? Salawu (2004) argues that communication in indigenous languages in most developing countries has been adversely affected due to the fact of their colonization. He concludes: 'This fact of history has actually affected the sensibility of the people of the developing countries' (Salawu, 2004, 197). It is noted in the 'Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literatures' that 'Colonialism created some of the most serious obstacles against African languages and literatures […] these colonial obstacles still haunt independent Africa and continue to block the mind of the continent' [3]. It is in this light that Mohochi posits that:

Current language attitudes and perceptions in Africa are, to a large extent, attributable to colonial language policies which independent African states have been unable to change considerably. With the benefit of hindsight, one can only conclude that colonial administration machine, knowing the important role of language in shaping one's identity, initiated language policies that were meant to subdue their subjects, making them more susceptible to western languages and cultures. Many began to disdain their languages and cultural practices, trying instead very hard to learn the western ways. [4]

Besides the factor of colonialism, the current onslaught of globalization which impacts not only on the political and economic systems of nations but also on their cultural identity is noteworthy. Maduagwu (1999, 3) observes that:

[…] some Third World scholars and their sympathizers argue that globalization is not as value-free as it is being portrayed in the

West. Globalization is only the latest stage of European economic and cultural domination of the rest of the world which started with colonialism, went through imperialism and have [sic] now arrived at globalization stage.

This viewpoint is put succinctly on BBC News by Koome Kirimi, a respondent to the poser 'Are Indigenous Languages Dead?' to mark 2006 as the Year of African Languages: 'The world is ailing from an illness: globalization. The give-and-take dynamics of globalization have seen African states give away more than they've received. African states are giving away their language, their culture, their identity' [5].

With the clipping of the mother tongues in Nigeria in relation to their status and roles in national development, English has always served as the official language. Regrettably, Adegbija (2004, 34) notes that only about 20% of Nigerians are proficient in the language. Obviously, English is largely a minority language monopolized by the elite. This polarity in the Nigerian society as in some other African countries goes a long way to lend credence to the view that any group which has access to language power will have consequent political and economic power and vice versa. This situation is most unhealthy when we consider Bamgbose's (1998, 11) viewpoint:

> The fact is that if development is to be meaningful, there is no way in which it can be carried out in a language which excludes the majority of the people in the society. This, then, is one of the most important justifications for putting greater emphasis on the use and development of a country's indigenous languages.

Thus, it is in the spirit of the 'Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literatures' that '[…] Africa must […] affirm a new beginning by returning to its languages and heritage' [6], that the question of acquiring initial literacy in African languages has been greatly emphasized. In consequence, Salawu (2006, 2) challenges: 'For any African with a concern for the soul and survival of his language and culture, there must be a deliberate and sincere effort to learn and teach the language […]'

While this paper recognizes the potential of teaching and learning Nigerian local languages for empowering them, it considers that the ambivalence in Salawu's (2006, 2) disposition is compelling. For he turns around to lament: 'Alas, the situation with the learning, and by extension, the teaching of African languages is by no means cheerful. Not many young Africans are interested in learning the languages, either formally or informally'. This submission brings to the fore the question of language attitudes and Adegbija (2004, 54) explicates it thus:

> Attitudes towards languages are motivated by several factors including their perceived socioeconomic value, their status-raising potential, their perceived instrumental value, their perceived esteem, their perceived functions or roles in the nation, their numerical strength, the perceived political and economic power of its speakers, their use in the official domains, their educational value, etc. Generally, positive attitudes, covert or overt, are developed towards a language that is perceived to have value in all these different areas […] Conversely, negative attitudes, overt or covert, develop towards a language in proportion to its lack of function or narrowing of its distribution in registers.

Adegbija's view above encapsulates the linguistic situation in Nigeria where the abandonment of local languages has engendered people's negative attitude towards them. The hard truth is that Nigerians are poorly motivated to learn their indigenous languages. It is thus the argument of this paper that while education in African indigenous languages is most desirable, it should translate to enhancing individual social mobility and better social economic life, and playing vital roles in national development processes.

Following this introductory background is a review of literature on the challenges of teaching and learning Nigeria's local languages. After this appraisal, we will focus on some domains of Nigeria's national life where the enhancement of the utilitarian value of Nigeria's local languages would tremendously boost their status and roles. Finally, we will give the concluding comments.

Challenges of Teaching and Learning Nigeria's Local Languages

The National Policy on Education (NPE) (1977, revised 1981, 2000) requires that every Nigerian child study at least one indigenous language which could be the child's mother tongue or an indigenous language of wider communication in their area of domicile at the pre-primary, primary, junior secondary school (JSS) and senior secondary school (SSS) levels of education. It must be noted, however, that although the teaching of English together with mother tongues has continuously featured in the country's schools since the nineteenth century, the formulation of the NPE marked a watershed in the history of language education in Nigeria. The innovation introduced in the NPE is the teaching of the three major indigenous languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) as second languages. This is in recognition of the fact that indigenous languages are a veritable tool of communication and a vehicle for promoting national identity and preserving the people's cultural heritage.

To implement the language provisions in the NPE, colleges of education have developed L2 programmes in the major Nigerian languages with the establishment of the Department of Nigerian Languages which have engaged in cross-ethnic teaching of these major languages (Makinde, 2005). In a further bid to meet the imperative of training teachers and to produce audio-visual materials for teaching Nigerian languages, the National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN) Aba was established in 1992. In spite of these landmark efforts the teaching of indigenous languages both as first and second language in Nigeria is fraught with some problems.

There are certain logistic and conceptual flaws in the NPE itself which have hampered effective teaching/learning of the indigenous languages. As such, there are many critiques about the explicit languages' aspect of the NPE (See Emenanjo, 2002, 7-9). We find out, among other shortcomings, that there are no constitutional provisions for sanctions where the policy requirements are not implemented. Although the NPE stipulates that the first language should be the medium of education at the pre-primary school level, children who go to pre-primary schools nowadays begin with an early immersion in English. This is as a result of the proliferation of private nursery schools. Adegbija (2004, 20) laments the sorry situation: 'Since most pre-primary schools are privately owned, the Government has only had a very marginal impact, if any, on language use at this level, nor has it been able to enforce the first-language medium policy'.

In fact, the non-use of indigenous languages in such schools marks them out as 'model' schools with the characteristic label 'international'. It is rather disheartening that in this age of globalization, we label our schools international and yet we have no indigenous values to sell to the international community; all we do is to keep absorb-

ing the cultures of others without having anything to offer in return. For the African child who is just growing up and will be faced with the challenge of competing later on in a globalized world, there is a grave danger, as they are put at a very big disadvantage when compared to their counterpart in the western world. In this regard, Fafunwa (1982, 295-296) submits:

> It is our thesis that if the Nigerian child is to be encouraged from the start to develop curiosity, initiative, industry, manipulative ability, spontaneous flexibility, manual dexterity, mechanical comprehension and the co-ordination of the hand and eye, he should acquire these skills and attitudes through his mother-tongue; after all this is the most natural learning medium. This is where the average European or English child has a decided advantage over his African counterpart. While the former is acquiring new skills during the first six years in his mother tongue, the latter is busy struggling with a foreign language during the greater part of his primary education.

Teachers' factor which is indispensable to effective teaching and learning is also a drawback to the successful implementation of the NPE. The Technical Committee on Production of Teachers for the Three Major Languages came out with its report in 1988. Bamgbose (2006, 18-19) records:

> This committee found that, with the existing secondary school classes as of that date, 55,237 teachers were needed in secondary schools, and, of this number, only 6,383 were available, made up of Hausa (1,678), Igbo (1,117) and Yoruba (3, 588). The shortfall of 48,858 is distributed as follows: Hausa (16,313), Igbo (18,211) and Yoruba (14, 330).

It was in realization of the challenge of teacher production that the National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN) was established. Even when NINLAN had not become fully operational, Awobuluyi had predicted that NINLAN would not be able to produce more than a very small percentage of the teachers actually needed for teaching the languages in question as L2 throughout the country. He then suggested that conventional universities should be involved in the project for training L2 teachers for those languages. But the problem of poor funding of education in Nigeria has partly affected the scheme of training, retraining, and recruiting teachers.

To this end, we may argue that the proviso for the implementation of the policy couched in the phraseology 'subject to the availability of teachers' is, in fact, defeatist from the outset. Arohunmolase (2006, 3), citing Junaidu and Ihebuzor (1993), laments the prevailing circumstance thus:

> […] the problem of the supply of teachers in Nigerian languages represents one of the greatest problems facing the curriculum development efforts in Nigeria. The introduction of Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba), as L2 at the JSS level and the Colleges of Education worsened the compounded problem of the supply of trained teachers. It is a matter of great regret that, adequate plans were not made for the supply of teachers before the Federal Government decided to implement the Nigerian languages policy in the Colleges of Education.

Apart from teachers' factor which is not properly addressed in the NPE, the question of language loyalty that speakers of minority languages have towards their languages has generated mixed feelings. Recall that every child is required to study their mother tongue or the wider language of communication in the immediate community. Of all the over 450 indigenous languages, few are documented and have suitable pedagogical materials required for effective teaching. While strong language loyalty could force some ethnic groups to go to any length to ensure that their languages are formally taught, speakers of minority languages could see their children's learning the language of wider communication as portending the grave danger of their own language being completely assimilated. In this regard, language loyalty sometimes occasioned by ethnic rivalry becomes counterproductive for the effective teaching/learning of the major languages.

If the issues discussed above are some of the flaws of the NPE, one would have expected that a responsive government would have risen to the challenge of revising the document and more importantly seeing to the implementation of the language policies therein. Meanwhile, in Harare Declaration of 1997, African leaders were challenged to come up with realistic language policies for their respective countries:

> (a) All African language Policies should be those that enhance the chances of attaining the vision of Africa […]
> (b) Each country should produce a clear Language Policy Document, within which every language spoken in the country can find its place.
> (c) Guidelines for policy formulation should be sanctioned by legislative action.
> (d) Every country's policy framework should be flexible enough to allow each community to use its language side-by-side with other languages while integrating with the wider society, within an empowering language policy that caters for communication at local, regional and international levels.
> (e) A language policy-formulating and monitoring institution/body should be established in each country. [7]

But this challenge has not been taken up by the Nigerian government. Explaining one of the probable reasons for this seeming inaction, Adegbija (2004, 34) says:

> Political instability has been a principal impediment to the implementation of language policy in Nigeria. Previously agreed policies are often abandoned by new regimes and implementation is truncated. There is policy fluctuation, reinterpretation and misinterpretation and ad hoc and arbitrary policy initiatives.

In addition to the problem of political instability in Nigeria, Nigerian government has focused on teaching of science and technology to the neglect of language education. In this regard, Onukaogu (2001, 12) notes that: '[…] the impression created by Nigerian educated planners immediately after independence was that everything must be done to enhance science, mathematics and technology in Nigeria.' In consequence, at the secondary school level, students are encouraged to study science based courses and such students are considered the gifted ones on whose hands the development of the nation lies. At the higher institution, admission quota for courses in science and technology is higher than that of any other course, all in a bid to achieve technological breakthrough, forgetting that a nation whose cultural values are not given a pride of place in its development efforts can hardly compete with other nations. This is because cultural values in themselves are an identity-defining tool that would project unique technological advancements that the world could celebrate.

If government had not focused on the development of science and technology to the neglect of developing language education, it would not have been the case that in 2006 which was proclaimed as the Year of African Languages by the African Union, the National Institute for Nigerian Languages was under threat of being scrapped. This move by the government of Nigeria was totally at variance with the spirit behind the promotion of the African languages. Thus, while there was plan to renew commitment to developing African languages at the continental level, it is ironic that a major institution instrumental to realizing that goal was under threat of being scrapped in Nigeria.

Up to now, we have been able to discuss the problems militating against effective teaching/learning of Nigeria's local languages, as they pertain to the NPE. It is pertinent, at this juncture, to focus attention on a major issue pivotal to the survival of endangered languages, which no doubt has been a causative factor for the poor recognition given to Africa's local languages.

Language Utility: A Prerequisite for Language Revitalization

To enhance the status of endangered Nigeria's local languages, they need to be appreciated in terms of assigning them functions in more domains of life. This is because language thrives when it serves primarily as a means of communication in a given society. As a matter of fact, Idolor's (2002, 2) argument that "No phenomenon void of utility survives in a society […]' holds good for urgently addressing the linguistic situation in Africa at present. To this end, we now focus on three major domains of Nigeria's national life where the indigenous languages can be harnessed for national development.

Political Communication

Nigeria is a nation with a fledgling democracy and thus requires mobilizing the people for participatory democracy, using local languages. There is no doubt that the language of government in Nigeria is English but the local languages can also be employed to play complementary roles in political processes. For instance, the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria has provision for the conduct of the businesses of the National Assembly in one of the three major languages and the State Houses of Assembly in the dominant language of the state. It is, however, regrettable that since this constitutional provision has been made, it is only Ogun and Anambra that have reportedly introduced a weekly use of Yoruba and Igbo respectively in the conduct of their businesses. Even though their trail-blazing effort is commendable, the restriction to a particular day in a whole week is not encouraging at all. More worrisome is the position of the legislators of the Lagos State House of Assembly who rejected the proposal of using Yoruba for their proceedings on the grounds that Lagos is metropolitan city and that Yoruba will trivialize the serious business of legislating.

It is not out of place if Nigeria's democracy is fashioned in such a way that it gives room for the propagation of indigenous values. In such a situation, we could de-emphasize the use of English by giving room for people who can read and write in their indigenous languages or one of the major Nigerian languages to be qualified to contest for elective positions. In fact, we have to note that the bane of the current democratic practice in Nigeria is the undue emphasis on paper qualification. This is jeopardizing the polity in the sense that some political aspirants have had to resort to certificate forgery and when eventually they get elected into offices, they are linguistically incapacitated because of lack of competence in English. More often than not, they are cut off from lending their voice to major decisions on crucial issues and all

they do is to observe, applaud others and get fat allowances and salary, all in the name of 'misrepresenting' their constituencies. It does not mean that such political office holders are bereft of ideas about what governance entails or how to tackle pressing social issues but the problem is that they cannot relate their experiences in an alien tongue.

We find out that even local government councils in linguistically homogeneous communities which are directly responsible to the grassroots people keep their subjects in the dark with the adoption of English as the language of administration. This has created a gulf between the government and the people they govern. Mohochi posits:

> Whereas horizontal communication is smooth (among the elite in former colonial languages and the masses in local languages), it is the missing vertical communication (between the leaders and the rest of the population) that needs to be improved in order to attain increased participation of the masses in Africa's development strives. [8]

With regard to government policies and programmes which should directly impact on people's lives, it is regrettable that they are packaged in English, circulated among the elite without involving and affecting the grassroots people. For instance, some governments have poverty alleviation scheme for rural dwellers and yet English is the dominant language of communication. How then do the rural dwellers benefit maximally from it? On the use of local languages in realizing the set objectives of poverty alleviation programmes, Bamgbose (2006, 30) posits:

> Information on the programmes should not only be in the languages that people understand, the various projects offered to alleviate poverty should be capable of being pursued through the medium of our indigenous languages. Existing practices in crafts, trade, agriculture, local industries, etc. should be the basis of poverty alleviation intervention rather than super-imposed Western oriented practices, which inevitably have to be transmitted in English.

It is interesting that the poverty alleviation agencies of government and the National Orientation Agency are vital spheres of life where experts in indigenous languages can be gainfully employed to sell government programmes and activities to the people.

Health Care

Of all facets of national life, the health sector is about the most sensitive in that any communication breakdown can spell disaster for the people. Information needs to be disseminated from time to time to eradicate ignorance. To achieve this objective, indigenous languages need to be employed to disseminate health tips. Although there have been renewed efforts in using Nigerian languages in health campaigns, there could be tremendous improvement on what has been achieved so far. Thus, the present discourse calls attention to how HIV/AIDS awareness campaign and the activities of pharmaceutical companies could empower local languages.

HIV/AIDS messages are about the most trumpeted of health issues in Nigeria today. There is a national body responsible for sensitizing the people on the scourge. It is called the National Action Committee on AIDS (NACA) with its state outlet, State

Action Committee on AIDS (SACA) and the local outlet, Local Action Committee on AIDS (LACA). Apart from these government-controlled agencies, there are numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are devoted to transmitting HIV/AIDS campaigns. But the major challenge has been how effective their awareness campaigns have been in view of the predominant use of English. As in other spheres of Nigeria's national life, English has displaced the indigenous languages in the awareness campaign drive of these agencies. There are so many rural dwellers waiting to be informed in their local languages about the prevention, control and management of the scourge. This is why the Program of African Studies 'Executive Summary of HIV/AIDS Prevention in Nigerian Communities' challenges, 'Uneducated rural population and minority communities should not be overlooked when prevention messages are designed. Sixty-five per cent of Nigerians live in rural areas and are not reached by current prevention campaigns' [9].

Thus, the action committees on HIV/AIDS at the national, state and local levels could find gainful employment for health workers who are knowledgeable in the local languages of certain target communities. This will, on the one hand, ensure that the members of the target communities have access to accurate information and, on the other hand, prove a point that it is not only competence in English that guarantees access to well-paid jobs; knowledge of indigenous languages can as well brighten one's job prospect, as competence only in English in this circumstance amounts to outright disadvantage. In fact, the NGOs could aim at recruiting speakers of indigenous languages as extension workers to penetrate the rural communities where people are still ignorant of the scourge.

With regard to the activities of pharmaceutical companies, the present researcher has observed that the use of local languages to reach the ordinary people is a far cry from what should be expected in a linguistically heterogeneous society like Nigeria. Apart from the information disseminated to patients by physicians at the point of prescribing drugs for them, patients encounter a lot of medical discourses that should provide them relevant information that they themselves should be able to digest. Such discourses include literature on the packs of drugs, or literature leaflets inside packs, and posters or stickers introducing new brands of drugs. But the unfortunate situation is that such material is produced mainly in the medium of English. The use of English in this situation excludes the larger percentage of the population who do not use English. Although dispensers at pharmaceutical stores give information on the administration of drugs bought over the counter, the buyers' ability to retain such information is sometimes suspect. So, it is reasonable that consumers have access to the needed information in the language they understand.

Consequently, pharmaceutical companies especially the ones based in Nigeria as part of their corporate social responsibility owe the people the obligation of communicating with them in local languages. Thus, transcribing the material in question to the languages of the country that are already committed to writing and dispensing the drugs to the target communities will go a long way to meet the communicative needs of the people. To achieve this objective, experts in local languages could be employed to serve in different capacities, as the companies may require.

Banking Sector

Almost all banking institutions in Nigeria today carry out their transactions in the medium of English. Those who have language power are, therefore, those who have economic power, while those that have no language power end up being disempowered financially. For instance, during the recapitalization of banks in Nigeria in

2005, most banks had to go to the open market to sell shares to meet the 25 billion naira capital base benchmark for each bank. Consequently, banks in Nigeria embarked on aggressive advertisements, trying to sway the people that investing in their own shares would yield the most of profits in the long run. While pages of newspapers and magazines, and billboards were awash with advertisements and the air wave both on radio and television was rent with jingles in English, the ones in the local languages could be counted at one's fingertips. Contributing to national economy in this sense seems targeted only at a minority section of the people who use English, for it is assumed that the rural dwellers do not have much to offer since they do not use the language that matters. The polarity created in this situation should not have been if majority of the citizenry could have access to financial information in their respective indigenous languages thereby creating the avenue for them to contribute to national development and to empower them too financially.

To reach the majority of the Nigerian people who do not use the English language but will have transactions to carry out in banks either for their children, wards, or even with business partners, banking institutions in Nigeria could have certain sections where transactions in local languages take place. In fact, the present writer cannot but sympathize with some customers who sometimes get frustrated in the banking hall when the information they require is not readily available in the language they understand well. To increase their efficiency and to penetrate the teeming population of the people who do not use the English language, financial institutions as part of their corporate social responsibility need to employ workers whose job requires that they be competent in the dominant indigenous language of the immediate community. In fact, the services of the Customer Care Unit of most banks could improve considerably if they are directed by employees competent in the use of indigenous languages. If these and other strategies are employed towards empowering the local languages, people will come to appreciate the fact that teaching/learning their indigenous languages could open doors of increased participation in national development and personal advancement for them.

Concluding Comments

This study has so far underscored the fact that in order to address the problem of teaching and learning Nigerian languages, there is need to appraise their utilitarian value not only for individual advancement but also for the general development of the country. The linguistic situation in Africa at present is such that education in an African language does not ensure social mobility and better socio-economic life. And until we realize that our linguistic diversity is a goldmine for meaningful development, we will continue to bow under the hegemony of English. To empower local languages, it is not enough to prescribe teaching/learning them in the school curriculum. We need to come up with workable language policies that appreciate the multilingual nature of our communities and give due recognition to the potential of every language to contribute to national development. According to Bamgbose (1998, 6), in this kind of arrangement, '[…] all languages will have an appropriate role in a comprehensive language policy, but these roles need not be identical'. This has been called 'egalitarian multilingualism', which according to Sole i Carmardons (1997) quoted by Emenanjo (2002, 5), provides for 'balanced relationships among languages (and) must be based upon equality and reciprocity of the linguistic communities and of the speakers'. When this utilitarian dimension to teaching/learning the local languages is given a pride of place in a comprehensive language policy, then people will be favourably disposed to learning their indigenous languages.

Notes

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Technology Words: A Study in Current Spelling

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Abstract

Initial research into the topic of the current spelling of technology terms was undertaken in late 2007. The current research study is updating and expanding on a subset of terms in the earlier research. Users of print and electronic media come across the same technology terms such as *Web site* and *e-mail* being spelled in variety of ways in a range of sources. This study inspects how various Internet sites and publications (print and Internet-based) spell certain technology-related terms. Variant spellings of these terms are examined to see if there are correct or accepted spellings of the terms. The first study in 2007 looked at the spelling of six terms (Web, Web site, Internet, e-learning, podcast, and e-mail). The findings indicated an "overall inconsistency in the spelling of these terms" (Thompson et al., 2007) but little understanding of why. This second, follow-up study again checks on the spelling of two technology terms - *Web site* and *e-mail* – included the 2007 study and also looks into the "why" of the situation. The current study uses a single method – review of selected print and electronic sources. Future follow-up studies could add additional methods (e.g., more extensive number of sources, different media, discussions and surveys with persons responsible for determining publication/author guidelines and word spellings). The results indicated that there is general agreement on spelling *Web site* and *e-mail* as such – in a certain category of sources but not overall. The main "competing" spelling variations of *website* and *email* have much support.

Keywords: spelling, e-mail, email, Web site, website, Internet

Introduction

There appears to be a fluid situation today in spelling some frequently used technology terms. Individuals and organizations often seem to spell words to suit "one's fancy or convenience and not rationale" leading to a "free-for-all environment for spelling the frequently used terms" (Misra, 2007a, p. 2). However, this situation is "not only counter-productive but it also does not befit a growing discipline and practice worldwide leave alone our electronic age or e-age" (Misra, 2007b, 12). A previous study (Thompson et al., 2007) that examined how certain technology words are spelled yielded some interesting, but inconclusive, results. The Thompson et al. (2007) study found that while there was some uniformity (e.g., capitalizing the "I" in Internet), generally there was little agreement on how to spell most of the researched terms (Web, Web site, Internet, e-learning, podcast, and e-mail). Some of the sources were not even consistent within their own sites or publications, as a given term was spelling in multiple ways in the same site or issue. "It's all too common to find a Web site that uses "e-mail" throughout its articles, but scatters "email," "E-mail" or "Email" arbitrarily across graphics, contact pages and navigation buttons" (Palser, 2003, 12).

But why even research the topic of how technology words are spelled? A recent WhiteSmoke survey (2008) found that nearly nine of every 10 survey participants said they thought correct spelling is important, and even a higher number said spelling errors by others troubled them. People view spelling as important. So there seems to be a felt need to have an accepted fixed way (i.e., standard) to spell words, such as *e-mail* and *Web site.* Mason and Allen (2001) point out that

One of the topics that hardly anyone talks about is that of spelling standardization. Why? Because it is often assumed that spelling issues have already been resolved for international languages. Yet, let us consider that 5/6ths of the world's languages are currently moving from non-written to written forms and that these transitions will be accompanied by pre-literacy, early literacy and post-literacy stages. In such cases, spelling standardization is no longer an assumed achievement. One of the most important points to keep in mind is that many of the world's major languages underwent the standardization and normalization stage of their written form over a period of several centuries. This is not the case for many of the less-prevalent languages of the modern world. Such languages are forced to undergo rapid standardization processes within a period of less than a decade. And to add to this, standardization needs to take into consideration from the start the ramifications of computer technologies. Despite these issues, the majority of leading linguists for less-prevalent languages are not technology freaks, so language standardization efforts continue to be discussed without looking at how the decisions will affect a future language spell-checker, Web site localization, speech-to-text dictation systems and so on. (4-5)

Correct spelling matters as getting it right in communications includes grammar *and* spelling. And "getting it right" enhances the credibility of the publications as print and electronic publications and/or sites can increase their credibility with their audience if the content is accurate, consistent, and understandable. An inappropriate word choice (i.e., use of an incorrect variation of a technology term) may confuse or obscure the intended meaning. The audience might be confused and frustrated if every publication treated the spelling of key technology terms somewhat differently. A reader might wonder if the authors were actually referring to the same words. When a term is perceived to be misspelled or misused, it tends to jump out at the reader, reflecting poorly on the author and publication, and leading to diminished credibility. For example, if an article in 2008 discussed "Web logs" instead of the now accepted shortened form of *blogs*, its credibility could be undercut. Although the capitalization and spacing may be buttressed by the same argument supporting "Web site," users fairly universally have not progressed to only using the shortened word. Just so, most people say Web or Internet or just Net instead of the "World Wide Web."

Incorrect spelling or the choice of a perceived incorrect word variation can make the source appear uninformed, which is a most undesirable outcome. So spelling is important, because no matter how good the writing and ideas are, if there is a perception of incorrect spelling, it can become a distracting "noise" and interfere with the reader's comprehension. Also, the author can lose much credibility when the spelling is poor.

While it is important to put this study into a broader perspective of language use and development, what of spelling technology terms specifically? With the rapid changes in technology fields, it is difficult to keep pace with the growing and evolving language of technology terms. Many sources, print or electronic, choose not to include references to accepted spelling of terms but refer to third party sources such as specified dictionaries or style guides. There are exceptions such as Tulane University whose University Style Guide specifies that the "The word e-mail is hyphenated, with

a lowercase e…The word Internet is capitalized…The word online is not hyphenated, with a lowercase *o*" [and] "The word website is not capitalized, nor hyphenated" (Tulane University, 2008). However, while Tulane also specifies it specifies the correct spelling is "website" (one word), the university also prescribes the term *web page* is "two words, not capitalized, nor hyphenated" (Tulane University, 2008). Why is "web page" treated differently than "website"? In fairness, the IEEE Computer Society's Style Guide (IEEE Computer Society, 2007) also has a similar apparent contradictory use as it includes *Web* but then includes *website* and *web page*. Add to Tulane's apparent inconsistency, the specified *website* spelling is found as *web site* and *Web site* in various university sites. Having a style guide is one thing. Actually having the guide followed seems to be another issue. This example from this one university underscores the seeming inconsistencies abundant in spelling technology words.

Another university, Pennsylvania State University, also has a guide for writing on the Internet on its *Write for the Web* page. The university stipulates "In the body of a sentence, use e-mail (lower case e)"… **Do not** [emphasis not added] use email [and] "Web is spelled with a CAPITAL 'W.' Do not use web. Web site is two separate words" (Administrative Information Services, 2008). However, a brief search on the Penn State site shows many instances of "email" and "website" (and "Website") instead of the stipulated spellings. As with Tulane University, attempts at spelling uniformity have less than 100% compliance.

A third university, Georgetown University, bases its online *Spelling and use of Technology Words* on the *Microsoft Manual of Style for Technical Publications* (3rd Edition). Unfortunately, the third edition was published in 2004, which is a long time in technology years. Microsoft and Georgetown should consider updating how they approach spelling technology words.

Some publications, such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, follow Georgetown University's example in having guidelines for technology terms that follow the style guides of other publications. The editor -in-chief of *The Chronicle* states the publication generally spells words one way (e.g., e-mail, not email; Web site, not Website or website) and follows the *Webster's New World Dictionary* and *The New York Times manual of Style & Usage* (personal communication, P. Semas e-mail, August 8, 2008). The Chief Copy Editor adds that *The Chronicle* "follows a stylebook and uses a house dictionary. In our case it is The New York Times Manual of Style and Webster's New World, but many other newspapers use the AP Stylebook or The Chicago Manual of Style, and whatever dictionaries they prefer" (personal communication, H. Landecker e-mail, August 9, 2008). Landecker states the publication standardizes to have "certain spellings of words. It would be distracting to readers to see 'e-mail' in one article and 'email' in another, and given that we have a nanosecond of their time, we don't want to send them down any path other than the one the author wants them following" (personal communication, H. Landecker e-mail, August 9, 2008). The guidelines for contributing authors does not speak to the issue of spelling but it is the job of the copy desk to "maintain consistency in spelling and style" (personal communication, H. Landecker e-mail, August 9, 2008). Adding additional insight into how *The Chronicle* handles spelling technology words is the insight provided by Scott Smallwood, its managing editor:

We have a strong copy desk and a style guide that is the arbiter of all such spellings. These evolve over time (years ago we weren't allowed to use 'blog' instead always writing "Web log." We try to not have multiple spellings of the same word, but I'm sure they sneak in (personal communication, S. Smallwood e-mail, August 11, 2008).

Spelling Standardization

Regarding "standardization" of way words are spelled, with the proliferation of new technology words today it could become chaotic if spelling continues to be non-standardized. Why do people accept multiple spellings of the same technology-related term, but wince when a commonly "accepted" word (e.g., blog) is misspelled or misused? Many American readers might be quizzical or otherwise if "color" was spelled as "colour" (UK convention) but simply shrug their shoulders when they see multiple variations of relatively new technology words such as when they see multiple spellings of *Web site* (e.g., website, web site, Website) and *e-mail* (e.g., email, Email, e-Mail, E-mail, and eMail).

Attempts at standardizing spelling can lead to passionate defenses of a particular spelling. This passion is seen in the numerous comments that follow an online article or blog on the topic of the "correct" version of a technology word. E.g., is "email" or "e-mail" the best spelling? One business conducted research into the most accepted spelling for this choice. The email experience council (eec), a global e-mail marketing best practices and advocacy organization, standardized on *email*. The company claims to have used "multiple forms of research to gather insights with which to render an opinion" (eec, 2006, 4) on whether to go with *email* or *e-mail*. In a September, 2006, press release the company stated that it sought out multiple social networks and professional organizations with the issue and we ran multiple surveys…The results are that the majority of professional marketers spell and feel that it is appropriate to spell the word as "email" without a hyphen. We also found that most believe that traditional capitalization rules should apply; If it begins a sentence or is leveraged as a proper noun, it should be spelled "Email". We support this and are working to get this incorporated in to dictionary and reference resources around the world as well as to ensure all the thousands of companies that our members represent, commit to this standard. (eec, 2006, 4)

As support for its decision to go with email, eec cited several dictionaries (e.g., *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*) that had made the decision also to side with that spelling. However, a review of the eec's cited support shows less than unanimous support for *email*. Some of the cited sources actually seem to state a preference for the *e-mail* variation instead.

The eec organization went another step to try to make *email* the standard spelling by launching a "Hyphens Equal Disrespect" petition. Its petition rationale states its support for the *email* spelling signifies the ubiquity and power of this form of communication, which now has little in common with its text-only, non-interactive ancestor, "electronic mail."…As the number of signees grows, the eec will use this list to convince publishers—and then the dictionaries—to change their spelling of the word. (email experience council, 2008, 2 and 4)

Standardized spelling makes it easier to understand meaning. Therefore, many organizations, as well as publications found in print and/or on the Internet, purport to follow a given dictionary and/or style guide, the latter aiming to "improve the clarity and consistency of documents and publications… Style guides are the product of optimists (or obsessives) who really want to believe in order and principles" (Carnegie Mellon, n.d.). Using style guides should assist in presenting a clear, consistent style of writing in every document or publication that comes from the same parent source.

However, not everyone believes that dictionaries are the correct source for "correct" spelling. The fifth edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* asserts "dictionaries are not the best guide to spelling in the elec-

tronic world. This is an extremely fast-moving environment: common usage develops quickly, leaving print resources easily bypassed" (American Psychological Association, 2001, 1-2).

The publication further states, "Dictionaries are not a good guide to the rapidly proliferating vocabulary of the Internet and World Wide Web. The 10th edition of *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate*, for example, lists E-mail as the preferred spelling, but the term is now so common that it is usually spelled e-mail or even email (APA currently spells it e-mail)" (American Psychological Association, 2001, p. 89 footnote). However, the APA manual still uses dictionaries as it states the

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary is the standard spelling reference for APA journals and books. If a word is not in *Webster's Collegiate*, consult the more comprehensive *Merriam-Webster's Third New International Dictionary*. If the dictionary gives a choice, use the first spelling listed… (p. 89)

Sabin (2008) views print dictionaries as displaying the "more conservative spellings because they cannot keep pace with the changes rapidly taking place in the field" (p. 245). He suggests looking at "magazines and dictionaries devoted to computer and Internet technology" (p. 245), plus style manuals published by knowing technology industry types. He further advises to base your spelling decisions on your audience, e.g., staying with the more conservative spellings for those audiences who are not enveloped in technology.

Overall, there is much thought that both "e-mail" and "Web site" will probably morph into "email" and "website," respectively, over time. Much discussion was found that purported to track the gradual transformation of this study's reviewed words to shorter versions. As the online version of *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* states:

The transition from *World Wide Web site* to *Web site* to *website* seems to have progressed as rapidly as the technology itself. The development of *website* as a single uncapitalized word mirrors the development of other technological expressions which have tended to evolve into unhyphenated forms as they become more familiar. Thus *email* has recently been gaining ground over the forms *E-mail* and *e-mail,* especially in texts that are more technologically oriented. (Bartleby.com, 2000)

But as with so much of the thoughts on this topic, not everyone is convinced. Bill Walsh, copy editor at *The Washington Post*, says

Compound nouns *do* tend to go from separate to joined, often (though not so often anymore) with a hyphen stage. The problem with "e-mail" is that it's not a simple compound noun. It's an initial-letter-based abbreviation, and no initial-letter-based abbreviation in the history of the English language has ever morphed into a solid word. (n.d.)

Palser (2003) posits that "when lingo becomes familiar, new terms lose their starch and slide into a more casual style. Trademarks are forgotten, words merge and hyphens fall away. That's happening now to the language of the Internet--too swiftly or not swiftly enough, depending on whom you ask" (2)

Results of Research

The discussion on whether to use *email* or *e-mail* is vast. It is the same for *Web site* versus *website* (and the other less used variants). One needs only to do a quick Google search to get thousands of hits on the subject.

There seem to be several sources (e.g., *Associated Press Stylebook & Briefing on Media Law*, *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage*) that are widely acknowledged to be the most highly regarded authorities for spelling, especially in elec-