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EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL NIGERIAN ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Effective Communication in a Digital Nigerian Environment x-rays how Communication Technology and on–line communication have affected the communicative ability of the average Nigerian student. The paper sees the emergence of digital communication, which is a product of the ICT as a welcome development considering the many benefits derivable from the new technology. It however frowns at the negative effect which the new technology has had on the Nigerian environment and attributes it to the freedom of expression and the linguistic diversity which emerge from the informal use of language employed in digital communication. The paper concludes with a note of warning on the dangers of inter-textuality and recommends that digital communication as exemplified in text messages and other on-line communication be embraced with care because most often there is a transfer of features of these varieties on the formal usage of the English language which mars effective communication.

Effective Communication in the Digital Nigerian Environment: Problems and Prospects

Introduction

Communication is derived from the Latin word “communus” which means common. According to Schramm qtd in Okunna (6), “when people communicate, they are trying to establish commonness with someone”. This implies sharing information, ideas, experience or messages. “Communication is the process through which participants create and share information with one another as they move towards reaching mutual understanding” (Rogers and Steinfatt 113). Communication involves a code which serves as a classification, that is language used by individuals to categorize their experiences and communicate such ideas to a receiver. The receiver decodes the message into an idea. The

communication process is an exchange or a sharing of information which requires certain basic components to bring it into existence. These include the source from which the message originates, the medium through which the message is conveyed; the audience which receives the message and the feedback which is the reaction to the message. According to Lasswell, "the basic components of the communication process can be identified in one question: Who says what, through which channel, to whom, with what effect" (qtd. in Okunna 8). Who what and whom refer to the source, the message and the audience respectively, while the "channel" is the medium of communication and effect refers to the response of the receiver.

Communication is a complex process and it is sometimes difficult to achieve effective communication especially in a digital environment. Communication becomes effective or successful if the receiver recognizes the speaker's message – the speaker's communicative intention. According to Quirk, "the effectiveness of every communication depends on the selection of specific items from the hundreds of thousands of the English language lexicon that are available to us as speakers and writers" (qtd. in Ezenwa-Ohaeto and Ogbazi(135).

Communication can equally be seen as a transactional affair, hence it involves equal participation by the parties involved in the communication act. This is why Hambagda defines it as the act of conveying in the simplest form, information or ideas which the recipient can easily understand, and the ability on the part of the recipient to reciprocate in such a way that he can easily be understood (22).

According to Katz and Kahn,"communication is dimensional. Its components include purpose, elements, process and symbol" (7).

Effective communication implies functional and successful exchange of messages, ideas and information by the interacting parties (encoder and decoder). For communication to be effective it must be functional. That is to say, it must work in the way the act was intended.

In addition, effective communication must be dimensional with the presence of the relevant components. It must be transactional by involving participation of the encoding and decoding parties. And of course, it must involve a process whereby the encoder stimulates ideas, information and messages in the decoder. All this, in the opinion of Obi and Nwaiwu is what makes human communication meaningful and effective as opposed to non-human communication (14).

Communicating in a Digital Environment

A digital environment is a society that has embraced and cued to the modem technological way of doing things (communicating).

The emergence of the personal computers, internet, mobile phones have been described as development that has had great positive impact on global communication .Njoku was of the view that the new world order (ICT) has made the modern society amazingly sophisticated and hence the use of physical and mental abilities to perform tasks have radically shifted to the use of electro-mechanical devices (2). The challenges to live up to the new world order has given way to globalization, a situation where the entire world is unified into one small village with common socio-economic, political, cultural and educational (linguistic) systems.

It is amazing the rate at which digital communication has enveloped and revolutionalised the entire universe within a space of time. In Nigeria for instance, digital communication was not heard of until the twilight of the 20th century (Odowoye (9). Yet there is hardly any facet of the nation's human endeavour that is not glued to digital communication today. The internet, computers, mobile phones and an array of other social media available in ICT have become a source of glamour to the average Nigerian citizen.

Writing on social media and youths in Nigeria, Nwaiwu argued that the Nigerian youth generally and students in particular are so glued to the media that they regard any information on print, electronic and on-line as models (3).

Invariably, the on-line media has rendered the average Nigerian ineffective in communication as the culture of reading outside students' textbooks is no longer there. This new technology has increased the zeal of a typical Nigerian to want to read and write (communicate) through browsing, all in the name of living up to the dictates of the new world order. According to Njoku, this is a commendable effort because:

> The recent new world order has made it such that only societies with the right information, skills and attitudes can be part of the world of automation as building of skyscrapers, jets, robots, underground rail, military arsenals etc cannot happen through chance. (12)

Njoku's contention in the excerpt above points to the fact that our Nigerian society cannot be left behind in the glamour and glitter that go with digital communication. However, the excesses of the average Nigerian (especially students) in their bid to embrace the new digital development and the negative effect this has had on effective communication is a source of worry of this paper.

That the average literate Nigerian can hardly communicate effectively and functionally has been attributed to the craze for ICT and its subsidiaries. It is important to assert that effective communication is a function of a combination of factors such as audience, environment and content or theme. And just as many look up to the print media as conveyors of correct and standard forms of English so do they for on-line media. Hence, these media forms of communication have become a parameter with which effective and functional communication is measured.

Importance of Digital Communication

Digital communication by way of computers, on-line media, social media and mobile phones has a number of immeasurable value. According to Gambo, the emergence of the personal computer in the 1960s has a great positive impact on the pedagogy of a number of school subjects. He identified four major areas in which personal computer has affected these subjects positively to include volume, speed, time and accuracy (3).

In language and communication specifically, the on-line communication through social media has been described by scholars and researchers as innovations that have had great impact on communication (Weiss and Gershon'sqtd in Njoku (18). The satellite now links the whole world through the telephone, telegraph, radio, TV., internet and many others and hence communication has become simplified. The internet and related network of computers have made the World Wide Web (www) a reality. The immeasurable benefit of the internet has made many to now see it as the "super highway" and hence the belief that anyone who is out of the internet is far away from information super highway of the world.

A number of other benefits derivable from digital communication can be exemplified in the Twitter, You 'tube, facebook,whatsapp and yahoo (among others) which enable ICT literate Nigerians to communicate with ease through text messages and yahoo mail. This way, communication is made faster, easier and enjoyable more than the earlier forms of communication through physical and mental abilities.

Realizing the immeasurable place which the new digital development holds for the country, the Nigerian government in 2001, formulated the Nigerian National policy for Information Technology (IT) with the following:

VISION: To make Nigeria an ICT capable country in Africa and a key player in the information society by the year 2005 using ICT as the engine for sustainable development and global competitiveness.

MISSION: To use IT for education, creation of wealth, povertyeradication, job creation and global competitiveness (6)

It is in recognition of the indispensable role of the new digital world order that the relevant authorities decided to make the acquisition of basic ICT skills and capabilities part of the national minimum standards for Teachers Education at both levels of Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) and first degree. These are clearly stated in the National Minimum Standards issued by the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE 2000), the National Universities Commission (NUC 2004) and the Teachers' Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN 1993). Implicit from the foregoing is that the era of Nigerians who cannot communicate digitally is gone. Every literate Nigerian is now expected not only to be computer literate, but to prove his e-capabilities in a digital society such as ours.

Challenges of Digital Communication on Effective Communication

The general purpose for which we communicate include information, education and entertainment. Every moment of our lives we are either receiving or giving information, creating or solving problems through communication. Obi and Nwaiwu have identified seven of the specific purposes for which humans communicate to include: information, directive, regulative, education, mass media, entertainment and psychological/laxative purposes(11 - 13).

It is imperative that human communication is made effective and functional so as to avoid a breakdown. In addition, effective communication helps in understanding a person or situation and enables the communicating parties to resolve differences, build trust and respect, and create environments where creative ideas, problem solving, affection and caring can flourish (www.Helpgtlide.org). With the new digital information age, one is expected to send, receive and process huge numbers of' messages which must be effective and functional. Effective communication

is about more than just exchanging information; it is also about understanding the emotion behind the information. Effective communication enables one to communicate even negative or difficult messages without creating conflict or destroying trust. Experts and researchers are unanimous in the argument on whether the new digital communication has enhanced or impeded communication efforts of the computer literate Nigerians.

According to Nwaiwu the e-capabilities have made many Nigerians lazy in physical and mental communication. He identified the problem areas associated with e-communication to include:

a. Technical control (spelling, punctuation, capitalization).
b. Graphology (handwriting)
c. Formal/Informal expression
d. British/American forms (among others) (8)

Use of Language in Digital Communication

A language is often defined as a conventional system for communication, a system for conveying message (Akmajian Adrian et al 228). On the surface, the relationship between language and meaning seems perfectly clear. We select words, structure them using the rules of syntax and grammar agreed upon by our speech community so people will interpret their meanings correctly. Language is also a creative art used to create new words, and sentences that represent meaning while influencing people to interpret words differently. In ICT or digital communication, conversations are constructed using text and emoticons in a 'read and respond' format that allows the building-up of a reciprocal exchange. The relationship between the writer, the reader, the text and reality are constantly changing and it is quite possible for writers and readers to develop different perceptions of any particular rhetorical situation. According to Schmitt, the rhetorical situation refers to a combination of various elements of writing that comprise the context of writing; it is a particular social and material arrangement in which written expression and communication take place (253).

Communication is concerned mainly with the production of language and other elements such as symbols, signs, gestures and technology. In ICT or digital communication, there is such freedom of expression and the linguistic diversity which result from it is enormous. In ICT, new forms of structure and usage emerge, with the use of SMS, what's app, face book, e-mail, etc, therefore greater demand is placed on the use of the English language in transformations and structure. New varieties emerge

bringing the features of these varieties to bear on their linguistic interaction. Transliteration, pidgin and code-mixing are common features.

Examples

Sample A: Sis xup ow u dey? Hpe hope u dey fyn? Sis ow work shay everythin dey go fyn? Sis my feeding mawn don finish even my fudstuffs. Pls help snd mi some mawn nd I will be very great4. greet ur hubby 4 mi.

B: Emmy, wa, re u, dis 2 in4m u dat I cn't cum 2 u hauz becos I dey busy, whc ever wi go everly c.

C: Ikechi – guy, I din, ce ur msg no wahara, anytime, way u think we go c, wi go relit, shai shi, na ur popsi place, ur guy de cool-oo

Digital communication is rapidly blurring the line between the communication media provided by the "natural" world and the human body. In communication, medium and discourse form may be related. Discourse in one medium may be more complex syntactically, have more words or be less cohesive in a different way, have a different kind of macrostructure or have less structure.

Example: Sample D:

> Hi Oge I just want remind you that our monthly due is around the corner. Pls endevour to come to meeting tomorrow so that, you will help me collect the money from our members.

One discovers that in sample D, the writer of the text decides to use correct English except for a few abbreviations.

Sample E: Abi u no dey talk to me again becos I no gree answer you that time you called me, well sha na you sabi but remember that we are friends oooo – oooo

The writer of this text uses Nigerian pidgin.

Language use must consist of continuous making of linguistic choices, consciously or unconsciously. These choices can be situated at any level of linguistic form: phonetic/phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical or semantic. They may also range over variety – internal options or may involve regionally, socially, functionally distributed types of variations as found in the texts above. The matter

of choice is based on "negotiability" which is the property of language responsible for the fact that choices are not made mechanically or according to strict grammatical rules or fixed form-function relationships.

So in text 'A' one finds a word written as great4 and in B – in4m in C – popsi yet meaning is not impaired.

So in digital/ICT language it is not about grammaticality and acceptability one can break the rules of language and still communicate effectively to the other person. This is informed by adaptability which is the property of language which enables the language user the opportunity to make linguistic choices from a variable range of possibilities in such a way as to approach points of satisfaction for communicative needs.

On the other hand, making choices that do not seem fully appropriate may expand the usability and meaning of the chosen form, which provides creativity though it can also pose serious problems for the second language user of the English language.

Problems and Prospects

The writer's task is not simple as constructing an accurate representation of reality. The writer also has to negotiate through the construction of text his or her own view of these elements of writing with the views held by writers. According to Goffman, writers are not only presenting their views of reality but also constructing their discursive identity which may affect the way the text is read and responded to.

There is bound to be a level of communicative difficulties or differences between two communication participants. Example, a teenager and an older adult will not construct the same type of text. Here are some sample texts from my undergraduate students that served as data for this paper.

Sample A: Nawa o just had one kian yeye fight wit momsi. Seizly msttymz thez parents dey do lyk say them no flex life. Them dey form Dia holy holy

Na jst becoz persn pick call by 12 4 nite am im make she dey persn lyk dis

Nna mehn i taya oh.

Sample B:Hi mum, how far now. hop u are oky? hw is d family nd my siblings? I just wt 2 tel u dat I need mony. infat I am broke. I beg u shud send it tumoro or next abeg.

Sample C: Helo bro, what'up? Its been long ah saw u last, where went u?

Anyway ah Jez wanna tell u dat exams are near. Lest ai forget how was ur last trip 2 d villa, hope ur oldies a all full of life. Ai miss ur kompany. hope u a grea8. Hav a 9ice day.

Sample D: Xup, dear, hw wsur day, so hw re, we balling 2nite @ de bash tuday, don't 4get, de dress code s red n whyte. U cee dear, am feeling kul and gr8t tuday and I do hop ur cumin don't 4get wat happened dat last nite. Oh am lol cee u.

Sample E: Guy, hw far? U just 4get person sha. I was xpectin d alert, bt I didn't see it o! Nawa 4 u sha. The deadline 4 d payment is already past. U fall my hand no be small. E no go bad if you still send am sha. At least dere r oda tins I can use d moni. L8r Anselm.

Whatsapp dialogue was also collected from the undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

Sample I

A: Heey bby Xup

B: Swithrt, am not aiit

A: Haba, y na … wotz appending 2 ma bby

B: Wrili mizing u … lyk croiz kinda sick 3 so I nid u by ma syd bt u aren't here

A: OMG … hnstly I didn't knw, nd besidez bby u knw am abt writing ma xamz xo can't wrili make it.

B: Yea … yea … know u'ud say dat bt swiddy don't warn I ondastand shaa….

II

A: Asin ehn, u lucky sef your monsi no take yo fon f na ma own, jst tell you fon bye

B: Hnstly, momsiz fit vex perns walie!

A: But shebi u knw say na for our ow good shaa @ least if to say u tell am wetin you dey to she fit not vex for you.

B: Momsiz r d bst … don't care fwot u gugz fink … if urz aren't mine iz Jare.

* The sample texts that serve as the raw data for this work are produced exactly as they were collected.

One discovers from the whatsapp that the younger generation have the ability to develop new expressive features that suit both the users and the use to which they put the language and their texts convey meaning to their group only but these new features do not fall in line with core grammatical, syntactic and morphological features of the English language. It seems as if there is prior agreement about the meaning of symbols in the language code they have adopted. This makes it easier for them to connect the sounds and words to specific meanings.

Secondly, the youth has been socialized into a somewhat different culture than the adult. When they share a common culture – a strong bond is often formed by them. As the degree of intercultural differences wider in human communication situations, information exchange is likely to be less effective. Meanings are less likely to be shared as a result of communication exchange. Consider the dialogue in the whatsapp Samples 1 and 2 if addressed to an adult – The message intended by the source participant has less probability of being interpreted meaningfully. The basis for understanding one another narrows as cultural/differences or age increases. The pool of shared meanings shrinks and effective communication is likely to be marred.

There is a world of difference in the construction of texts of adults. Some of the educated ones try to observe the rules of the grammar of language and when read, there is a free flow of ideas and the meanings are clear.

Example: I

> Greetings beloved. My mum will be buried on Friday 26/7/14. Oguejiofor's comp, Okpuifitevill, off Adazi Rd. Tanx.

Example: II

> Mr. & Mrs. – (name withheld) cordially invite u to the wedding of their daughter _____ on 9th August @ Christ Redemption Ang. Church WTC Enugu. Time 10am.

Example: III

Beloved; you are reminded of our joint peace house discipleship class today by 4pm at NNPC filling station, amawbia round-about. Remain blessed

There is a consciousness among the adult writers to use the English language in its acceptable form. Most often one finds correct forms, correct spellings, punctuations, in their texts leading to effective communication.

Conclusion

In as much as the writer of a text has the freedom of choice in the construction one can see that a great harm is being done to the English language which is the target language of the second language learner. The quantity of communication is increasing with this age of digital communication but the truth is that the quality is decreasing. The English language is being bastardized and the way the youths especially are writing is bringing down correct grammatical usage of the language. As the world experiences great revolution in communication technology, new forms of structure and usage are said to emerge, but the unfortunate thing is that many of our undergraduates simply transfer these features of informal literary varieties to their formal writings either as they write essays, examinations or official letters.

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