Language Choice and the Eroding of Cultural Identity among Nigerian Facebook Users

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Abstract

The advent of the social media has made life easier for people. It has made sending and receiving of information more convenient. Consequently, individuals, organizations, institutions and even governments find social media an easier way of reaching their target audience. Social media have also helped in boosting the economy. It helps in promoting brand visibility and awareness which in turn promotes business growth. However, this has come with a price to our cultural identity. Social media is not only a mode of passing information but also a source of penetration of cultures from dominant cultures to recessive ones. African cultures have been at the receiving end of this cultural imperialism. The Nigerian Facebook community currently faces a significant erosion of cultural identity. In order to investigate this phenomenon, two Facebook pages – Yabaleftonline.com and RANT HQ – were purposively selected for this study. Six posts (three from each page) were selected and three comments under each post were also selected to analyse the extent of the erosion of cultural identity in each African value. The study anchors on the theory of linguistic relativity which postulates that the way in which we think about the world is directly influenced by the language we use to talk about it. Since English is a liberal language and also the medium of expression used in the Facebook pages selected for this study, the outcome of the study shows that many Nigerian users of Facebook do not reflect their cultural identity on Facebook.

Introduction

Language is the principal means by which we conduct our social lives. Language is the medium used by individuals to negotiate a sense of self in different contexts (Norton, 2000). Language cannot be divorced from culture because language is one of the most important aspects of culture. Culture is built up through communication over time. As stated by Hall (2012, p.18), "Language is a repository of culture and a tool by which culture is created". Language is therefore a fundamental aspect of cultural identity. It is through language that we transmit and express our group values, beliefs and customs and pass them down from one generation to another. It is also through language that people create a sense of community. As LittleJohn and Foss aptly put it:

> People are able to shift contexts, change meanings, and act in a variety of ways because of a history of interaction with many people over time in which they learned numerous ways to interpret and act in different situations. In modern society, a person is part of many systems,

each with its own set of meaning and action rules. The rules are learned through interaction in social groups. Over time, individuals internalize many of these rules and draw on them to guide their actions (2008, P.217).

Language and culture have a homologous relationship. They are intertwined, evolving together and influencing one another. In this context, Krober (1923) says that, "culture, then, began when speech was present, and from then on, the enrichment of either means the further development of the other" (Guessabi 2020, p.2).

Identity construction is a social and cultural process which is accomplished through discursive practices. Language is the most flexible and pervasive symbolic resource at the centre of the cultural representation of identity (Mercuri, 2012). Therefore, the ability to use a specific language in a specific context influences the development of cultural identity.

Cultural Identity

Edward B. Taylor is reputed as the scholar who first coined and defined culture. Taylor sees culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs or any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (Idang, 2015). This definition does not fully encompass what culture entails. Culture is a phenomenon through which a group of people is identified. It is a set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioural conventions, basic assumptions, and values that are shared by a group of people and that influence each member's interpretations of meanings of other people's behaviour. Every human acquires the culture of the environment he lives in consciously or unconsciously because culture is acquired through the socialization process. Fafunwa (1974, p.48) writes that, "The child just grows into within the cultural heritage of his people. He imbibes it. Culture in the traditional society is not taught; it is caught".

Culture is universal; each social group has its own unique culture. This uniqueness is termed cultural variation. Even though each culture is unique, there are points of convergence of cultures of people sharing boundaries. The Yoruba culture for instance, share some dominant traits with the Edo culture than it would with the Western culture. Hence, there is a vast difference between African culture and those of other continents. Culture is also not fixed but dynamic. Any living culture is subject to change. It changes through contact with and absorption of other people's culture, a process known as assimilation (Antia, 2005). Culture is an adaptive system because people can change their social patterns, beliefs and values.

Identity is a construct that encompasses different disciplines. It is "people's concept of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" (Hogg and Abrams, 1988, p.2). In the social sciences, identity is defined as the way that individuals label themselves as members of a shared values and customs of a particular culture shapes people's view of who they are, how they think and how they view the world (Rovira, 2008). A person's culture is an essential element of their identity. Cultural identity is a person's sense of belonging to a particular culture or group. It refers to "identification with, or sense of belonging to a particular group based on various cultural categories, including nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and religion" (Chen, 2014, p.1). Cultural identity is part of a person's self-concept. Variables that constitute cultural identity include:

ethnicity, cultural background, language, religion, sexuality, geographical environment, migration status, and others. Even though some aspects of identity such as nationality, ethnicity, sexuality are static, the postmodernist approach supports a more fluid construction of identity. Hall (1996, p.6) posits that "identities are points of temporary attachments to the subject positions that discursive practices construct for us". This means that individuals' construction of their identities is a dynamic one, it is continually changing depending on the social context or setting and therefore subject to reconstruction. When people speak, they construct and reconstruct their identity and how they relate to the social world (Morita, 2004).

African Cultural Values

Values are a culture's standard for discerning what is good and just in society. It is what shapes society and influence people who live within that society. A culture is an embodiment of different values. Values are essential for the survival of any group of people. Idang (2015) enumerates six values found in the African culture:

•   Social Values: This involves the practices performed by a society. They include – festivals, games, dances, ceremonies (like marriage ceremonies, funeral ceremonies, naming ceremonies, rites of passage, e.t.c.) peculiar to a particular society. This also involves the collectivism culture of Africans. Embedded in the heart of the African social values is Ubuntu – "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am". In the African culture, humans are interdependent on other humans. Sociality, belonging, mutual responsibility and service, connectedness, solidarity, caring and sharing are all important values constituting our very being (Smit, 2007). The African family is the first point of socialization. The extended family is very important in shaping the personality of an African. Embedded in the African child is respect for higher authority in the family and society.

•   Moral Values: Idang (2015, p.103) asserts that "African culture is embedded in strong moral considerations. It has a system of various beliefs and customs which every individual ought to keep in order to live long and to avoid bringing curses on them and others". Kudadjie (1983) distinguishes between two main types of sanctions to enforce morality: religious and social. Religious sanctions included the practice of cursing through magic and the fear of punishment by the ancestors and the gods. The punishment could be troubling the errant descendants with sickness or misfortune until restitution is made. Social sanctions included the following: family or clan renunciation, disinheriting, ostracism, public disgrace and even execution in the case of notorious criminals.

•   Religious Values: Religious values are intertwined with moral values. African Traditional Religion is the original religion of Africans. There is belief in good and bad spirits and life after death as ancestors are worshipped and their direction sought for in times of need. Sorcerers, diviners and chief priests mediate between the gods and man. African Traditional Religion holds a moral sense of justice. Idang (2015, p.104) states that, "the diviners, sorcerers and soothsayers help to streamline human behaviour in society and people are afraid to commit offences because of the fear of being exposed by the diviners and sorcerers". There are often consequences for deviation from these moral values.

•   Political Values: Prior to colonization, most African cultures have political institutions with council of chiefs, cult groups and a ruler who is accorded with respect. The position of a leader was either hereditary or by conquest.

•   Aesthetic Values: Aesthetics is used to talk about beauty or arts. African aesthetic values is immensely rich. African arts and crafts find expression in a variety of wood carvings, brass and leather work, sculpture, paintings and pottery. The aesthetic value of a people influences their art and their judgment of what is beautiful or ugly. Some African cultures emphasize personal appearance. Idang (2015, p.105) writes that:

> The sense of beauty of Ibibio people is epitomized in their fattened maidens whom they call 'mbopo'. These fattened maidens are confined to a room where they are fed with traditional cuisines. The idea behind it is to prepare the maiden and make her look as good, healthy and beautiful as possible for her husband. This is usually done before marriage and after child birth. The Western model of beauty is not like this. It is often pictured as slim-looking young ladies who move in staggered steps. This shows that the African aesthetic value and sense of what is beautiful is markedly different.

•   Economic Values: The traditional economy of Africans was based on farming, hunting, fishing, crafts and trade. A large family guarantees a large work force and cheap labour, therefore, men take pride in marrying many wives and producing many children especially males so as to have a lot of hands in the farm. African culture is communalistic. Individuals should be of value to the society. The economic value of the traditional African society is marked by cooperation. Friends and relations assist one another in the farm, building houses and solving other difficulties. Hard work is a trait the average African man loves to take pride in. Laziness is synonymous with a life of poverty.

Cultural Diffusion

Cultural diffusion is the social process through which the cultural practices, beliefs, items such as food, music or tools spread from one culture to another. This spread could be geographical (from one location to another) or social (from one social group to another). It is the spreading of culture over time and it takes place through cultural contact. Idang (2015, p.107) opines that "diffusion entails intentional borrowing of cultural traits from other societies with which the beneficiary society comes in contact with, or an imposition of cultural traits on one society by a stronger society intending to assimilate the weaker society". Africa falls into the second category by reason of colonialism.

There is an integration of the Western culture into the African culture. Motlhabi (1986) draws attention to the fact that equivalents of the Ten Commandments, like prohibitions to steal, murder, commit adultery, tell lies or deceive, are encountered in the traditional African concept of a virtuous life. Many of the core values of Africans have acquired traits of the Western culture. For Christians, ceremonies like naming and funeral ceremonies are still done albeit with the influence of Christianity. Traditional marriages are done as well as Western marriage. African religious values have shaped the Western religion which the colonialists thrusted on Africans. Some Africans who go to church also patronize diviners and sorcerers when the need arises. Divination is often sought by individuals such as barren women, warriors, people with strange diseases, and

others who suspect that their ordeals were orchestrated by their enemies who tried to harm them through witchcraft, sorcery, or spirit possession (Abukari et al, 2022). This diffusion is also responsible for African Christians craze for prophets to reveal mysteries to them in place of sorcerers and diviners.

The Erosion of African Culture

Africa has been in cultural dilemma ever since its forceful subjugation by European countries through colonialism and slavery (Maduagwu, 1999, para.13). The coming of the colonial masters and the imposition of their culture on Africans through Western education and evangelization has been blamed as the beginning of the gradual erosion in the traditional value system. African countries have been unable to independently chart their own cultural identity.

Maduagwu (1999) asserts that:

In traditional Africa, education was essentially functional: preparation to meet the challenges of the society. The colonial education system, on the other hand, was designed to alienate the African from his or her culture, to loathe his or her language and manual work . . . the traditional African informal education was first and foremost communalistic, promotion of unity and harmony of communal experiences where the individual is a unit within the organic whole. The emphasis on traditional education was character formation. The colonial education both at its beginning in Africa and as it has been maintained by African leaders since de-colonization neglected the character formation aspect of education. The neglect of character formation has given rise to moral depravity which now characterize the present-day African society. This is manifested in the virtual collapse of family values, rampant corruption in public life and excessive materialism among the so-called educated elite.

Igboin (2011, p.101) opines that "the method of moral inculcation was vitiated which resulted in the abandonment of traditional norms and values through a systematic depersonalization of the African and paganization of its values ". The imposition of the Western extreme individualism destroyed African's age-long communalism.

Facebook Pages as Speech Communities

 The rapid expansion of the internet and the ways it is being used make the internet a very dynamic social force. Social interactions are gradually shifting to the internet thereby yielding novel ways to create and participate in communities. Speech communities have been defined as groups that share values and attitudes about language use, varieties and practices (Morgan, 2014). Virtual communities can be thought of as speech communities since each group share the same value and use a common language. According to Landi (1973), "the totality of the messages we exchange with one another while speaking a given language constitutes a speech community, that is, the whole society understood from the point of view of speaking".People on different Facebook pages

use a common language in communicating and often share similar interests because each Facebook page is created for a particular purpose.

Theoretical Framework

The Whorfian/Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, otherwise known as linguistic relativity is associated with the linguist Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf. According to linguistic relativity, the way in which we think about the world is directly influenced by the language we use to talk about it. According to Sapir in his book *Language* (1929):

> Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for the society… the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group (Wardhaugh,1998, p.216).

Whorf adds that we "cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language" (Wardhaugh,1998, p.217). Fishman (1960 and 1972) has made claims concerning the Whorfian hypothesis, one of which is that, if speakers of one language have certain words to describe things and speakers another language lack similar words, then speakers of the first language will find it easier to talk about those things (Wardhaugh,1998).   The choice of this framework is to examine how the choice of English as a medium of communication by Nigerian users of Facebook influence their view of the world.

Methodology

Two Facebook pages (Yabaleftonline.com and RANT HQ) were purposively selected for this study. Sixposts were taken between September, 2021 to January,2022 from the Facebook pages. Three comments under each post were selected. Theposts and comments were purposively selected based on their relevance to study.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Post 1: YabaLeftOnline.com November 1, 2021

I'm currently mentally exhausted – BBNaija star , Micheal opens up

Comments

1. Wetin come concern us nah? If you wan run mad abeg no use am disturb us…we are already exhausted in this country (What is our business? If you want to run mad please do not disturb us with it…We are already exhausted in this country).

2. This year BBN house mates and mental health are 5 & 6. All of us dey suffer am but e reach una turn e come become news. (This year's BBN house mates are interrelated with mental health. All of us are suffering from mental health but you turn yours to news.)

3. Trying to understand how that concerns me.

Big Brother Naija (BBN/ BBNaija) is a yearly reality TV show in Nigeria. From the comments to one of the participants post concerning his mental health above, we can come to the conclusion that we have lost our collectivism culture and embraced the individualistic culture of the West (every man to himself). No one wants to be his brother's keeper anymore. Ubuntu has disappeared and its annihilation has its roots in the combined effects of colonization, cultural globalization and cultural diffidence.

Post 2: RANT HQ   September 28, 2021

When your boyfriend is kissing you, where do you want him to place his hands on.

Comments

1. on my breast

2. my pussy

3. Mine will always want my two palms on her booty…with a tender squeezing.

Before the western assault on African traditional system, there was a widespread reservation for pillow talk. Sexuality in pre-colonial African communities, as observed by Oloworekende, was:

> Absent from communal discussions and was only discussed in vague terms that did not leave room for sexual curiosity or expression, such that the language of sex was stripped from everyday communication … where lessons and talks existed in pre-colonial Nigeria, the lessons … were often heteronormative, discussed only in the context of marriage. An example of this being the lessons learnt in the fattening rooms of the Ibibio land, where young women were introduced to the art of seduction and romance, and received advice on improving their physical profiles to appeal to their husbands. (2019, para.3)

Such post and comments above abound on Facebook pages where English is the medium of expression unlike pages where our indigenous languages are the medium of expression. Circumlocution and euphemistic language is often used to express such ideas when the need arises in indigenous languages. This has to do with English being a liberal language as against our conservative indigenous languages. A good reflection of the moral decay in the family structure is seen in the Big Brother show. According to Ode (2009), "most family members, males, females, husbands, wives become addicted to watching and applauding the decadence and rapid erosion of Africa's cherished moral values"(Oko-Epelle and Abdulsalam 2020, p.99). On different Facebook pages, people put up unabashed support for the inmates' immoral life styles.

Post 3: YabaleftOnline.com January 2, 2022

"Don't gain any sexual experience before getting married" – Pastor Kingsley Okonkwo tells single people.

Comments

1. Too late sir. We need to check if his sperm is rich.

2. It's you that God will judge for not saying it on time. Something I already experienced on cross-over night.

3. How will I then know that he fucks me well?

       Prior to globalization which has paved way for illicit sexual behaviour, there were stringent rules which guided and enforced discipline among the members of the African society. Failure to adhere to the rules guiding sexual unions was an offence frowned upon by every member of the community in African society. Globalization favours the culture of the dominating civilization to the detriment of the developing societies. (Okafor,2018). Pre-marital sex has become the norm in our society and promiscuity is no longer frowned upon by many as was the norm in the past. People are now proud to come on social media to expose their pre-marital sex life which is supposed to be a thing of shame in the African culture. Even co-habitation before marriage, which is alien to our African values, is applauded on social media.

Post 4:YabaLeftOnline.com December 30, 2021

"How come two of your wives divorced you in less than two months?" Charley Boy questions Ooni of Ife's marriage crisis.

Comments

1. No woman can dump a man and not just an ordinary man for that matter. I think Kabiyesi has some questionable character that's not disclosed to the public.

2. The man cannot perform period!

3. Even God is ashamed of you, Ooni.

       The Western civilization submerged and dismantled indigenous institutions and in its place, a foreign rule was established. Traditional institutions before then were regarded as not only political authorities but also custodians of culture. Traditional rulers were accountable to their

citizens and were one of the most respected members of societies. However, in recent times, the reverence and respect accorded to traditional rulers in the African setting is no more obtainable as can be seen from the vitriolic criticisms thrown at them without caution on Facebook.

Post 5 :RANT HQ 15 December, 2021

"Why I Underwent Gastric Bypass Surgery" EniolaBadmus

Comment

1. Congratulations, I'm proud of you.

2. You now look like a celebrity.

3. I never knew you can be this beautiful. Hope you did something about the voice too.

In most traditional African societies, being fat or plump was favoured, because it implied that a woman was healthy. African men preferred 'fleshy' women to skinny ones because 'real men eat flesh'. In modern times however, Western standards of beauty have increasingly made it into global media. The quest to attain Western ideas of beauty has resulted in women undergoing costly and often life-threatening cosmetic surgery to improve their appearance, self-esteem and confidence. We have embraced the Eurocentric image of beauty and abandoned the African one which views a thick and curvy woman as beautiful.

Post 6 : YabaLeftOnline.com November 5, 2021

Don't be distracted by Yahoo boys, they will go to jail – VP Osibanjo tells Nigerian youths.

Comments

1. Since Yahoo began, I have not heard of armed robbers' attacks. If Yahoo will change my story, abeg I wan learn… Our politicians that are the real Yahoo boys, EFCC are dining with them. There is no repercussion in Yahoo except you are using juju.

2. But wait ooo… Yahoo has actually helped lots of youths than the federal government.

3. While going through the comments here, I am very sure now that Yahoo is a good business…it's legal now but some of us do not have the mind…do it if you have the mind…nobody is holier.

In traditional African societies, people work hard. Laziness and fraud were never encouraged. African work values take its roots from African morality which includes decency, honesty, kindness, justice sense of right and wrong. Information and communication technology has expedited the growth of globalization and has given birth to cybercrime by disseminating ideas regarding innovation in crimes and unethical conducts. Getting rich overnight without working for it has become the order of the day especially among our youth. This trend has given rise to the menace of 'yahoo' and money rituals among the youth currently ravaging our society.

Conclusion

The dereliction of the African cultural identity can be traced to colonialism and then, in recent times, globalization. New values, like individualization and liberalism, which are alien to the African values have been adopted which have emptied Africa of its values. The media, of which social media is currently at the fore front, is one of the driving forces of globalization and have championed the distortion of our values. Since language is the carrier of culture, Westernization, which English is its carrier in the Nigerian context, has eroded our cultural identity in more ways than one as seen in this paper.

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