

Language in the Face of COVID-19 and Insecurity in Nigeria

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Abstract

In today's competitive world, every society is faced with different problems ranging from health, technology, resources, education, security wise etc. In Nigeria, the most pronounced challenge is insecurity. National security has been a challenging and disturbing issue in Nigeria. Several efforts have been made by government at all levels to provide effective and endearing security mechanisms, yet, the problem of national security has persisted. However, with the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic, the insurgency appeared with a new face and tenser than ever before. Historically, major events like natural disasters and war have proven to have big impacts on language. Since its advent, COVID-19 has brought a totally new approach to people's life over the world and language has not been spared. While the threat of COVID-19 has triggered a serious global health concern, a great deal of the fear surrounding the disease is being fueled by widespread misinformation. The World Health Organization provides information which is primarily directed at member States, who are then tasked with localizing relevant information for their populations through their national health authorities. This paper therefore examines language in the face of COVID-19 pandemic and insecurity challenges in Nigeria. It highlights the communicative perspective of language as well as the role of language in the

fight against COVID-19 and insecurity in Nigeria.

KEYWORDS: Language, COVID-19, Pandemic, Insecurity, Communication, Crisis, Information

Introduction

Language as a system of arbitrary verbal symbols and non-verbal means which speakers put in order according to conventional code is used to communicate ideas and feelings or to influence the behaviour of others. The possession of language, perhaps more than any other attribute, distinguishes humans from other animals (Fromkin et al, 2003:3). As such, to understand humanity, one must understand that language as a dynamic system can be used to introduce new ways of referring to things that have always been there and those which come into existence later on. According to Mweri (2021), languages can be adapted to reflect changes taking place in the life and culture of users, and the majority of such changes happen in their vocabulary, because as compared to vocabularies that can change very quickly both in its lexicon and in word meanings, grammatical and phonological structures of language are relatively stable and take time to change (p.36).

The outbreak of the Corona virus otherwise known as COVID-19 across the world brought about new approaches of doing things. Given the ravaging impact of the virus, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-

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19 a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. Hence, to contain the spread of the pandemic, governments at all levels came up with various policies. Social and physical distancing, partial lockdowns of certain sectors, restricting movement, and imposing bans on domestic and international travel (except for essential and humanitarian purposes), became most prominent of such policies.

Nigeria recorded its COVID-19 index case on 28 February 2020, and has also been implementing policies to contain the pandemic. Since then, the country has recorded a total number of 187,023 confirmed cases, with 2268 deaths, 168455 discharged from hospital (as of 22nd August 2021). While several countries of the world are squarely focused on the pandemic and drawing on all available resources, some African countries are faced with the double challenge of insecurity and the pandemic. Nigeria falls into the category of countries having to handle both insecurity and the COVID-19 pandemic, having been confronted with the ravaging activities of Boko Haram, herdsmen, bandits and militants over the years. The activities of the secessionist IPOB group in the South Eastern part of Nigeria have increased the level of insurgency across the country.

Historically, major events like natural disasters and war have proven to have big impacts on language. Since its advent, COVID-19 has brought a totally new approach to people's life over the world and language has not been spared. While the threat of COVID-19 has triggered a serious global health concern, a great deal of the fear surrounding the disease is being fueled by widespread misinformation.

Misinformation about COVID-19 identified by BBC Media Action includes rumors that the disease can be prevented by shaving beards or drinking salt water, and that people can self diagnose by holding their breath. However, experts warn that when

confusion about language is combined with the anxiety of living through a global pandemic, it can create an environment where misinformation flourishes (Rizvic, 2020). This can be dangerous to public health for many reasons, including the potential for discrimination and racism. Even with the discovery of COVID-19 vaccine, language barriers could put certain segments of the society at greater risk in the face of Covid-19 pandemic and insecurity challenges.

Good intentions accompanied with poor language use often do more harm than good. In the face of crises like the COVID-19 pandemic or insecurity threat, and as the world navigate to the new normal; it is essential to communicate in a language that is clear, accurate, and accessible. Only information in a language that people understand can save lives. Hence, the big question becomes; In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, insecurity challenges in Nigeria and efforts by the government to curb it, what is the role of language in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic and insecurity challenges facing the country? Answer to this question is the main thrust of this paper.

COVID-19 and Insecurity in Nigeria

Terrorism and other forms of insecurity and conflicts are not new in Nigeria. The activities of Boko Haram and bandits, inter-communal clashes, the herdsmen–farming community crisis and militancy, among others, have ravaged (and continue to ravage) the country, leaving thousands dead and millions displaced. Acts of terrorism by Boko Haram have been rampant in north-eastern Nigeria, while banditry is more prominent in the north-western region of the country. In the south-south and south-eastern regions, the activities of militant groups and herdsmen have continued to ravage the area. The south-south dominant militant groups have often operated via kidnappings and oil

bunkering. The herder–farmer conflict is associated with struggle over scarce resources, land ownership, proprietorship and community ownership.

Herdsmen, who are typically from northern Nigeria, often migrate to the southern parts of the country in search of healthy and greener grazing pastures, which are now of very low quantity in the north. These herdsmen are often regarded as strangers in their new settlements, they encroach on the farms of the local people and their animals graze on (and destroy) the farmers' crops. This has mostly been the source of the crisis between the two groups, resulting in cattle rustling, killings, rapes, abductions and other atrocities. While the scourge of insecurity and conflicts have been on the increase in Nigeria, the various conflict groups have also had their share of the brutality and combatant activities of security forces across the country (Abubakar, 2021).

Interestingly, many factors have been identified as exacting impact on national security. Among those that constitute threats are: bad and weak government, human right violation, unjust and inequitable distribution of national resources (e.g. in political posts, industries, investments, funds, etc), disunited and disintegrated ethnic groups, ethnic and religious antagonisms, and cleavages, weak and poor economy marked by corruption, weak currency, etc, socio-economic hardship, unemployment, hunger, etc, weak military might, weak media, communal clashes, unhealthy competition among the ethnic groups for national resources, political domination, abuse and misuse of power by some defense and security agents etc (Odunlami, 1999:131). While the Nigerian Armed Forces have recorded some progress over the years in their quest to end insecurity in the country, insurgency has continued unabated across the country.

The outbreak of Corona virus on the

other hand increased the level of insecurity across the country. As government imposed restrictions, banned some daily activities and closed up some important sectors of the economy, the closure of borders led to constant attack by Boko Haram. Since there was no means of getting aid in terms of foods, ammunitions and relief materials from their sponsors, they sought for other means of survival. In addition to the displacement caused by the activities of the Boko Haram group as well as other bandits, the crisis hampered agricultural activities and heightened the risk of acute food insecurity. The effect of this is still felt even in the present time. Abubakar (2021) asserts that following the ban placed on hotels and other bar houses where people could patronize the services of prostitutes as they constantly do, adding to lack of money, this led to increase in rape cases and infidelity among spouses within the country. While most of these atrocities were carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic as people were always at home, however, even as the lockdown was relaxed, there have been severe cases of insurgency, theft, rape amongst others. The issue of rape cases has persisted despite the fear of transmissions of the virus. Several cases of rape have been reported in which most of the victims were killed or injured after the assault.

Communicative Perspective of Language

The primary function of language is communication. Every normal human being depends, in all his social activities, on the use of language to do things. People use language principally as a tool to do things such as; request a favour, make a promise, report a piece of news, give directions, offer greeting, seek information, extend an invitation, request help and do hundreds of other ordinary things (Finegan, 2012:302). Thus, Okeke (2012) opines that what we do with language can have positive or

negative consequences on us. For instance, it could negatively affect us when it is used to curse, fire an employee, etc but positively when used to pray, propose marriage, tell the truth, etc. (p.220). Considering communication generally, Wardhaugh as cited in Okeke (2012) asserts that it involves much more than using language to state propositions or convey facts. Through conversation, we establish relationship, and so on. The utterances we use in conversation enable us to do these kinds of things because conversation itself has certain properties which are well worth examining. It is therefore important to understand what utterances do, how they can be used, and specifically, how they can be used in conversation.

Essentially, whenever language is used for communication, it performs different kinds of acts. The utterances/words used are locutions. Most locutions express some intent that a speaker has. This tells why Austin and Searle in Wardhaugh cited in Okeke(2012) ascribe an illocutionary function to language and see language as illocutionary and performative acts. These have a signification that a speaking person is doing more than mere communication; he is also performing an action. In other words, the illocutionary and performative functions of language show language as an action, a performance. Most verbs we use carry some illocutionary and performative forces. Such verbs include; pronounce, nullify, baptize, declare, congratulate, etc. This is why the declaration of June 12, 1993 Nigerian election as of null and void remained nullified with its negative consequences (p.222).

However, there are many other functions of language as we hardly can think of any human activity that will be performed without the facility of language. Thus, we can use language to make statements, ask questions, persuade, dissuade, pray, curse, abuse, praise, perform rituals, recall, threaten, make peace, etc.

Language therefore is very essential because it makes life easier and meaningful. Language can do all these and many others if used appropriately.

Language Change and Use in the Face of Covid-19 and Insecurity in Nigeria

Language matters in moments of crisis especially one that relates to public health because the goals of any public health campaign must be clearly defined, especially when the campaigns include measures that limit liberty, damage the economy and change people's way of life. Thus, effective communication is crucial for the success of public health measures to tackle COVID-19 and insecurity in Nigeria.

The special Covid-19 related updates give a glimpse into how language can quickly change in the face of unprecedented social and economic disruption. For example, one of the effects of the pandemic is that it has brought previously obscure medical terms to the forefront of everyday speech. Terms related to social isolation existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic, but they have become much more common in 2020 and beyond. Words like; self-isolate, self-isolated and shelter in place all received new citations to illustrate their current usage. Some terms have seen a shift in meaning. Originally, sheltering in place referred to seeking safety during a circumscribed event, like a tornado or an active shooter attack. It is now being used to refer to a prolonged period of social isolation. Similarly, elbow bump has evolved from a gesture akin to a high-five, as documented in 1981, to its present form: a safe way to greet another person.

Suffice it to mean that the COVID-19 pandemic has produced its fair share of new terms that are blends of other words. They include “maskne,” an acne outbreak caused by facial coverings; “zoom bombing,” which is when strangers intrude on video conferences; and “quarantini,” a cocktail consumed in

isolation. Other new blends include “covidiot,” for someone who ignores public safety recommendations; “doom scrolling,” which happens when you skim anxiety-inducing pandemic-related stories on your smart phone; and the German term “hamsterkauf,” or panic buying. Whether such terms will be in common usage after the pandemic is yet to be ascertained.

However, while the COVID-19 pandemic has led to neologism, it has created a lot of confusion in the terminology used to describe the virus as well as the choice of words used in stating its preventive measures. For instance, people don't clearly understand the concept of “social distancing”. To address this confusion, people need detailed medical information in clear and accessible language to understand COVID-19 specifically. Explanations that lack detail risk down playing these verity of COVID-19 and can lead to misconceptions. It is important to use contextualized translations of “social distancing” to ensure that the concept is conveyed correctly. Literal translations of “social distancing” create confusion. The more accurate term “physical distancing” can help people better understand how to protect themselves and others from COVID-19.

More so, it is claimed that ineffective and inappropriate choices of words and language use in general threaten national security more than any other factor is justified. Although the above factors can threaten national security, Odunlami (1999) seems to undermine language use which is an element central to all the insecurity challenges mentioned above as none of these forces could be achieved without inappropriate use of language. On the other hand, Okeke (2012) adds that effective and appropriate uses of language in communication enhance national security. Expressions are usually intended for certain meanings and such meanings manifest in different linguistic forms to depict the intention of

the speaker. Meaning is embedded in language. Okeke (2012) asserts that the literal (semantic) meaning of words may lead to contextual (pragmatic) meaning as people tend to interpret meanings of words further by examining some extra-linguistic features like context/situation, tenor, mode, locution, illocution, perlocution and felicity condition (p.226).

Role of Language in the Fight against Covid-19 and Insecurity

According to Okeke (2012), ability to use language appropriately means that both speakers and listeners can interpret or produce appropriate messages and feedbacks (p.221). As such, knowing a language is not simply a matter of knowing how to encode a message and transmit it to a second party, who then decodes it in order to understand what we intended to say. It also embodies the ability to use language accurately, appropriately and flexibly to be communicative competent. Communicative competence enables a user of language to know when and where to use language. Using language flexibly implies that the user has strategic competence to organize a message and communicate the intended meaning to the listener/audience effectively.

Human beings are social animals and contagious infections like the Corona virus throw the very foundations of our social lives into question. Not to be able to gather, to hug those dear to us, or to rub shoulders with passers-by in our cities is deeply disturbing to our social fabric. Not only has the pandemic unsettled our personal lives but it has also heightened friction between groups. All these means that the language challenges of COVID-19 insecurity do not only relate to the dissemination of information but also to relationship building. asserts that when it comes to global communication, there is a division of labour between languages specializing in information dissemination through written genres

and languages specializing in relationship building through oral genres. Thus, language users should have these two important aspects of language use in mind during communication.

During moments of crisis, the availability of timely, high-quality information becomes more vital, not only for the general public but also health professionals and decision makers at all levels. A mismatch between the language in which such information is communicated and the linguistic repertoires of those who need the information serves to exacerbate the effects of disasters on linguistic minorities in comparison to the majority population.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the world to adopt a whole new glossary of terms which may not have been familiar. However, some terms may still be unclear, such as the precise difference between “self-isolation” and “quarantine.” This new vocabulary can lead to uncertainty and misinformation during a time when clarity of language is most needed. To further confuse things, the virus itself has been referred to by several different names, including simply “Coronavirus” (the name for the broad category of viruses it belongs to), “COVID-19” (the name of the disease caused by the virus), and “SARS-CoV-2” (the name of the current strain of the virus). While the language surrounding Covid-19 continues to change, a concerted shift toward terminology that is accurate, compassionate, and resistant to misinterpretation can have profound effects.

The availability of knowledge in the languages of the people not only ensures that the message is not misunderstood due to a poor level of command of the official language but also creates trust, which increases the likelihood of acceptance. Health experts and governments need to position themselves as trustworthy sources of information to the public, who need to understand the situation, be aware of the

precautions they can take, and stay calm.

On the part of insecurity, there is a need for the security agencies, especially the police and the civil defense organizations to dispatch officers and men of their organizations to their individual states of origin. This will enable these security personnel to engage and interact with people in their indigenous languages. It will also enhance proper investigation that would stop or reduce crime rate incessant killings.

In addition, government agencies and private organizations like the National Orientation Agency, media houses, and conflict management institutions should regularly dialogue with the people in their native languages. This will also reduce the feeling of marginalization and the urge to take up arms by the perceived marginalized people and communities. Any information emanating from the government should also be communicated to the people through their different languages. This will aid proper dissemination and assimilation of any information released by the authorities to the citizenry, and it will further enhance purposive enlightenment and education of the citizens on the decisions of the government.

Relating with the people in their native languages will help to foster a sense of belonging in the country and it will also afford the citizens (both literates and illiterates) the opportunity to express their opinions, feelings and or dissatisfactions on any matter that may be affecting them and their localities. By so doing, there will be peace and orderliness in the country while lawlessness, civil disobedience and illegal arms proliferation leading to high rate of crime like armed robbery, kidnapping, human trafficking, terrorism, banditry, and insurgency will be drastically reduced and curtailed, because the citizens would be well informed, educated and updated.

Conclusion

The problem of national security in the face of COVID-19 pandemic is not the task of the government alone but what every Nigerian should collaborate to ensure through effective and appropriate use of words of the accepted language communication. As the government strives to curb the negative effects of the pandemic, thoughts should be given to what one wants to say, the receiver, the effect of his utterance on the receiver, the possible interpretations that might be given as his intended meanings. These are necessary because the insecurity in Nigeria has taken a shape that needed, more than any other thing, effective and appropriate use of language as a more comprehensive measure to address it. It is important that politicians, and indeed Nigerians in general try to maintain continuity as well as achieve peace and success in language use by constantly, and strategically figuring out what to say, how to say things and how to understand what others say in the process of interacting with others.

Suggestions

A key component of managing any crisis is effective communication, which can be difficult during an infodemic. As the world scrambles to contain the Coronavirus pandemic, the role of effective communication becomes increasingly critical. As such, the paper suggests that:

1. Health workers should apply plain language principles. Information in plain and accessible language reduces confusion and has the potential to prevent rumors.
2. Government should partner with health workers and language translators so as to translate critical public-facing content in languages and formats that people will understand.
3. Language data and mapping should also be adopted by government and health workers.

In order to provide easily-understood information, organizations need to know which languages people speak and understand, and where it is spoken

4. Nigerians, especially the political players, should avoid making inflammatory and unguarded utterances that threaten national security.
5. People should strengthen their feedback mechanism and improve on their communicative competence.

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