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MEDIA LITERACY AND THE ROLE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

By

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ABSTRACT

Literacy is the ability to effectively and efficiently comprehend and use written symbols. It is the ability to be able to understand what is written by imputing meaning into it. For this to be possible, a uniform language is essential. This means that the words of the said language must mean the same thing to everybody in that language community irrespective of their geographical location. Language also makes it possible for communication to occur over long distances and over spans of time. All that the parties to the communication process need to do is to encode and decode their symbols in the appropriate manner and pass such through the required channels. Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages effectively. Media literacy includes the impact the messages make on the audience. Underlying these all is the use of English language as the vehicle for the transmission of ideas, meaning and literacy. English language is the official language of Nigeria. This means that this language has a role to play in maintaining and improving on media literacy in Nigeria. This paper examines the role of English language in media literacy. It x-rays what media literacy is. It discusses the media audience and the channels. It also looks at how the media can be used to improve literacy in the society.

WHAT IS MEDIA LITERACY

Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate information to the media audience through a variety of channels including print and non print. Media literacy is the systematic study of the media and their operations in our sociopolitical systems as well as their contributions to the development and maintenance of culture. It is the information and communication skill

that is needed to make citizens more competent. It is the ability to read what the print media offer, see what the visual media present as well as hear what the aural media announce.

It is a response to the changing nature of information in our modern society. It addresses the skills students need to be taught in the schools to wisely evaluate the media; competence citizens must possess to consume or create information in their homes and offices and the abilities workers must acquire in this new millennium as

globalization takes over the world economy. Unlike traditional literacy, it includes the ability to read what others have written for comprehension; and to write for others to read to understand what we have in mind. Unlike traditional literacy it swerves from the elementary recognition and comprehension of symbols or words to the conscious integrated level of critical thinking, questioning, analyzing and evaluating the information provided by the media.

Globalization, new media technologies and the Internet are re-defining what it means to be literate. Globalization is creating a *one world* economy and making people from different parts of the world to meet to trade, transfer capital and remove barriers to international trade. It is a new work order.

Information and communication technologies have transformed the range and speed of dispersing information and of communicating. Today, the whole world lies a click away! Information can be sent and received by millions of people within seconds. In addition, this new technology now provides people with the opportunity of being media creators. This means that media literacy plays significant roles in encouraging creativity, co-operation and learning, including learning problem solving skills. Today, the world media technology is a convergence of telecommunication and computers. It is a beautiful fusion of sight and sound aimed at making fiction look like reality. Indeed for the undiscerning, the fiction looks like facts. Special effects and skillful editing make the *reel*

truth look like the *real truth*.

The mass media audience is heterogeneous and widely dispersed. This includes people on different levels of literacy. Some are rich while others are poor. Their common platform is that they are media users: either as media consumers or content providers.

Media literacy is the perspective from which we expose ourselves to the mass media and to interpret the meaning of the messages that we get from them. It is necessary to point out that we build on our peculiar knowledge base. To build up this base we need tools and some raw materials. These tools are our skills and the raw materials are the information from the media and the real world. Media literacy is a continuum. Some people are high. Some others may be low. However no person can be described as a *total media illiterate*.

The aim of media literacy is to:

- i) increase audience knowledge and understanding of the mass communication process and the mass media industries
- ii) increase students awareness of how they can interact to create media content and meaning
- iii) help students become more skilled and knowledgeable media consumers

Potter (2002:31) points out that highly media literate people have wide knowledge bases. These bases give them the privilege of interpreting any message. They actively use their

highly developed skills to interpret and place any media message in the particular context that it belongs. Messages may be given multiple interpretations to get different meanings. They sift through these to select the one that is most useful to them from several points of view. Thus media literate people have greater control over media messages.

In contrast, people of medium to low media literacy have limited or inadequate knowledge to interpret media messages. Possibly they are reluctant or unwilling to develop or use their skills. Similarly, low literate people are much less capable of identifying inaccuracies, sorting through controversies or appreciative of literary finesse. They can be described as being in a *mindless state* during media exposure. They accept the surface intentions of the message designers. Example: if they watch, hear or read the advert message for a particular product and feel positive about it, they would rush out to buy the product thinking that it would solve all their problems. They have just bought the advertiser's message without thinking!

Potter (2002:33) states that it is better to perform at higher levels of literacy. He is of the view that by so doing, the individual has more power to guard his beliefs and behaviors. He processes every message to reach his own meaning from reasoning. Poor media literacy translates to a *closed world*, where the individual is forced to accept unquestioningly the dominant themes, values, beliefs and even the interpretations presented to him by the media.

Street (1984) identifies two major concepts involving literacy. These are the autonomous and ideological concepts. The first deals with the universal skill or aptitude of being able to read and write. The second sees literacy as a social construct that takes on complex, cultural and ideological meanings in different specific settings. Potter (1999:1-10) has designed a quiz for people to assess themselves on their literary level.

WHY MEDIA LITERACY MATTERS

The need for media literacy is hinged on the fact that the media saturates our lives. The media literacy matters. From waking up in the morning to going to sleep in the night we are bombarded by media messages. Nigerians get their first hand information from the mass media channels. The media are seen as part of our national culture. This cultural orientation towards the mass media and mass communication places a responsibility on the media audience to know that they are part of the communication process. They cannot be victims of media influences or be impervious to it as they are part of the creation and maintenance of their own culture. Media audience owes the society the duty of actively participating in the mass communication process. For them to do this effectively, they must be media literate.

Now we do know that the media wield power and have some influence on the society. Media effect is pervasive. Any person believing that the media have no effect is only

pretending or out rightly ignorant! In our *informationcracy* society the media tell us what to think and say. The mass media affect how we see our world, relate with other people and even vote. They tell us what to eat, wear, the schools to send our children to and were to get buried even in death. They are the platforms on which issues are debated. They transmit our culture or whatever it is that we believe in by carrying them across time and space.

In today's society, the ability to effectively interpret and create media content is a necessity. Media literacy enables the person possessing it to have the ability to build up critical thinking and analytical skills. Without this type of skill the person would literally swallow everything purveyed by the media. Media literacy is a fundamental requirement to becoming an informed citizen who can actively and successfully communicate with the members of the society in which he lives and with the outside world. Individuals must ask who is creating the message and for what purpose, for every message has an objective it aims to achieve. People will not spend so much money to pass across a message without any objective that they intend to achieve.

The beneficial use of technology has brought a new dimension to media management and literacy. If the entertainment media and film producers alone use this technology, possibly no body would complain. But these technologies are also used in *serious media* programmes that are meant to provide factual information, like television news reporting. A reporter in the studios of the Nigerian

Television Authority, Port Harcourt is magically transferred to the oil fields of the Niger Delta where gas is being flared and the flames are seen. This set decoration is visually more pleasing, re-locates the reporter and lends power, authority and credence to the story. The advance of infotainment has led to the decline in objectivity, neutrality and the truth in news. It is like the media are being used to deceive. Media literacy teaches the skill required to truly and independently judge the media and participate in whatever is happening in our Nigerian society.

The sheer quantity of the media messages and the variety of forms in which they are presented challenges every critical person to learn to filter, interpret, accept and or discard them. Thus it is expected that a media literate person should be able to:

i) recognize all mass media channels

ii) draw his own conclusion if there is a causal relationship between media reports and the public's response. In other words he finds out whether what the media are reporting is different from what the public is saying

iii) recognize any distortion, stereotyping, propaganda and violence in visual media

iv) recognize, process, interpret and produce print and visual images using current technology

v) information to be communicated to him through reading, writing, speaking and listening through the integrated use of visual forms.

MEDIA LITERACY SKILLS

These are the skills needed to effectively process or decode or interpret the media message from different types of channels. It includes the ability of:

i) reading and writing

You can write on paper or any other surface for others to read and comprehend. The readers can also write for you to read and make meaning out of their words.

ii) speaking and listening

You talk and expect others to listen. You are also expected to listen when others talk. Example: you may listen to a broadcast programme and at the same time give a feedback to the presenter

iii) critical viewing.

Example: watching a home video to assess the message being passed by the actors; making effort to understand content; and making attempt to filter out noise

iv) providing media content for others to consume

This is the ability to create your own message using a variety of technologies. These technologies include the use of audio and visual technologies; the bill boards; print; radio, television and computers. Advertising companies provide media contents by running commercials in the media. The independent producers and broadcasting stations also provide content.

v) Ability to distinguish emotions from reasoning when responding to media content

Media messages especially from television may convey emotions, but we

must develop the ability to comprehend the message behind the content. Example: you may enjoy watching the Police parade but the message is that of physical fitness and discipline.

THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

The communication process describes the various steps an individual takes to share an idea, information or attitude with another person to create a commonality in meaning. It is the various steps that a message passes through from the sender to the receiver of information. It is a process involving the sorting, selecting and sharing of symbols to help a receiver get from his own mind the required action similar to what is in the mind of the sender. It is a dynamic process involving different factors that interact to cause specific effect.

It starts with a sender who has a message to share with a receiver. This sender encodes his message in an acceptable format, for example in writing, so as to elicit meaning from the mind of the receiver of the message. He passes this through a channel like the radio, television, newspaper, billboards, internet etc) for the receiver to decode. Proper decoding leads to understanding and the sending of the appropriate feedback. The circle starts all over again. Improper coding or the inability to decode leads to the ignoring of the message. In addition it creates noise.

Noise is the inability of the message to make it to the intended receiver as sent. Noise can be channel, semantic or psychological. The channel has to do with the physical interference in the communication process, for example,

when there is a blast of static, too small prints, a blurred picture, a voice that is too harsh or too soft. In semantic noise the receiver clearly sees or hears the message but does not understand because the wrong symbols have been used. Here, words take on connotative meaning based on the hearer's field of reference. The encoder may also use jargon. Psychological noise arises from the receiver himself and is the factor that leads to the misunderstanding of the message. It can be caused by selective exposure or selective retention.

Langer (1989) describes communication as the intentional transmittal of a specific message in a particular context. It is a simultaneous reciprocal transaction between the sender and the receiver. Mass communication messages must move over long distances. The ability to communicate is a skill that has to be learnt. A competent communicator requires the knowledge of the principles and practices of effective communication and the conscious decision to most appropriately convey a particular message. Scott and Brydon (1997:10-13) call this communication competence. They write that this include self, interpretive, goal, role, message and performance competencies.

Communication is what sustains our culture; both popular and high. Browne (1978:12) says that popular culture is the culture of *everyone* in the society. It defines our attitudes, habits and actions. The media are the channels for the transmission and maintenance of culture. Wilson and Wilson (2001:5) therefore write that it is

essential for the consumer of media contents to be aware of the impact of the media on our culture. They advise anybody aspiring to be media literate to know who created the media content; for what purpose; the effect of the media on our society; the role of the consumer in the mass communication process and perhaps most importantly how the media have evolved over from their humble beginning to the high places that they occupy in today's world.

Carey (1975:10) offers the cultural definition of communication to be the symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed. Baran (2004:9) adds that communication and reality are linked. According to him, communication is part of our every life activity and determines how we perceive, understand and construct our view of reality and of the world. Indeed communication is the foundation of our culture.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF MEDIA LITERACY

Potter (2002:350) writes that media literacy rests on four foundations:

- i) *Media literacy is a continuum:* Media literacy is neither a categorical possession, like having a degree in Mass Communication nor an absolute condition but a continuum. This means that you are at a particular point in the line of literacy at any particular time. However there is no point where any person can be described as being below or above the

benchmark, for there is always room for improvement. Those who are low on the scale develop to higher levels and those that are good learn new skills to improve on their performance.

ii) *Media literacy needs to be developed:* A person can improve his level of literacy by a deliberate and conscious broadening of his knowledge. Our literacy level grows as we mature physically, emotionally and morally. The higher the level of maturation, the more developed is our knowledge base and skills. Children -on a lower maturation level- like brightly colored pictures. But their parents -on a higher maturation level- try to evaluate the message behind the pictures. The passive exposure to media messages without any active processing does not translate to any higher level of literacy.

iii) *Media literacy is multidimensional:* The cognitive, emotional, aesthetic and moral dimensions must be artfully blended together. The cognitive dimension includes the mental processes of understanding how and why messages are produced to give meaning. The emotional dimension includes the feelings resultant from media exposure. Example: children exposed to violent films may experience extreme fear and adults exposed to pornography may become antisocial. The aesthetics include the ability to enjoy, understand and appreciate

media contents. The moral dimension refers to the ability to infer the values or moral themes underlying the messages which you may accept or reject. However, each dimension is a continuum and may be developed independently of others.

iv) *The purpose of media literacy is to give us more control over interpretations:* All media messages are the interpretations of their writers. Print journalists write on what they feel is important. Advertisers tell us that using their products will quickly solve our problems. Television shows us glamour. As the media audience we can construct our own interpretations of these messages. Media effect is real, subtle and indirect. Through interpretation we can gain greater control over the media. We amplify the effects we want to have and discount those we do not want.

APPROACHES TO MEDIA LITERACY

Media literacy is an interdisciplinary course and therefore can be approached from different angles. Each approach emphasizes what it wants the consumer to know. It is important to point out that no particular approach is the total or best approach. Different approaches can be merged together for synergy. The appreciation of media literacy increases when both producers and consumers understand the basic philosophy behind each approach. The

approaches are:

i) *The media arts approach:* This teaches the critical analysis of production skills. The student is made to appreciate the aesthetics of the media. But beyond this is the critical analysis of what is read, seen or heard. It involves studying language, grammar and vocabulary of the media so as to be appreciative of their own codes, registers and conventions. An understanding of their language means an appreciation of their basic composition or frame. For example, in basic broadcast production key elements include lighting, sound, camera movements and shots. The different types of lighting and camera movements convey different types of messages. Little or no light means that the action is taking place in the night. A close up shot, for example, of the face of the actor is used to show a particular detail while the long shot establishes the location or scene of action.

ii) *Production Approach:* The aim is to give a hands on experience in the processing and assessing of information to the student. The student learns how to apply production techniques and actually produces content. He learns photography, cinematography and videography. He also learns script writing. In addition to improving on the traditional literacy skills, the technical skills

associated with production widens the employment opportunities for the student.

iii) *Citizenship:* This aims at using the media to turn out responsible citizens that can be good ambassadors of the nation as well as participate in the democracy project. Ambassadorship goes beyond the painting of country in good colors to include decision making skills. Media literacy aims to make the citizens understand the challenges and complexities of nation building and how to overcome them. The media provide the contextual meaning to societal problems. It connects the community issues and promotes sociopolitical development. This approach enthrones *mediacracy* instead of *meritocracy*. It is at the heart of the informed society for those who can manipulate symbols, information and the media would be in charge. It teaches students how to differentiate substance or reality from personality and rhetoric.

iv) *Protection:* This approach teaches the student to develop resistance or *refuse* media influence. The media influence by making people do things that ordinarily they would not have done. In other words what we watch on television, read from the newspapers or listen to from the radio determines some of the things that we do. When the Nigerian government through the Ministry of Health banned

the importation of *bleaching creams* and smoking in public places, it was deliberately reacting to this belief. This government believed that some people can be lured into smoking when they see others doing so. Similarly it thought that when girls of impressionable ages see *white skinned* women they attempt to use these creams to change their skin color. In the process they *burn* their skins. The society is crying out against explicit sex, obscenity and violence in the media. Censor Boards at times ban some movies it thinks would offend the sensibilities of others.

FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF MEDIA LITERACY

Media literacy is based on certain principles. These include:

- i) **Media messages are constructions:** The media do not show absolute reality. What we see, hear or read about are the re-constructions of reality of the news reporter of what he believes have happened or of what eye witnesses have told him. Before people believed what they saw. But today it is not so because the camera can be made to lie in these days of computer simulations. The media menu is a careful selection and assemblage of what that particular channel chooses to let the public know. It is never the total reality of all that is happening in the society. No media can ever report all and

everything that happens around us! When we do not have direct or immediate experience of a particular event, we look up to the media for information. The media then mediate. The understanding of the processes of mass communication helps us to appropriate how they can best serve us.

- ii) **Media audience give their own interpretation to messages:** Even though the media give us its own interpretation of reality, it is still left to the individual audience member to further interpret the message based on his own frame of reference, experience and value system. Thus different people exposed to the same message comprehend and interpret differently.

Example: when the Federal government of Nigeria announced the recent fuel price increase, different classes of people interpreted it differently. For the civil servant, it means more money would be spent on transport to and from work. For the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and other opposition and Civil Rights Societies, it was a clear call to take the government to task and remind it of its insensitivity to the plight of those it is ruling. For the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) it is an increase in revenue.

The audience must also have the ability to appreciate, enjoy and understand media

contents. The level of understanding enhances our appreciation. It is not always the best to be suspicious of the media. Media contents can be appreciated from different directions to get different types of meanings. For example: you can enjoy *Circle of Doom*, *Living in Bondage*, *Fuji House of Commotion* as wonderful pieces of cinematic creations or as thrilling black African acts; as the effect of the supernatural on the natural; man's weakness for pretty women or as just entertaining fare. For the less skilled they watch the actors and are amused. When children watch *Papa Ajasco* and *New Masquerade* they laugh at their humor but may not get the serious messages the dramas convey because their skill level is relatively low.

iii) **The commercial motive:** The media industry runs on money, not sentiments. This understanding of the economic and commercial environment in which the media work cannot be divorced from the media messages they purvey. Sex and crime sell newspapers. Films with high level of violence attract more viewers. Sensationalism is good business because they sell more and the media houses need the money from these junks to sustain their operations. The publishers claim that they are giving the public what they want. It is necessary to point out that the media practitioners are

subject to some ethical standards and indeed do have moral obligation to the public.

iv) **Media messages have consequences:** The introduction of printing changed the world. The mass media change the people of the world because they have impact. Media messages impact because they influence. They show, shape and reinforce reality. *Who* and *what* is portrayed should be balanced against *who* and *what* is left out. Media channels consistently construct and convey certain beliefs. Although each medium is unique yet they convey basic themes and values of the society. Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* learns that his bravery does not give him license to go against the tradition of his town without being sanctioned.

v) **Knowledge platform for analyses:** To consume media thoughtfully, we need a knowledge platform on which to base our thoughts and reflections. This base explains the mechanical processes of communication and how we can best appropriate them for our benefits. It also explains how the various media industries operate and their responsibilities to the society. The possession of this knowledge places in our hands the tools to make meaning out of the media contents.

Example: the size of the newspaper headline, placement of photos

and the page the story appears indicates to us the importance of the story. A small headline for a news story hidden in the inside pages tells us that the story is not as prominent as one with the big, bold headline on the front page.

The possession of the appropriate and effective production skills makes it possible for consumers to also be producers of media contents. For example, the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) demand their users to be creators too. Thus, when you are e-mailing you are creating contents too. It is more difficult to create than to consume.

THE PURPOSE OF LANGUAGE

The primary purpose of language is to enable communication. The very form of our language shapes our perception and cognition. Trevor (2001:10) observes that language is a social activity which demands joint action. He illustrates that nobody speaks or writes in a vacuum. We all aim to speak successfully and while doing so take into consideration the views of others. The speaker and the listener or the writer and the reader must belong to the same speech community for them to be able to understand and comprehend the message effectively. Every language consists of symbols. People in the same speech community use the same symbols and these must have common meanings. Crystal (1997) adds that language can also be used:

i) to communicate

- ii) to express emotions
- iii) for social interactions. Example: saying God bless you when someone sneezes
- iv) for sound effect or the making of onomatopoeic sounds. Example: when children play by singing to a rhyme
- v) to attempt to control the environment. Example: magic spells
- vi) to record facts as text
- vii) to think with or evaluate
- iii) to direct or give instructions about all aspects of life
- ix) express identity with a group. Example: chanting with others when there is a public or street demonstration, for example, against hike in petroleum prices.

Language can be described in a variety of ways. Harley (2001) lists six. These are:

- i) semantics or the meaning of words
- ii) syntax or word order (grammar)
- iii) morphology or the study of words and word formation
- iv) pragmatics or the study of language use
- v) phonetics or the raw sound of the words
- vi) phonology or the study of how sounds are used within a language

THE ROLE OF ENGLISH IN MEDIA LITERACY

English is the lingua franca or official language of Nigeria. It is the unifying language in a country that has

more than 350 other tongues. Because it is the official language, it has a role to play in media literacy. An understanding of the language is a major step in climbing up the ladder of media literacy. English is an acquired second language. In Nigerian public schools, pupils and students are taught in English. The text is used to describe any media product such as a television and radio programme; photo; newspaper article; advertisement; video game; web page or film- either on video or cinema. Texts are the main points of our study in understanding how media languages are created. One of the keys to understanding the meaning in text is in the use of codes (the rules or conventions by which signs are put together to create meaning). The English language is a set of codes or letters arranged into words, sentences or paragraphs. It can also be the sound of pronouncing these words or images assembled together in a definite sequence to give particular meaning.

However it must be pointed out that local languages exist. Wallace (2002:101) is convinced that the local language is the best means for the expression of authentic identity and political resistance on the parts of the subordinated groups. Barton (1994) and Baynham (1995) agree that local or vernacular literacies may either be in other languages that is not English or in English for local everyday purposes. Wallace insists that local literacies operate in private domains such as the family. The public domains are those of the media and the educational institutions.

Specifically, the English

language plays some specific roles in media literacy. They include the following:

i) *English is the language of communication:* We have defined media literacy to include the ability to recognize and understand symbols. English language is a collection of words -written or spoken- that have meaning. Thus English language is the vehicle for the transmission of knowledge, ideas, meaning and culture. It is used to communicate with others. Words can be arranged (encoded) in a particular order to create meaning on their decoding. English language literacy means that we have acquired the abstract linguistic system of symbols and syntax that gives us the platform to share meaning about hypothetical ideas that we cannot see as well as tangible objects that we can see.

English language literacy includes the fact that we can recognize symbols written individually or as a combination. We can also understand the spoken words. It allows communication to take place over long distances and over periods of times. All that the parties to the communication process need to do is to encode and decode their symbols in the appropriate and acceptable manner. Literacy depends on the skill to effectively and efficiently comprehend and use written or visual symbols. The English words mean the same thing in any place they are mentioned.

ii) *Communication skill:* Considine (1995) is of the opinion that English and Language Arts curricular exposes students to the content, skill,

form and function of language in all its richness and diversity. Specifically the language emphasizes the communication skills required to function in the society. We have earlier on agreed that media literacy is the ability to communicate and be communicated to effectively. English language teaches this because language enhances communication. The use of the media channels expands our communication skills.

iii) *Language appreciation:* English language creates the opportunity for the encoder to explore, experience, value and appreciate language. The grammar and vocabulary of the language is so rich in metaphors, idioms and other figures of speech that a creative media content provider can explore to add value to his message. Now there are different types of *Englishes* that almost every segment of the society can be reached. The professionals cling to their jargon. The roadside mechanics and pepper sellers have their own *special* or *pidgin* English. No matter the type or stratum of the society concerned, the aim is to communicate. English language offers the media consumer and content provider the opportunity of experiencing, valuing and appreciating the language.

iv) *Secondary socialization:* The written world is a world of symbols from which the readers construct meanings and experience. Halliday (1996:353) tells us that this world is a world of secondary socialization because we all have to be speakers and listeners at one time or the other. Communication is a socialization

process. English language has further heightened this socialization process.

v) *Language of fiction:* English language has proved relevant in such areas like Art Education, Performing Arts and History. Because English is the language of fiction, it has offered media literacy teachers the opportunities to compare and contrast printed books with their movie versions or celluloid literature. We have popular books like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *The God's are not to blame* now in motion pictures. Although their picture versions are not exactly word for word, but common areas such as genre, plot, conflict and resolution offer both teachers and students the chance to further explore the English language and visual language of films such as cut, fade, lighting etc.

vi) *English is the world language of commerce, education and technology:* In today's multimedia technology and computer revolution, English places a demand on users, consumers and sellers of the media to be well informed about the demands of the future. Without the ability to programme you systems in English, it is not too difficult to imagine that the future career and personal lives of the technologists would fail. Graddol (1997:2) observes that English is the main language of international commerce and trade. These two factors increasingly drive the cultural and political fields. The *Economist* (1996:37-39) describes English as the world standard language and an intrinsic part of the global communication revolution. The

language is so widely spread and spoken by so many people in different parts of the world that Crystal (1997:139) states that it has achieved genuine world status. Who are those that speak English? Graddol (1997:10) presents three: those who speak it as a first language; those for whom it is a second or additional language and those who learn it as a foreign language.

THE APPLICATION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TO MEDIA CONTENTS

English language symbols are the same in any place the language is spoken. Members of this language community have attached specific meanings to specific words or symbols. Therefore, they have a clear and unambiguous understanding of each symbol. It is the language chosen for this paper for the analyzing and discussing of media messages. But to be a critical and reflective consumer of communication, we need to understand how words, images, graphics and sound are brought together to have subtle and profound effects. English language can be used with deliberate precision or imprecision. For the former, the message encoder uses his words with precision. He leaves no room for any misinterpretation. His words mean exactly what they say. They are detailed, accurate, specific and particularly defined. Words can also be used with deliberate or intentional imprecision. This aspect is further examined below.

INTENTIONAL IMPRECISION

This is the using of words that

are vague, not exact or accurate. The words are deliberately unclear, imprecise, indefinite and ambiguous. They are chosen because they are inexplicit. Words are deliberately puffed or enlarged to assume meanings beyond the ordinary. Intentional imprecision is neither illegal nor sufficiently disturbing to draw the wrath of the regulatory bodies. However puffed up words are neither true nor accurate and they aim to deceive the unwary. The media literate person has the responsibility of spotting them and knowing them for what they are! The advertising industry uses words and phrases with intentional imprecision to say something about a product or service they are marketing. These words convey messages other than the precise plain truth!

Baran (2004:409) identifies three different ways that intentional imprecision can be used. They are through the use of:

i) *Unfinished statements*: The content provider uses unfinished statements and comparative adjectives to compare a particular product which he is selling anyway- with another one or many others that he refuses to disclose their identity. The real work of comparative adjectives is to create a relationship that expresses an increase in quality, quantity, or degree for example *quicker* and *more importantly*.

Examples: The unfinished statements like Bristar batteries claim that it *lasts twice as long*, Omega Bank's statement it is *beyond your imagination* or Union Bank's assertion that it is *bigger, better and stronger*.

A media literate person would ask which battery Bristar outlasts

twice. Whose imagination is Omega Bank beyond? Who is Union Bank bigger, better and stronger than? The observant person would notice that no answers are provided.

ii) Qualifiers: Qualifiers limit a claim. The words hedge out. Qualifiers may be either apparent or not. It is the media consumers fault for misinterpreting the words.

Examples of unapparent qualifiers include the following:

(i) A product *helps* keep you young but it may not do this as well as good dieting, rest, sleep and better time management. The product on its own can do nothing. It only helps!

(ii) The Nigerian Police *fight*s crime does not mean that the Police are winning the war. Similarly the same organization says that the "Police is your friend" does not mean that it would not arrest and prosecute criminals.

Apparent qualifiers are more obvious. They are usually presented after the primary claim has been made. For the broadcast media, usually, the words are spoken quickly at the end of the commercial or appear as small print on screen. For the print media, the words appear smaller or at the bottom of the paper advert.

Examples of apparent qualifiers include the following:

- (i) Taxes not included.
- (ii) Offer valid while stock lasts

(iii) Free gifts for the first 1000 buyers

(iv) Color may vary with package

Another way of qualifying is to present a product as part of a complete package.

Examples:

(i) *Golden Morn* is displayed on the breakfast table with some fruits, milk, cheese and eggs. These are ordinary breakfast items but this cereal adds little or no nutritional completeness to the breakfast.

(ii) *Indomie* noodles are advertised served with chicken laps and vegetables. But the packet does not include any of these.

iii CONNOTATIVE LOADING: Media content providers want the consumers to understand the inference or suggestion of the words, not their actual meanings. Thus words have implied additional meanings. Because they are not explicit, they are given subjective interpretations.

Examples:

- (i) Sheraton Hotels, simply the best!
- (ii) Nikon Nuga Hotel asks for permission to *spoil us a little*.
- (iii) Milo, the food drink of future champions!

When Lucozade is advertised as *high in food calories*, the interpretation is that it contains extra calories. The responsibility of giving precise

interpretation lies with the consumer. Today, the Advertising Council of Nigeria (APCON) is waging war against false claims, exaggerations, dishonesty and unsubstantiated claims in advertising. In fact it asks the public to report any they feel is false.

CONCLUSION

It has been established that the need to be media literate cannot be over emphasized. It is a necessity in the world of today where the mass media mediate between us and the rest of the society. We are washed with media messages. To be media literate you must understand the language of the media and the process of message management. The critical media consumer must know how to access and produce contents effectively using English language.

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INTERNET RESOURCE:

[Http://www.mediachannel.org/classroom/index.html](http://www.mediachannel.org/classroom/index.html)

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