

Vernacular Publishing: The Nigerian Experience

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Abstract: *The paper treats vernacular publishing: The Nigerian Experience. It gives a succinct definition of vernacular, and publishing thereby arriving at vernacular publishing as the ability of making known to the public. Announcing to the public the available literature in the indigenous languages and the dialect of a region or a particular country – Nigeria. The importance of vernacular publishing, the prospect which highlights the foundation already existing in Nigerian languages on which vernacular publishing can be easily built. The problems of vernacular publishing in Nigeria which is basically rooted in the multi-linguistic nature of the country. Secondly, tonal nature of Nigerian languages where dialectical signs must be inserted and this makes it difficult for printers to carry out. Suggestions are made to improve vernacular publishing that, teachers and the government should do everything possible to revive and improve on terminologies in our vernacular and encourage the teaching of vernacular at least in the primary school level. Parents can also help by introducing the child to the mother-tongue first before any foreign language. Churches can come in by improving on vernacular publishing.*

I. Introduction

What is vernacular?

A vernacular is the native dialect of a specific population, as opposed to language of wider communication that is second language or foreign language to the population, such as national language, standard language, or lingual franca. According to (Howell 1688) vernacular was brought into the English language as early as 1601 from Latin vernaculus. "native" which had been in figurative use in classical Latin as "national" and "domestic" having originally been derived from vernus and verna, a male or female slave respectively born in the house instead of abroad. The figurative meaning was broadened from the diminutive extended words vernaculus, vernacula. (Finegan 2004) in her definition of vernacular explains that "in general linguistics, a vernacular is opposed to a lingual franca". That is to say that vernacular is a third language in which persons speaking different vernacular not understood by each other may use for communication. (Elbow 2012) looks at vernacular as the language of a particular group, profession, religion, or a country especially as spoken rather than formally written. The Webster's Dictionary of the English Language International edition defines vernacular as using or relating to the speech of a region or ethnic group (not one introduced from outside, not a dead language of learning) the indigenous language or dialect of a region. While the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of current English look at it as a language or dialect spoken in a particular country or region as compared with a formal or written language.

While Publishing according to (Hannett 2010) is the process of production and dissemination of literature, music, or information –The activity of making information available to the general public. Traditionally, the term refers to the distribution of printed works and news papers. But with the advent of digital information systems and the internet, the scope of publishing has been expanded to include electronic resources such as the electronic versions of books and periodicals, as well as micron- publishing, websites, blogs, video game publishers and therefore, publishing involves the stages of development, acquisition, copy-editing, graphic design, production, printing (and its electronic equivalents), and marketing and distribution of books, newspapers, literary works, musical works, software and other works dealing with information, including the electronic media. It is the stages and arrangements involved in the printing and distribution of books, newspaper, music, etc for sale to the public. To make known to the public, to announce publicly, to prepare, have printed, distributed to the public. Put more succinctly, publishing is the act of selection, reproduction and circulation of written materials. It is the selection or choosing of manuscript for reproduction into printed materials for circulation to the audience, (Iwu 2010).

Therefore, vernacular publishing is making known to the public, announcing publicly the available literature in the indigenous languages or dialect of a particular region or the country Nigeria.

II. The Importance Of Vernacular Publishing

First and foremost, a language is the most important and by far, the most obvious part of a people's culture. Its significance in the transmission of values, cultural beliefs and highly esteemed aspirations cannot be

over-emphasized, therefore, it is a tremendous vehicle, a fundamental instrument of massive grass-root social mobilization. It is a tragedy, a great irony that more than forty-eight years after Nigerian Independence, a national lingua franca has remained a mirage, an illusion, to our great nation – the acclaimed giant of Africa.

The experience and events of history show that an indigenous language is not just a desirability but a necessity for Nigeria, as it can be seen in the words of (Altbach and Tefera 2000) if we must do away with the last strong reminder of imperialism – a colossal evil, a nefarious monster, that thrive on the sweat and blood of the downtrodden, the subjugated and hopelessly oppressed, then forget English language and adopt a national lingua franca.

Do you know that the calamity of the Nigerian and any other African in the colonial era was his subjection to the Whiteman's culture, accidental corruption and his virtues of materialism as constitutionalised in the bible of imperialism, massive exploitation and military adventurism? Hence the present predicament of Nigeria, the Nigerian and his fast fading traditional value.

There is an unhealthy view held that the west alone has something to give and the African's (Nigerian) has nothing to give thereby given a lot credence and substance to the western language English leaving dangerous effect on our cultural heritage.

History attest that a good citizen in Nigeria and elsewhere between 1850 and 1960 meant one who was Africa by blood, Christian by religion and British or French in culture and intellect. All others who were animists were only tolerated or accommodated. Indigenous publishing is necessary and important because, it is a means through which Nigerians can offer to their selves and the world in general, their cultural values, religion, science, craft, technological know-how, agriculture, to mention a few because it is a country full of information.

It is my humble conviction that if at Independence a national language was adopted or vernacular publishing had been encouraged, the moral, psychological and diversifying catastrophes, the cheapening of Nigeria culture and language, the ill -education of the Nigerian youth and children could have been corrected and our culture and language be hold in high esteem.

Another strong point can be advanced for the importance of indigenous publishing or vernacular publishing is the fact that we are educated and we have education. Education is a process of training of the individual (a psychomatic animal) physically, morally, intellectually and otherwise so as to produce a better person who will be of positive service to himself and his society. Education could thus be seen as the overall development of the individual's personality. I believe culture or language is not left out. Vernacular publishing can come in here to promote our culture and language.

Education whether formal or informal, has always as a convention been fashioned to meet the exigencies or challenges of the civilization of the people their technological level, their social background and their religious climate.

Let's also consider the failure of the Universal Primary Education (U.P.E. of 1976) and the unstable and unprogressive nature of the Universal Basic Education Programmes (U.B.E.) of present day Nigeria. It is because both programmes are tailored after western models and are blindly executed to some extent, let us retrace our Nigerianism and it is dependent on our ability to express ourselves in our local languages through publishing.

Social values of a language – we are told in Gen.11:1-9 that after the flood, the children of Noah had one language and few words. They then decided to get together (Social Cohesion) and build a tower to reach heavens in order to make a name for themselves. God said “Behold they are one people and they have all one language and this is the beginning of what they can do and nothing they can propose to do will be impossible for them” (vs.5 – 7). This means that a language can influence effective team work. The Lord God therefore confused their language so that they become scattered all over the earth (vs.8). This it seemed to me is the very thing the Whiteman's language is doing to Nigeria and Nigerians. Let there be vernacular publishing in Nigeria at least for the sake of social cohesion.

III. Prospects Of Vernacular Publishing

Vernacular publishing has a significant role to play in developing technology in Nigeria – be it indigenous, or transfer. If successive governments and programme planners give relevant support and appropriate policy direction, vernacular publishing in Nigeria can, and will make an enormous impact in the transfer and development of technology. This I think is possible because if an indigenous language is adopted, and there are publications in our indigenous language, there is a possibility of developing a comprehensive overview of technology and manpower need, this can make important contribution to job-related technological understanding and skills. Just as it is the case with Japan, China and India who developed their indigenous languages for technological development for their needs technological literacy is therefore, needed in Nigeria to develop our indigenous languages where appropriate and relevant in our educational policies and implementation.

The second prospect is that Nigerian cultural heritage has such “terminologies” used in our traditional medicine, poetry, art work, fishing, crafts, textiles trading, etc. irrespective of the type of language. For example, trade-marks, processes, receipts, formula, laws, concepts, theories, beliefs, norms religion, etc. are commonly used terminologies within our societies and similar to other countries except that theirs have been developed for their development of technology whereas, ours lie unimproved. These terminologies can be improved also if we take vernacular publishing seriously.

Modern educationists and educational philosophers have agreed that children learn better when they do so in their mother-tongues. The result of such an experiment in Nassarawa State have proved beyond any shadow of doubt that indigenous languages have a significant place in mass mobilization, a means to national development. The right and functional approach to our teaching practices in schools and colleges develop the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary in our language that can make Nigerians comfortable with technology. For example, we are yet comfortable in terms of technology in spite of the mass training abroad of our young Nigerians for the purpose of acquiring technical know-how to mobilize manpower for technological development has yielded no better results, but an economic syndrome. This situation is sad and is a result of technology illiteracy among us – particularly, that our indigenous technological processes and advants are not published.

Take a look at the structures of a language like phonetics, morphology, syntax and semantic, Nigerian languages already possess all and these are the elements a language needs for development. What is delaying the full realization of it all is lack of a standardized orthography – Right writing – without which there would not be a standardized provision for borrowed words – but such concepts have already been deeply rooted in these languages thought and are expressed in the language as such.

That apart, take for example, the Tiv thought and language embrace the fields of mathematics, physics, engineering, chemistry, medicine, biology, craft, etc. The Tiv had been in the words of Ako (2005) “solving”

- (i) Mathematical problems through traditional architecture and other forms of constructions including bridges, musical instrument, traps of various types. Figures are grouped in tens, twenties, etc. (hence five twenties meaning one hundred, etc.). The concept of addition, multiplication, division and subtraction are traditional legacies
- (ii) Extracting iron from iron ore and using the metal in making other objects. Casting is also practiced. Chalk and lead are some of the minerals Tiv have been producing traditionally.
- (iii) Weaving is another form of technology which is practiced by the Tiv people and all the names of the components are traditionally Tiv.
- (iv) The knowledge of medicine is well advanced and in human anatomy there is hardly any part of the body or bone which Tiv language has no name for. This makes it very easy for Nigeria authors to publish in their vernacular.

IV. Problems Of Vernacular Publishing In Nigeria

The problems that have militated against this noble achievement of vernacular publishing has been rooted under the inability of the Nigeria nation to adopt a lingua-franca. This is one of the major/chief problem of vernacular publishing compound by diverse complex issues ranging from cultural diversity, to myopic chauvinism, tribal pride and prejudice – a regretted trend of events that has carefully stagnated our political progress, social and cultural prosperity. In relation to the above, the fragility of vernacular publishing in Nigeria is an indicator of the state of Nigeria’s economy. (Altbach and Tefera 2010) elucidated that the vast continent of Africa with 10% of the world population, produced a meager 2% of the global output of books in 1981. A decade later it dropped to 1% while more than 70% of its book needs were imported. On the other hand, where as world linguistic survey points to growing language relationship (consolidation into major languages) African languages continue to develop and generate ever-new dialects and lingua- francas. In the same vein, given that the ‘world’ languages continue to have strong appeal to national elites, it is a very clear fact that most parents still prefer their children to be instructed in English language as they see this as the language that gives privileges. This probably may be one reason why Nigerian authors may not boarder to publish in their vernacular. In relation to that, (Atimo 1998) in (Iwu 2011) traces that, the culture of reading for leisure is lacking among the neo-literates. The writer attributed the poor reading culture of these people to the entrenched oral forms of social communication and noted that, even if these people want to read, it will be difficult for publishers to meet the reading material needs of a small population whose local languages might not exist in written form. Going by the problem of ethnicity in Nigeria, we all know that Nigeria is a multilingual nation of about 350 – 400 languages. Now the question of choosing one language to be the national lingua franca in a culturally divergent linguistics, social and religious persuasions becomes decisively tough. One undeniable fact is that every language or even a dialect has some cultural inclinations so that every language can act or serve as a transmitter of culture and traditional values. But the fear of each language or tribe to be dominated by another

has made tribes with abundant literature and scholars to begin to fight regional course rather than nationalistic aspirations which ignited and kept ablaze our spirit of struggle all through the odd days of pre-independence. For example, if Yoruba is adopted, as the national language, the Ibos and Hausas will not toe the line for fear of having the Yoruba culture imposed on them. The same way if Hausa or Ibo is adopted as the national lingua-franca the ethnic groups perceive. This has posed a big problem to the development of vernacular publishing in Nigeria.

Another problem of vernacular publishing is that which the printer experienced. There are some technical difficulties that the printer encounters in some vernacular languages, some special signs has to be printed either on top of a letter or down the letter/alphabet slanty or straight. It is a problem in the process of printing and can hinder publishing in vernacular.

Yet another problem as highlighted by Ekere (2007) that most of the languages are tonal with the result that the same printed word may have at least four different meanings and if dialectical signs are not used it then makes the reading process quite difficult.

The readers have to read over and over to get the right rhythm or to use the general context to get the meaning of the word. Such dialectical signs have to be inserted by hand. This is not vernacular publishing friendly.

V. What Should Be Done

It is a challenge to language teachers in Nigerian schools and colleges to come out and start to improve our culture by: reviewing the terminologies used in our local languages; determining the similarities and comparing with what is obtainable from more technologically advanced countries for the purpose of adapting same in the national education curriculum. This publication, I suggest must be in our vernacular.

Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community and, at a later stage English. Internationally, equal support has been given for the use of indigenous language in schools, for example, the first international support for the idea emerged at the UNESCO meeting of specialist in 1951 which recommended that pupils should begin their schooling through the medium of the mother-tongue. Infact, this meeting recommended that children should be educated in their mother-tongue as far as possible and by these vernacular publishing in Nigeria will be encouraged because, there will be the users and buyers of the published materials.

According to Ada (2005) "Nigeria should take a cue from similar multilingual nations like in Soviet Socialist Republic (U.S.S.R.) where there are ninety ethnic groups but nevertheless some of the languages were fully integrated into the national curriculum. This can also encourage vernacular publishing.

Our oral tradition of telling Tales should be put into written literature. Tales address themselves to everybody. They are meant for everybody's listening pleasure and attention because they talk about what men all over the world search for: good luck, fortune, peace, health, kindness and friendship among others. These are universal themes and they are put in literature form, there will be an increase in vernacular publishing and hence promotion of our culture.

Parents can also help by introducing the child to his/her mother-tongue before any other languages. Churches can also come in by publishing most if not all their literature in vernacular and encourage vernacular preaching.

VI. Conclusion

We appreciate the formidable problems of using an indigenous language as a medium of instruction in schools within the context of the Nigerian multi-linguistic and cultural diversity. Despite this something must be done to enhance vernacular publishing because, more than 48 years of independence we have used the English language paramountly as a medium of instruction but no remarkable technological development is witnessed. Beside that other multilingual countries like Russia, Bulgaria, Hungary, France, where Nigerian young men are sent to acquire technological knowledge have indigenous languages as medium of communication and instruction in primary, secondary and even tertiary institution of learning where foreigners are compelled to study the language of instruction before embarking on the course of study proper, Akpen (2002). Going by the prospects of vernacular publishing which we have highlighted above and the problems which I believed can be thrown away with the wave of a hand, I advice that we should not as a nation with prosperous tendency champion individualism at the detriment of nationalism, let us not advance our regional and tribal prejudices above our national interest. We did not fight the British for our regions, we fought them for our Nigeria, so the preservation and restoration of our culture which is our pride, our economic, social and political values lie in us and our mother-tongue through publishing. Let us try to advance, progress, develop and understand ourselves the African way.

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