

## DYNAMICS OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE IN ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION

OYERO OLUSOLA  
Covenant University,  
Nigeria.

### **Abstract**

*The seriousness of environmental issue has been brought to the fore, not only because of its significance to human sustainability but also due to its degeneration to communal conflicts, as well as emergence of miscreants and hoodlums who find expression of their destructive tendencies in environmental problems. This paper calls for a reappraisal of method of communicating environmental messages in particular reference to the language of communication. It begins with identification of environmental problems, the goal that environmental communication is meant to achieve and the inappropriateness of the English language packaged messages to achieving the goals. It stresses the significance of indigenous language use in communicating environmental messages and rounds off with examples of indigenous language communication.*

### **Introduction**

There has been a growing interest about environment in recent times more than ever before. This phenomenon, of course is due to the realization that environment is synonymous with human sustainability. Environmental issues have political, sociological, economic, ethnic, public health and even religious implications. This therefore has galvanized several scholars to make efforts to crystallize their thoughts on preservation of the environment and about how to make it sustainable.

On the global plane, issues such as climate change and ozone layer depletion among others have received and continue to receive attention. At the local level and in particular reference to Nigeria, problems like desert encroachment, flooding, bush burning, dumping of toxic waste by technologically advanced nations of the world, gas flaring, improper refuse disposal, motor vehicle and generating sets emission of poisonous substances, indiscriminate felling of trees, land reclamation etc. are in urgent need for solution.

More disheartening is the degeneration of these environmental problems to crises. Niger-Delta area is very notorious for conflict as a result of environmental problems. There have been cases of combat between ethnic militia groups and federal government troops; and oil companies' workers have undergone different kinds of molestation from the hands of the restful

youths. In some other parts of the country, there have been clashes of Fulani cattle-rearers with natives of some communities who felt bitter for the destruction of their farm products.

The magnitude of environmental problems (though cannot be explored here) underscores the urgent need for a more determined approach to solving the problems.

The imperative of communication to environment as it concerns creation of awareness and attitude change has been discussed by several scholars (Soola1999, Owens-Ibie2002, Ogunleye2002). Though it is just a variable in the development calculus because communication alone cannot bring about social development without working hand-in-hand with other social factors, it is nonetheless a very crucial dependent variable around which other factors revolve. This paper therefore calls for a rethink on the language of communication employed in environmental messages and directs attention to the significance and the influence of indigenous language use in environmental communication.

### **The Goal of Environmental Communication**

The aim of environmental communication, like any other development issue is to effect a positive change in the living conditions of a people. As stressed by (FAO 1994), communication for development should among other things, change people's lifestyle through awareness, peer-counselling technique of interpersonal communication, and social communication methods to pioneer attitudinal changes.

Coldevin (1999) adds that communication should be for speedy transformation of a country and the mass of its people. In other words, it should expedite the process of growth and advancement in a country or among a people. Okunna (2002), however notes that the desired change can only take place through provision of adequate knowledge and information so that the people are persuaded, through sound reasoning to change towards certain direction. Thus, the method of packaging and dissemination of the message is of utmost importance.

The process of social influence to attitude change reviewed by Opubor is also relevant here. (Enemaku2002). The processes include compliance, identification and internalization. The idea is that if an attitude is embraced under compliance, it will continue to be exhibited while the power figure is there. In the case of identification, the opinion lasts as long as there is a cordial relationship with the boss, but under internalization, the opinion change will depend on how important it is to the beliefs of the people. This calls for a careful and thorough planning and systematic approach in implementation of communication programmes for environmental issues so that the desired change can be achieved.

An examination of environmental messages shows an alienation of most of the people who the messages are meant for. The reason is that the messages are packaged in the language that most people do not understand-English language. The newspapers contents, and most radio and television programmes are designed in English language.

Not only does the language of packaging make the messages foreign and elite-oriented, it results in the ex-communication of the people who the messages are meant for. Even the indigenous language newspapers give very low coverage to development issues. Salawu`s (2002) study on development content of Yoruba Newspapers shows that all the development issues combined take 27.39 per cent of editorial contents of issues of newspapers analysed. One can then imagine how insignificant the coverage for environment would be.

It is also necessary to note that Africa parades the highest number of non-literate people in the world. Nigeria still remains one of the nine most educationally disadvantaged (E 9) countries in the world with adult literacy of 64 per cent as at year 2000 according to <sup>1</sup>UNICEF`s reports. The <sup>2</sup>Markdat report of 2000 about the use of home languages in South Africa reveals that there are only 22% people other than English who speak and understand the Queen`s language fluently. These facts show the inappropriateness of English language packaged messages to the majority of African population.

### **Significance of Indigenous Language to Environmental Communication**

Language is primarily a means of conveying meaning from one person to another i.e. it is a means of communication. However, it does not exist independent of culture. In other words, language is situated within a socio-cultural setting or community. It is an integral part of culture, a reflection of many features of a given culture. Like culture itself, it is a learned behaviour, which can be facilitated or enhanced through direct or indirect context and acculturation.

The inseparable nature of language from culture makes it of much significance to environmental communication. As noted by Soola (1998:97), the success of any development message will be determined by the extent to which such communication is "predicated on an understanding of the society`s culture, its peculiar system of values and attitudes".

Wallace (1996), also notes that cultural context and intimacy with a culture will give a deeper meaning to the understanding of language and the circumstance in which it occurs will determine believability or sense of reality. This aligns with Oladipo`s (1995) view that the meaning of a linguistic expression cannot be established outside the context of the form of social interaction which shapes it. It follows then that indigenous language being a part and carrier of culture is best suited for communicating environmental messages.

Owens-Ibie (2002) identifies the acceptability of language of communication to the audience as one of the criteria for thriving environmental awareness campaign. This stresses the significance indigenous language to environmental communication because it is most acceptable language to the audience being an integral part of the culture of the people.

Wallace (1996) emphasizes the point that native language when used in the media, writing or the arts is powerful in bringing about changes in the lives of people. He also states that the native language heals; it sets the mind positively in whatever endeavour being undertaken and that it is critical to being whole and well. He adds that the native language is a catalyst toward strengthening the concept of becoming; that is, the recognition of the importance of self, getting to know and accepting self.

Indigenous language has been proved to be very potent in creating a critical mass of real communication for substantial change (Burnay, 1997). Fafunwa, cited in Adekunle (1995:61) also notes that indigenous language can be used to raise the standard of living in the rural areas by using them in adult education programmes to teach basic technology. Folarin and Mohammed (1996:110), have also called attention to the fact that indigenous language press can be a veritable instrument in mobilizing the vast majority, who are unlettered in the English language, to be involved in the political process.

### **Empirical Study**

A study on the use of indigenous language in broadcasting by this writer examined the significance of indigenous language usage in broadcasting and the public preference for it. Radio Lagos 107.5 F.M., an indigenous language radio, owned by the Lagos State government, Nigeria, was used as a case study., as an arm of its Radio Service. Its sister station (Eko F.M.) broadcasts in English language. An indigenous language radio is a radio station where the major means of communication is any of the local languages. Radio Lagos 107.5 F.M., fondly called *Tiwantiwa* broadcasts in two indigenous languages- Yoruba and Ogu- spoken in Lagos State, Nigeria. Three questions were asked:

- What is the significance of indigenous language use in broadcasting?
- Do people generally prefer listening to radio in their mother tongue than in English Language?
- Would people's level of education influence their preference for listening to radio using their indigenous language?

### **The Method**

The study, carried out in old Alimosho local government area of Lagos State, Nigeria, due to its semi-urban nature, used survey method of research. A sample of 200 respondents were purposively drawn to include members of the public who can communicate in Yoruba language and who listen to Radio Lagos 107.5F.M.The study concentrates on Yoruba language speakers because Yoruba language programmes take the lion's share of the radio's air time. Questionnaires were used to collect data from the respondents,

covering their demographics and matters relating to the study. The Manager of Programmes of the radio station was also interviewed.

**Result.**

- **What is the significance of indigenous language use in broadcasting?**

The study reveals that indigenous language is significant because it gives good understanding and better meaning of radio messages to the listeners. The survey shows that majority of the respondents, 88%, understand radio programmes better in their indigenous language (Yoruba), 10% do not and 2% cannot tell.

Also, over 95%, as shown in the table below agreed that they derive better meaning from the Radio messages when Yoruba language is used. Only 3.5% and 1% disagree and undecided respectively.

**Yoruba Language Gives Better Meaning of Radio Messages**

Responses	No	Percentage
Agree	191	95.5
Disagree	7	3.5
Undecided	2	1
Total	200	100

Besides, it is also discovered that people generally have a natural liking for their native tongue and this gives them a feeling of enjoyment and sense of satisfaction when they listen to radio. A total of 188 (94%) respondents agreed that they feel good listening to Yoruba programmes. Nine (4.5%) respondents disagreed; while 3 (1.5%) listeners were undecided. Most of the respondents strongly agreed that they feel good listening to Yoruba programmes.

- **Do people generally prefer listening to radio in their mother tongue than in English Language?**

The data obtained show that people prefer 107.5 F.M. to other station with 72% of the respondents as opposed to 28% who do not.

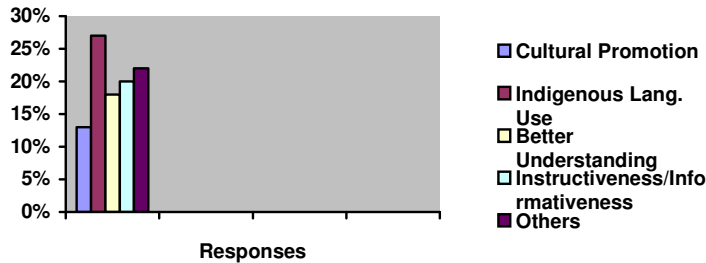
**Table 1. Listeners` Preference for Tiwantiwa`s Programmes**

Responses	No	Percentage
Yes	144	72
No	56	28
Total	200	100

The study went further to discover the reasons for *Tiwantiwa`s* preference. The data as shown in the **Fig.1** below revealed that 19 (13%) respondent`s preferred *Tiwantiwa`s* programmes because they promote local culture, 39 (27%) listeners said it is because of its use of indigenous language, 29 (20%)

preferred it because they have better understanding, 25 (18%) because they found the programmes informative or instructive, while 32(22%) preferred it because of music, interesting programmes generally and the like. It could be concluded that most listeners have preference for *Tiwantiwa* because of the use of indigenous language and cultural promotion.

**Fig.1 Reasons for *Tiwantiwa*'s Preference**



**• Would people’s level of education influence their preference for listening to radio using their indigenous language?**

The findings show that it is not only those who are non-literate or who do not speak English language that prefer listening to radio when their indigenous language is used, even the literate audience do. Respondents with O’level education and above make up 69% while those from Pry 6 down are 31%. So, the level of education does not affect people’s preference for to radio in their indigenous language. In the interview, the Radio Lagos M.P. stated “even the literate audience prefer using and expressing themselves in their mother tongue”.

In summary, the use of indigenous language is very significant because it gives the people better understanding and meaning of radio messages, and also makes for ease of assimilation and message recall. The people also have a natural liking, a good feeling of enjoyment and sense of satisfaction when radio messages are relayed in their mother tongue. And generally, people prefer listening to radio using their indigenous language.

**Other Case Studies**

**<sup>3</sup>Radio Sagaramatha**

Indigenous language has also been used in Nepal through the medium of radio for environmental campaign. The station, <sup>3</sup>Radio Sagaramatha celebrates the ethnic religious and linguistic diversity of the 2 million people reached by its signal around Katmandu valley. Programmes are designed on Katmandu’s growing air pollution problem, urbanization and its impact on heritage sites, tourism and the threat of HIV/AIDS and garbage disposal.

**<sup>4</sup>Micro-Finance and Marketing Project**

In Republic of Benin, indigenous language was used to broadcast product prices to farmers, marchants and the customers. The project called <sup>4</sup>Micro-Finance and Marketing Project was jointly financed by International Fund

for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the government of Benin was aimed at increasing income, well being and participation in local development by poor rural households and by women in particular.

The evaluation of the project shows that the people were of the unanimous opinion that the broadcasting of price information is useful. The merchants (and particularly the wholesalers) maintain that price broadcasting allows them to identify the best marketing time for their products. It also provides them with the information they need in order to manage their stocks of food in the markets, so they can sell at the most advantageous price. The project has raised the producers' level of dynamism among the other actors in the markets.

### **Conclusion**

Thus far, efforts have been made to underscore the importance of indigenous language to environmental communication. Going by the low level of literacy, indigenous language is most appropriate in communicating environmental messages. Apart from the better understanding and meaning it gives to the people, the emotional nature of language as it relates to the natural liking people have for their native tongue and the sense of pleasure and satisfaction derived in communicating in their native language makes the use of indigenous language of great significance to communicating environmental messages.

Therefore, packaging environmental messages in indigenous languages and relayed through the various media of mass communication-newspapers, radio, television, films etc.will to a very great extent help in creating persuasive awareness that will result in substantial change in people's use of the environment.

### **References**

- Adekunle, M. (1995). English in Nigeria: Attitudes, Policy and Communicative Realities. In A. Bamgbose, A. Banjo and A. Thomas (Eds.) *New Englishes: A West African Perspective*, Ibadan: Mosunro/The British Council.
- Burnaby, B.(1995). Personal Thought on Indigenous Language Stabilization. In J. Reyhner (Ed.) *Teaching Indigenous Languages*. Flagstaff: Northern Arizona University. Online. [www. ucc.nau.edu/ jar/ TIL. html](http://www.ucc.nau.edu/jar/TIL.html).
- Coldevin, G. (1991). Perspectives on communication for Rural Development. *Module on Development Communication I* Nairobi: ACCE PP 31-44
- Enemaku, O.S.(2002).Environmental Awareness in Nigeria: Communication Intervention Strategies and Options.In Osuntokun A.(Ed.) *Democracy and Sustainable Development in Nigeria*.Lagos:Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
- FAO (1994). *Communication. A key to Human Development*. Rome: FAO.

- Folarin B. and Mohammed. J. B. (1996) The Indigenous Language Press in Nigeria. In D. Olatunji and U. Adidi (Ed). *Journalism in Nigeria. Issues and Perspectives*. Lagos. WUJ.
- Ogunleye, F.(2002).Environmental Sustainability in the New Nigeria Democratic Dispensation: The “Awareness” Imperative. In Osuntokun A. (Ed.) *Democracy and Sustainable Development in Nigeria*.Lagos: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
- Okunna, C. S. (2002). A Quick Look at Development Communication. In C. S. Okunna (Ed.) *Teaching Mass Communication. A Multi-dimensional Approach*. Enugu: New Generation Books.
- Oladipo, S. (1995). African World, Western Concepts. The Problem of Language and Meaning in Religio- Anthological Interpretations of Africa World Views. In K. Owolabi (Ed). *Language in Nigeria. Essays in Honour of Ayo Bamgbose*. Ibadan: Group Publishers.
- Owens-Ibie, N.(2002).Governance,Development and Environmental Awareness in Nigeria. In Osuntokun A.(Ed.) *Democracy and Sustainable Development in Nigeria*.Lagos:Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
- Salawu, A. (2002).Development Communication in Yoruba Newspapers.In Soola, E.O. (Ed.) *Communicating for Development Purposes*.Ibadan: Krafts Books. .
- Soola, E. O. (1988). An Evaluative Study of the Dissemination of Family Planning Information in Ogun State. Ph.d Thesis, University of Ibadan.
- Wallace, L. (1996). Media, Writers, Arts Session Summary. In G. Cantoni (Ed.) *Stabilizing Indigenous Languages*. Flagstaff: Northern Arizona University. Online. [www. nceia. gwu. edu/ miscpubs/ stabilize / additional](http://www.nceia.gwu.edu/miscpubs/stabilize/additional).
1. [http: // www.unicef.org/inforbycountry/nigeria\\_statistics.html](http://www.unicef.org/inforbycountry/nigeria_statistics.html)
  2. [http: // www.litnet.co.za/taaldebat/lubisi.asp](http://www.litnet.co.za/taaldebat/lubisi.asp)
  3. <http://www.unesco.org/webworld/com/broadcasting/broad.3.html>
  4. [http: // www.fao.org/docrep/003](http://www.fao.org/docrep/003).