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## **Fidelity of Mass Media Communication: A case for Efficacious Use of the Language**

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**Abstract:** *The mass media, by popular assent, play very vital roles in the proper functioning and well-being of society. This they do by investigating and writing on contemporaneous issues of societal importance. To play these roles well, the language of communication must be clear and accurate and devoid of errors. But the mass media contents today are full errors, even avoidable ones thus obscuring meaning and sending the wrong message. These language errors pervade the two components of the media – broadcast and print. There has consequently been a public outcry against this language abuse. This paper examines the vital place of media in society, the language problems, mass media and sloppy use of language, the main causes of the problems and the way forward.*

### **1. Introduction**

Communication, an integral part of human existence, is defined as a dynamic and irreversible process by which we engage and interpret messages within a given situation or context, and it reveals the dynamic nature of relationships and organizations (Rifkind, 1996). The mass media are the vehicles through which messages reach large, heterogeneous audience scattered in time and space, simultaneously. The mass media, by unanimous agreement, play very important roles in the continued growth, development and cohesion of society. The gate-keeping and the agenda-setting functions of the mass media put them in a pole position to control public opinion. We have it on Larson's (1986) authority that, the public agenda or what kinds of things people think, discuss and worry about (and sometimes ultimately press for legislation about) is powerfully shaped and directed by what the news media choose to publicize. These they do by selecting and distributing what the public consume to inform and educate them on topical issues of societal importance as well as entertain them. These functions of the mass media

are basically story-telling: recounting events or occurrences in such a manner that people who were absent at the venue of the events or occurrences have more or less a similar experience of it.

Acceding to the prime position of the story-tellers in a chain of events, Chinua Achebe, in his book, *Anthills of the Savannah*, postulates that among the trio of the drums of war; the warriors that fought the war, and the story-teller who recounts the war, the story teller is the chief. In his exact words:

So why do I say that the story-teller is chief among his fellows? The same reason I think that our people sometimes will give the name 'Nkolika' to their daughters – Recalling-Is-Greatest. Why? Because it is only the story that outlives the sounds of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort: without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us. It is the thing that makes us different from others. It is the mark that sets one people apart from their neighbours.

If we agree (on Achebe's authority) that story-telling towers above the other two, we must on the authority of Confucius accept the primacy of the correct use of the language in story-telling. In answer to the question of what would be his first step if it fell on him to govern a nation, Confucius reportedly answered:

To correct language...;

If language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant;

If what is said is not what is meant, what ought to be done remains undone

If this remains undone, morals and art will deteriorate;

If morals and art deteriorate, justice will go astray;

If justice does go astray, the people will stand about in helpless confusion;

Hence there must be no arbitrariness in what is said;

This matters above every thing.

If the mass media professionals are story-tellers and story-telling plays such vital roles in the society, and stories are told in a language, it becomes therefore, imperative that mass media communicators must be masters of the language in which they communicate in order to be understood accurately. Rivera agrees that through language:

We understand things through language. We associate meanings to language through language. We add knowledge to the existing known things through language. We define who we are and who others are to us through language. In a system of deferral we create the world we live in and the realities in our lives through language. We are constructed with that system of the very language we use to identify ourselves.

Mass media messages both - print and broadcast – must, as a result, thrive in the correct use of the language of communication. It does not matter the language: English, Igbo, Yoruba, Urdu and Swahili among others. What matters is that the messages are effectively communicated in a language understood by the target audience. The language should not only be clear, it should also be accurate, concise, complete and correct.

But the media professionals in Nigeria have apparently not heeded the above vital injunctions or lack the competence to apply them or both. Sloppy use of the language in the Nigerian mass media is rising by the day. Ndibe (2011:17) laments that, “the language of Nigerian journalism is often, one is sad to say, shockingly dated, pallid, disheveled.” Agbese (1996:6) concurs. He avers that:

Despite the gallant effort of people like Newman, the murderers of the language are still roaming our newsrooms, their hands dripping with the blood of decapitated information and disemboweled language. Armed with clichés, jargon, foreign words and phrases and confused thinking, they go on driving the stake through the heart of the English language.

A scan our national dailies or listening to most of our broadcast media contents bears out the position of the above

scholars. They publish daily, a litany of grammatical errors, slang and language abuses of different kinds in both their headlines and the body. In the broadcast media, not only that these errors are rampant, the pronunciation of certain words is at best, atrocious. This is direct opposite of what obtains in developed countries where media message are not only accurate in language but also virtually error-free.

Using the analytical method, this paper tries to locate the strictures that enervate language usage in the media and why; examines the commonest errors in the media language use, and proffer solutions as to make amends.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

The multiplicity of language errors in media makes a good case for their analyses. Hence this study is anchored on the Error Analysis theory. The objective is to determine the main causes of these errors especially the influence of other competing languages particularly, indigenous languages on the second language usage. These errors are of two broad kinds. First, the inter-lingual errors caused mainly by the influence of negative transfer from mother tongue to second language; second, intra-lingual errors as a result of the non-proficiency of target language usage by communicators. The errors in the media have input from the two though the second seems more pronounced.

The first – the inter-lingual induced errors are located within the purview of the contrastive analysis of language. Contrastive linguistics is defined as “a sub-discipline of linguistics concerned with the comparison of two or more languages or subsystems of languages in order to determine both the differences and similarities between them” (Fisiak, 1981, p. 1). Contrastive analysis began in the 1950s with the pioneering work of American linguist, Robert Lado who systematically studied errors and developed the error theories and what is today known as the contrastive analysis. In the words of XIE Fang (2007:1):

Contrastive analysis hypothesis claimed that the principal barrier to second language acquisition is the

interference of the first language system with the second language system and that a scientific, structural comparison of the two languages in question would enable people to predict and describe which are problems and which are not.

He adds:

Deeply rooted in behaviorism and structuralism, they held that human language learning was to change old habits and to build new habits. Errors occur when learners could not respond correctly to a particular stimulus in the second language. Since an error may serve as a negative stimulus which reinforces 'bad habits', it should not be allowed to occur.

The second, the intra-lingual errors, are basically in the scope of pure error analysis. James (2001: 62) defines error analysis as, "the study of linguistic ignorance, the investigation of what people do not know and how they attempt to cope with their ignorance." It is indeed a systematic study and analysis of errors made by the learners/users of a foreign language in an attempt to account for their origin, their regularity, their predictability and variability. Building on Chomsky's the "competence versus performance" distinction; Coder (1967) associated errors with failures in competence and mistakes with failures in performance. In his view, a mistake occurs as the result of processing limitations rather than lack of competence. To place the analysis in proper perspective, Brown (2000) distinguished between 'errors' and 'mistake' thus: "A 'mistake' refers to a performance error in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly, while an 'error' is a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the inter-language competence of the learner."

He further explains that:

All people make mistakes, in both native and second language situations. As a matter of fact, falling back on some alternative, non-standard language uses like false starts, hesitations, random guesses, confusions of

structure or slips of the tongue is a regular feature of native speaker speech. Native speakers are normally capable of recognizing and correcting such mistakes. Nevertheless, an error, in this technical sense, is the breaches of rules of code; it is the noticeable deviation in grammaticality resulting from a lack of requisite knowledge. It arises because of the lack of competence. Native speakers may also make errors but they are able to correct their own errors; nevertheless, L2 learners cannot, by any means, always do so.

In his ground breaking work on error analysis, Richard (1971) identified the causes of competence errors as (a) interference errors of mother tongue interference; (b) intra-lingual errors within the target language itself and (c) developmental errors, reflecting the learners' attempts to construct hypotheses about their target language from their limited experience. Focusing only intra-lingual and developmental errors Richards (1971) had identified four main problems associated with the acquisition of a second language (English) namely: (1) overgeneralization, covering instances where the learners create a deviant structure on the basis of his experience of other structure of the target language; (2) ignorance of rule restriction, occurring as a result of failure to observe the restrictions or existing structures; (3) incomplete application of rules, arising when the learners fail to fully develop a certain structure required to produce acceptable sentences; (4) False concepts hypothesized, deriving from faulty comprehension of distinctions in the target language.

In our discussion and analysis of the errors in the media contents, we shall subject them to the causes enunciated above by Richard (1971).

### **3. Language Problems**

Sapir (1966) defines language as “a purely human and non-instructive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols”. Oguntuase (2007) agrees that language is not always logical. In fact, it is often illogical. In addition,

grammar is not a precise logical or mathematical system. It has fuzzy edges. And that exactly makes language difficult. He adds that, “language is a complex, many sided study, calling for constant vigilance. It is complex because language - any language for that matter - is used to communicate a whole range of thoughts and ideas that the human mind is capable of conceiving. It requires constant vigilance because a language - if it is a dynamic language - is forever changing and adapting itself to the new demands placed upon it, especially in the areas of science and technology, music, law and fashion.”

Truth is that the use of language is as interesting as it is difficult and challenging. Any writer - reporter, editor - who aspires for fame and popularity must start by writing or editing the language correctly. A good command of the language is not, however, easy to achieve. For one, language especially English language is dynamic: it changes with time. This implies that what is considered a wrong grammatical usage today can become correct tomorrow and vice versa. For another, as new things keep coming, new words, phrases and usages also keep increasing. One can hardly keep track of these new words and phrases and their correct usage.

English language which is our main language of communication is particularly complex and its rules, norms, nuances, conventions are many, varied and difficult to keep track of. There is uncountable number of irregular verbs, fixed idioms, figurative expressions, proverbs, phrases, colloquialism, synonyms, antonyms, homonyms and other literary devices that a media writer has to contend with. A wrong application of any of these devices results in language abuse.

Beyond these impediments are the well-known troubles associated with acquisition and use of a second language. Not only are there the influence of the mother tongue, there are also the cases of lack of proficiency in the use of the language. Nonetheless, being a second language, the dynamism and complexity of the language do not constitute a licence for rampant cases of linguistic perfidy that pervade our media contents, which in reality, calls to question the grammatical competence of our news writers and editors.

#### **4. Mass media and Sloppy Use of Language**

Scholars and language purists (Barzun, Flaubert, Safire, Johnson) have, on many occasions, called for the correct use of the language. Many of them had gone the extra mile to explain and actually tried to loosen some of the strictures that tend to make the language look more complex than it really is by suggesting easy ways to approach it. They have equally given useful tips on the correct language usage and some pitfalls to avoid. A message is successfully delivered if what the communicator has in mind is what the target audience understands and consequently reacts in the desired manner. The lapse in the language usage has often led to loss of meaning and resulted in either the audience understanding the wrong thing or being frustrated with their unsuccessful attempt to correctly decipher the message.

The founding fathers of journalism realized the importance of correctness and accuracy in the use of language and created the position of the sub-editor whose duty it is to read, spot and correct errors; refine copies, guard against poor taste, libel, puffery, axe grinding and such other anomalies that could harm the language, image and reputation of the media content. As gatekeepers, the editors and the sub-editors are sharp-eyed, versed in the language of communication and versatile. The sub-editors are variously called 'the reporter's best critic' and the midwife of publications. The sub-editors so impressed Edward Shanks that he once said: "Sub-editors, when I meet them seem to have only two eyes just like other people; where they keep the other two I cannot say but I know that they must have them."

However, despite these accolades, grammatical errors, bad concord, licentious idioms, poor use of phrases, word-coinages, wrong choice of words, sloppy use of literary devices, extensive use of clichés, slang, journalese and unbridled use of adjectives have taken over our mass media contents. Hardly is there any story in most of our newspapers and magazines and or in the radio and television that is completely error-free.

Listening to radio or television programmes exposes one to innumerable abuses in the use the language of communication. The problems here range from wrong sentences, dictions, poor pronunciations to wrong translations. Wrong translation is particularly rampant in translation of English language to indigenous languages.

A few of these language abuses in both the print and the broadcast media (as shown below) will do for our illustrations.

1. **Wrong:** The love of money and material possession has taken over ***the reigns*** of good governance (Sunday Sun, 15 October, 2006; National Mirror, July 20 2006).

**Correct:** The love of money and material possession has taken over ***the reins*** of good governance. Note: A king or queens reigns. Reins of power are the instruments or tools of power or governance.

2. **Wrong:** It ***speaks volume*** on of the charade that we witnessed in 2003 in the guise of election (Daily Sun editorial, March 20, 2006.)

**Correct:** It ***speaks volumes*** on of the charade that we witnessed in 2003 in the guise of election. Note: speaks volumes is a fixed idiom and cannot be changed in any way.

3. **Wrong:** Youths in Nigeria and indeed elsewhere on the continent need not rush foreign visas if the political leaders in these countries have ***put their acts together*** and got their priorities right. (Daily Sun editorial, April 6, 2006)

**Correct:** Youths in Nigeria and indeed elsewhere on the continent need not rush foreign visas if the political leaders in these countries have put their ***act together*** and got their priorities right.

4. **Wrong:** Poor parents beget poor ***offsprings*** thereby creating a kind of dynasty of the poor. (Punch, November 23 2004.)

**Correct:** Poor parents beget poor **offspring** thereby creating a kind of dynasty of the poor. Note: Offspring has no plural form.

5. **Wrong:** I am sure President Umaru Yar' Adua will continue to uphold, promote and sustain democratic rule and not the kind that was **practiced** by President Olusegun Obasanjo. We want to have **a level playing ground** (The Guardian, July 31, 2007).

**Correct:** I am sure President Umaru Yar' Adua would continue to uphold, promote and sustain democratic rule and not the kind that was **practised** by President Olusegun Obasanjo. We want to have **a level playing field**. Note: Practice is a noun. Practise is a verb. It is wrong grammatically to use the two interchangeably. Level playing field is an idiom. It is not level playing ground.

6. **Wrong:** But they hardly can point to concrete **infrastructures** that have sprung up from the Value Added Tax, VAT. (Sun Editorial, 30 2007) Again, Daily Sun editorial of August 2, 2007 made the same mistake thus: This has worked in some instances, especially in situations where public **infrastructures** have been poorly managed.

**Correct:** But they hardly can point to concrete **infrastructure or infrastructural facilities** that have sprung up from the Value Added Tax, VAT. This has worked in some instances, especially in situations where public **infrastructure or infrastructural facilities** have been poorly managed. Note: we correctly say or write infrastructure or infrastructural facilities. Infrastructures is ungrammatical.

7. **Wrong:** Besides, local councils would be strengthened **to enable them carry** out this function (The Guardian editorial June 2, 2006).

**Correct:** Besides, local councils would be strengthened **to enable them to carry** out this function. Note: enable always go with 'to'. It does not stand alone as is presently being used by some writers.

8. **Wrong:** The national population and housing census which held between March 21 and March 27, 2006, **failed woefully** to meet the expectations of Nigerians (Daily Sun editorial, April 3, 2006).

**Correct:** The national population and housing census which held between March 21 and March 27, 2006, **failed abysmally** to meet the expectations of Nigerians. Note: Failure is not qualified with the adverb, woefully.

9. **Wrong:** Local government (LG) chairmen are **lootocrats**. The chairman of the EFCC, Mallam Nuhu Ribadu, on Tuesday described some local government chairmen as **lootocrats** (The Punch, 28 February, 2007).

**Correct:** Local government (LG) chairmen are **kleptomaniacs**. The chairman of the EFCC, Mallam Nuhu Ribadu, on Tuesday described some local government chairmen as *kleptomaniacs*. Note: Lootocrats is English made in Nigeria.

10. **Wrong:** We must let President Olusegun Obasanjo know how sadly he would be missed, particularly his jibes, part of which qualify us to be the **most happiest** nation on earth in the midst of our very difficult circumstances (The Punch Viewpoint page, April 26, 2006).

**Correct:** We must let President Olusegun Obasanjo know how sadly he will be missed, particularly his jibes, part of which qualify us to be the **happiest** nation on earth even in the midst of our very difficult circumstances. Note: Double superlatives cannot be used at the same time. Most and '...ist' are superlatives and connote 'the best' the extreme or the top

11. **Wrong:** Recently, the vice-chancellor of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), Professor Chinedu Nebo, declared at a press conference that he had signed a backlog of certificates of **graduands**

going back to 10 years (The Guardian editorial March 14, 2006).

**Correct:** Recently, the vice-chancellor of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), Professor Chinedu Nebo, declared at a press conference that he had signed a backlog of certificates of **graduates** going back to 10 years. Note: The correct use is graduate. Graduand is a slang used only in American English.

12. **Wrong:** Surely, these members will not include those who **had decamped** from the party which platform they were elected to the Plateau state House of Assembly (The Nation, November 14, 2006).

**Correct:** Surely, these members will not include those who **had defected** from the party upon which platform they were elected to the Plateau State House of Assembly. Note: One defects from one party to another and not decamp.

13. **Wrong:** This week, TheNews reveals a **blueprint** said to be **authored** by the hawks in the presidency, showing a step-by-step approach to the jailing of the vice-president, Atiku Abubakar, who has apparently fallen out with his boss, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo (The News, December 19, 2005).

**Correct:** This week The News reveals a **plan** said to be written by the hawks in the presidency, showing a step-by-step approach to the jailing of the vice-president, Atiku Abubakar, who has apparently fallen out with his boss, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo. Note: Blueprint is excessively used and abused. Plan is better in the context of the above usage. Author is a noun meaning a writer. It is better to say 'written by' than to say 'authored'.

14. **Wrong:** From Barbeach Towers on Victoria Island to Nigeria Airways quarters in Ikeja, public servants are being evicted from their government-owned houses with medieval cruelty, despite unambiguous and subsisting court orders to the

contrary. Three governors were **outrightly removed** under section 292, a fourth narrowly escaped death with a warning from the state to be of good behaviour after the process has been completed. Note outright is an adverb. So why add 'ly'.

**Correct:** From Barbeach Towers on Victoria Island to Nigeria Airways quarters in Ikeja, public servants are being evicted from their government-owned houses with medieval cruelty, despite unambiguous and subsisting court orders to the contrary. Three governors were removed outright under section 292, a fourth narrowly escaped death with a warning from the state to be of good behaviour after the process has been completed.

15. **Wrong:** The Federal Government should establish, as a matter of urgency and civic responsibility, a judicial enquiry into the violent death of Charles Alaba Joseph, the President of Mobitel. Earlier reports that Mr. Joseph jumped to his demise have been contradicted by the police autopsy, which put the man's death down to gunshot. (Vanguard editorial, September, 28, 2005).

**Correct:** The Federal Government should establish, as a matter of urgency and civic responsibility, a judicial inquiry into the violent death of Charles Alaba Joseph, the President of Mobitel. Earlier reports that Mr. Joseph jumped to his demise have been contradicted by the police autopsy, which ascribed the man's death to gunshot injuries. Other reasons the death of Charles Joseph should not be left to the devices of the police abound. Note: Put down means to bring to an end. So it is wrong to use it in this context rather ASCRIBED is a better word.

The above is just a tip of the iceberg. Reading and or listening to our media contents have revealed that the reporters, casters and rewrite men can hardly distinguish between such verbs as given/giving, been/being. The reporters also often confuse the meaning of and wrongly use

such homonyms as advice/advise, blitz/bliss, border/bother, certify/satisfy, owe/own, cite/site, cause/course, council/counsel, device/devise, fare/fair, eminent/imminent, gate/gait, hale/hail, hair/heir, incidence/incident, moneys/monies practice/practise, precedent/precedence, tale/tell, tow/toe, stationary/stationery, wreak/wreck, wring/ring, among others. Such licentious expressions and coinages such as: meet with, likes of, witch-hunting, setting-up, come February 28, stinkingly rich, electioneering campaign, razed down, many at times, joined together; are so common in our media contents that they can pass for the rule rather than the exception in language usage.

It is baffling that in some of our media contents, reporters still do not know or understand the difference between such usages as its and it's; your and you're; affect and effect, there and their among others. Such confusions are sheer solecisms that are inexplicable.

The Nigerian journalists find it very easy to manufacture words or to 'Nigerianize' words where he finds it convenient to do so, a development Ndibe says is a product of the journalists' often-lazy adoption of the politician's language; a language which George Orwell dismissed as, "... designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable and to give appearance of solidity to pure wind." Consequently, they have manufactured such words as opportuned (opportunity to); indigene (indigenous); up till (Up until); heading to (heading for or heading towards) among such other words and expressions unknown to English language.

The problem of language abuse transcends persons and publications. Dan Agbese (of Newswatch) is a language purist. Ironically, Agbese's own publication, Newswatch is not immune to this atrocious use of English language. Here and there in the Newswatch magazine, one finds decapitated information and disemboweled language. In its January 16, 2006 edition at page 14, for instance, the Newswatch cited late Abubakar Rimi as saying: "The GSM companies are actually **ripping-off** ordinary Nigerians...." The compound noun, 'rip-off' was, in glaring show of language insensitivity, turned to a verb; a verb unknown to any version of English

language. This blunder was committed despite an elaborate style guard (written and edited by Agbese himself for his publication Newswatch) to guide reporters and writers on the appropriate use of the language. This is besides the well known condemnation of poor use of language by one of the founding fathers of the newsmagazine, Yakubu Mohammed. In a reception organized by Dele Olojede (the Nigerian-born Pulitzer award winner) for instance, Mohammed reportedly condemned the crude use of language in Nigerian journalism. He said: "...the kind of Nigerian journalism we are practising today cannot take us to anywhere. Our writing has become very poor; our sense of investigation has become very appalling. Today, we will do a story on one side and tomorrow we will look for the other person to balance up. That is not the tradition of journalism, which we are celebrating today. I hope that my bosses who are here will help us carry this message to our brothers who are doing so much damage to the profession..." (TheNews, 11/7/2005; p. 41).

## **5. Why the Problem?**

As can be seen from the foregoing, it is doubtful if the media houses in Nigeria employ sub-editors much less those with two pairs of eyes as Shanks believed. The errors are too many and occur too often for comfort. The field reporters in a normal media setup often write their reports and submit to the sub-editors who read, correct and generally refine the copy before it is published. But apparently, the sub-editors are either too lazy, incompetent or do not have enough grasp of the language to effect the required corrections. This is particularly baffling because there are computer software that when installed in computer, can help the sub-editors effect some corrections, at least the grammatical errors with ease. What cannot be immediately stated is whether the sub-editors bother at all to deal with the corrections or just let the copies from field reporters go for publication without editing. This, however, should not be the case because they (the sub-editors) know that the field reporters always write their reports under strenuous and uncomfortable conditions and do not have enough time to really refine the copies. This is the primary reason for the employment of the sub-editors.

So they are the first culprits in the language buccaneering that has assailed the entire media output.

The sub-editors themselves are not helped by the fact that some media houses do not have comprehensive stylebook that guides their reporters' writing. The stylebook often determines how words are used, capitalized, abbreviated, spelt, and punctuated among others. According to Kansas City Star's style book:

The stylebook is not intended to set up a narrow pattern of writing or to discourage freshness and originality. Its purpose is to develop more readable stories by standardizing capitalization, abbreviation, punctuation, spelling, syntax and certain geographical usage. Although the copy desks are responsible for proper marking of copy, reporters should familiarize themselves with the rules and write accordingly. Cooperative efforts will result in finer newspaper.

The complex and dynamic nature of languages, especially the English language makes it very difficult to use them accurately. As new things are developing so also are new words. As some expressions are getting obsolete and out of use, so are new ones coming up. Besides, there are some illogical usages that one has no way of explaining except that it is the way it is used. There are fixed idioms that cannot be changed in any way and any small alteration to such usage renders it otiose. A good example is the idiom: 'at all costs.' If by any slight mistake one writes, 'at all cost', it becomes wrong. "When an established idiom clashes with grammar, correctness is on the side of the idiom. Put in another way, if sticking grimly to rules of grammar makes you sound like a pompous pedant, you are a pompous pedant" (Safire, 1983). Besides, Oguntuase (2007:39) is of the opinion that:

Reality affects language. And the language requires change from time to time but linguistic change is no easier to accept than any other kind of reforms, including social, political and economic. It may even be harder. The fight against bad habits in English is not frivolous, and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers, critics

and teachers of English. It should be the concern of every user of the language, particularly the pressman or woman.

Contributing to the confusion in the use of the English language is existence of two blocs of the language: the American English and British Standard English. The American in their pragmatic manner took the language to an operating table and performed a surgical operation on it. All the alphabets they considered superfluous in a word were chopped off. Alternative words, names, diction, idioms, syntax and phrases were found for things they considered far-flung. After the operation, humour became humor; glamour, glamor; programme, program; organisation, organization among many others. Some usages of the language accepted and popular in America are considered otiose in British Standard English. They effected many other changes unknown previously to the language. This brought much confusion as it became difficult to follow one version strictly as advised by language purists. Ekwelie (2005:27) agrees that, "American and British Englishes pose problems for the native speakers in both countries and baffle the borrowers. In the age of personal computers, a writer is likely to receive false alarms on spelling and diction because the PC he is using is programmed on an alien set of values." This tends to give the media writers the added burden of keeping vocabulary and diction under control. The problem however, is that some journalists do not even know of the existence of the two versions much less their differences. In their ignorance, they muddle up the two.

Perhaps the worst problem of most media writers is their penchant to write to impress and not to express. Nothing identifies a writer as unsure of him or herself more than an all out effort to impress his readers or listeners with the power of his or her vocabulary. In his effort to impress, he often falls victim of the many laws, customs and conventions that guide the language, especially the English language. This is why in journalistic parlance, we say: 'do not purchase when you can buy.' Johnson cited in Agbese (1996:81) also cautioned that: "Every man speaks and writes with the intent to be understood; and it can seldom happen but he

that understands himself might convey his notions to another, if, content to be understood, he did not seek to be admired.”

As a writer, one should not try to, unnecessarily, embellish or polish his work. It only clutters the work and obstructs understanding. He should always concern himself with the rules, the conventions and the correct usage. He should strive to detect and correct faults or errors. This has led to the existence of journalese in journalistic writing. Journalese is the absence of freshness in journalistic writings. Writing about Journalese in Time Magazine (18th March, 1985), John Leo said:

Journalese, the native tongue of news gatherers and pundits, retains a faint similarity to English but is actually closer to Latin. Like Latin, it is primarily a written language, prized for its incantatory powers, and is best learned early, while the mind is still supple. Every curb reporter, for instance, knows that fires rage out of control, minor mischief is perpetrated by vandals (never Visigoths, Franks or a single vandal working alone) and key labour accords are hammered out by weary negotiators in the marathon, round-the-clock bargaining sessions, thus narrowly averting threatened walkouts. In journalese, all homes are either modest or stately. Journalese is rich in mystic nouns: gratification, quichification, watershed elections and apron strings (the political coattails of a female candidate).

Absence of good knowledge of basic grammar on the side of the reporters and sub-editors is a real handicap. Most departments of Mass Communication where these reporters and sub-editors are trained do not offer courses in basic grammar, syntax and phonology. Indeed, there are basically no language courses in these departments that produce graduates who make their living by extensive use of the language. At best, what some of these institutions do is to advise students to take optional language courses and perhaps, another optional course in basic grammar. In this case, the students have an option not to choose the language course where the alternative is cheaper or easier to pass.

Because of this anomaly, many of them are not grounded in mechanics of the language and do not know what constitutes correct or wrong use of the language in the first place and cannot, therefore, apply them as required. It goes to the ridiculous extent that sometimes, when they are told that certain usage is incorrect, they object and often stick to their own wrong usage.

The disagreement and bad blood among the language purists and guardians on what is the correct use of certain terms or concepts have not helped matters. Such controversies are not new. The language's purists and priests have over the time been locked in fierce arguments over some issues in the language usage. This is particularly so because of the dynamic nature of the English language. We notice with fascination how the language adapts itself with changes in time and discovery. It is interesting to note that certain word usages that were considered abominable some years back are today considered correct usages in much the same way as some of them are now considered obsolete, archaic, dated or clichés. It is therefore, expected that once-in-a-while, controversies would arise over new and correct usage of certain words, idioms and expressions. Oguntuase (2006:19) concurs with this position; hence he explains:

One thing is sure. People, particularly purists, will not give up arguing about language usage. But note that, any dictionary is likely to be in some respects out of date by the time it is published. And this was never more true than at the moment. Every language is in a continuous state of flux and enlargement words can form barriers as well as promote understanding. Therefore, every user must, in addition to dictionaries, have and read stylebooks, usage guides and handbooks.

Compounding this problem is the fact that when such a controversy arises between these language gurus, it takes very long time to resolve as each of the combatants with his own apostles sticks to his guns. There is virtually no arbiter in cases like that and the greatest losers are the learners and such users as mass media writers.

## **6. The way forward**

Arresting this language problem is as much a challenge to the society as it is to the mass media writers. It is a fundamental problem that demands a thorough reassessment of the courses taught in the training schools, retraining of the practising journalists and professional approach to media writing. It should be tackled at three different levels: societal, industrial and individual.

At the societal level and of course, importantly, the mass communication departments of universities, polytechnics, and all the other institutions where journalists are trained should overhaul their academic curriculum to include such language courses like Basic Grammar, Syntax, Phonology and such others that will improve the language competence of the media writers. It should be borne in mind that though not pure language students, the key tool of media writers is the language of communication and as such, they must be masters of the language.

**Second**, at industrial level, the media houses should ensure that they have a well-articulated stylebook which should serve as a bible of sorts for young and old writers. This ensures uniformity in writing; eliminates production bottlenecks and builds a robust personality for the media house. In absence a stylebook in a media house is an open invitation to chaos in writing. Making a case for the development and strict use of comprehensive stylebook in each media house, Ekwelie (2005:30) said:

Each mass medium should develop its own writing guide on words and spelling. The chapter contains two word lists – one indicating some of the differences in American and British diction and the other, a spelling variety. Publishers can easily build on them in the attempt to fortify for the battle against cacography – incorrect spelling – and bad (i.e. confusing) vocabulary or cacology.

Third and most important is the individual writer. He is the most important in the chain because long after the

lecturers had rested their lectures in the classrooms and the industry had developed and produced their stylebooks, it is the individual writer that produces what the public reads or listens to. If he fails in delivering the message with clarity and accuracy, the efforts of the other two have failed completely. It is so because no stylebook or lecturer, in reality, teaches anybody good writing. They may provide the guides and the rules to be observed but the final act of writing is the job of the writer – he either succeeds or fails.

Some are born-good-writers while others develop good writing skill with experience and practice. Whichever is the case, the writer can do with some guides and rules hone on his skills. The tips below will be of immense benefit to the aspiring writer in his craft.

**F**irst, think straight. The forerunner of any good writing is good and straight thinking. No good story or article can come out of confused or incoherent thinking. Professional writers are disciplined thinkers. They get approvals for their copies because they are mentally organized performers. Whether writing for the print or broadcasting, media writers employ a common strategy and a critical method. Good and straight thinking is the prelude and the forerunner of any good writing. The writer needs to first, think through his story and then settle down to write.

**S**econd, use short sentences. Even after good thoughts, it is still an arduous task to write exactly the way you have thought. To write nearly as well as one has thought, it advisable to make use of short sentences. Scholars and accomplished writers have at various times, made cases for the use of short sentences in writing. According to Jules Loh (of Associated Press) cited in Ohaja (1998), “a simple declarative sentence is like a beautiful woman in a plain black dress. *Guestav Flaubert* advises that: “Whenever you can shorten a sentence, do. And one always can. The best sentence? The shortest.”

**T**hird, use simple words. A media writer should write to express and not to impress. Put in another way, the major preoccupation of a media writer is to pass across a message

as accurately and clearly as possible. The best technique for clarity in writing is the use of simple words. Strunk (1972) admonishes writers “to avoid the elaborate, the pretentious, the coy and the cute. Do not be tempted by a twenty-dollar word when there is a ten-center handy.” The best story is that which the reader or listener can follow effortlessly. Use of difficult words often leads to avoidable errors. Avoid foreign words. Nothing weighs down good writing like influx of foreign and unfamiliar words and phrases.

**F**ourth, avoid excessive use of adjectives. The adjective is as important in English language as any of the other parts of speech. However, writers, particularly, young and inexperienced ones are advised to be careful the way they use adjectives. They should, where they can, avoid it. Lack of use of adjectives is more pardonable than excessive or unnecessary use of it. For one, it tends to clutter your sentence and for another, it gives you away as wanting to impress. In mass media writing, the best write-up is that which the audience understands exactly as the writer want them to understand it. Many accomplished writers have advised against this anomaly. Harold Evans in Okoro et al (2003:105) remarks that:

Some writers think that style means spraying adjectives and verbs on sentences. They give superficial glitter. They often conceal rusty body work. Adjectives and adverbs should not be after thoughts. They should be permitted only when they add precision and economy to sentence. Every adjective should be examined to see: is it needed to define the subject or is it for emphasis? If something is amusing or sensational, there is no need to tell the reader. The facts that amused or shocked should be described and he (the reader) can apply his own adjectives.

**F**ifth, omit needless words. Strunk (1972:17) instructs that: “Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires that the writer make all his sentences short or

that he avoids all detail and treats his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.”

This easiest way to remove all needless materials is to read your work over and remove those words, sentences and paragraphs whose absence will not in any way affect your work negatively. Retain only those that enhance the clarity of the work.

## **7. Conclusion**

The need to keep a civil tongue cannot be overstated especially in the mass media. Language being key tool of communication through the mass media should be clear, correct, concrete, complete and concrete. Those who make a living out of the media should therefore, make themselves masters of the language if only not to confuse and or confound their readers and listeners. Error-free publications are the rights of the consumers of the media contents. Those who provide them should therefore, realize that good writing, in reality, does not lend itself to any excuses.

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