

The Nexus between Good Command of English and Social Respectability in the Nigerian Society

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Abstract

Several decades ago, from the pre-colonial to the earliest part of the post-colonial era, individuals were accorded respect on the basis of certain cultural values such as high sense of moral standing, wisdom, custodianship of truth and knowledge of tradition, martial skills for war, holding of titles, and wealth which is largely determined by having large expanse of lands, yam barns, and herds of goats. Contrastively, this is not the case in our contemporary times, with the advent of Western education and the dominance of the white man's culture and its associated language, the English language. A lot of scholars have extolled the role of English language as a unifying force in Nigeria, but little attention has been directed to the cons and disservices done to our cultural values vis-a-vis social respectability in Nigeria. Apart from the idolization of materialism in the country, a good command of English language is a prime prerequisite for social recognition. The paper therefore seeks to ascertain if this yardstick of good command of English is adequate for measuring individual's acceptability, and respect in society, especially amongst the elites. The work tries to investigate this using the qualitative research of Sapir-Whorfian theory of language. It was discovered that even though a good command of English can earn an individual respectability in social circles, even on the global scene, it does not guarantee an outstanding personality since there are more enduring traits such as integrity and high moral values, which should mark a celebrated personality.

Keywords: English language, social respectability, false personalities, pre-colonial values, post-colonial values

Introduction

Literacy refers to the ability to read and write. The ability to read and write English language accords one a literate status in Nigeria. Apart from attaining a level of mastery of English language through the academic institution, from the primary, secondary to the tertiary level of education, one can also attain proficiency in English language through the undaunted task of applying oneself to studying the language by learning its vocabularies and the rules that govern the acceptable use of the language.

Because of the premium placed on good command of English for social acceptability and respect in the Nigerian society, some miscreants have tried to have their way in several fraudulent activities by maintaining a good posture of impeccable English, complemented by good dress style. Most Nigerians have fallen prey to some of these scammers in the society, which include ‘half-baked elites’, greedy politicians, internet scammers, kidnappers, and 419ners, to mention a few. Looking at it from another angle, Ezekeke (2013) asserts that when a man is stripped off his language, his identity is also taken along with it. The questions then are: ‘Is good command of English language enough to accord someone social respectability in the Nigerian society? Are there other enduring values that should form the basis for respectability and honorability in the Nigerian society? These are the concerns of this study.

Statement of the Problem

The undue emphasis on good command of English as a prerequisite for honorability in the Nigerian society has given a lee way for miscreants and fraudulent persons to thrive in their activities, as unsuspecting citizens give them attention and respect and in the process get swindled of their property or even kidnapped and killed by these ‘false personalities’. Persons with fraudulent intentions are virtually everywhere and one will need a discerning eye to detect one. They abound in all works of life as impersonators, scammers, kidnappers, bank fraudsters and the like. Public spirited Nigerians and other individuals are baffled at the ‘gullibility’ displayed by some Nigerians in the face of these scammers, who take undue advantage of their possessing a good command of English language to cheat and rob the citizens of their possessions; hence the rationale for this work. The paper seeks to undermine this attitudinal belief amongst Nigerians and to proffer possible solutions by advancing some enduring qualities that will determine a person’s respectability and honorability in the Nigerian society.

Aim and Objectives

The work aims at undertaking a critical analysis on the undue premium placed on good command of English language as a pre-requisite for social respectability.

This aim is realizable with the following objectives:

- To assess the suitability of this yardstick vis-a-vis happenings in the Nigerian society;
- To expose the consequences of the yardstick for social respectability; and

- To advance other enduring societal values that should determine honorability in the Nigerian society.

Significance of the Study

- The work is an appraisal of a value system of the Nigerian society and an attempt to point out an aspect of misrepresentation inherent in it.
- The work is significant because it will call to question the hitherto misplacement of values which contradicts the values of our founding fathers.
- The study will serve as an eye opener to Nigerians, to reduce their gullibility to miscreants possessing ‘impeccable’ speaking skills and directs them to look inwards to more viable basis for social acceptance of individuals.
- It will help in a better appreciation of certain cultural values such as integrity, patriotism, honesty and hard work in individuals, especially those in authority and offices of high responsibility.
- Lastly, it will serve as a reference tool for students who are engaged in sociological and related studies.

Theoretical framework

The study is predicated on the Sapir-Whorfian theory of language which is attributable to the views of Edward Sapir in 1929 and the subsequent version of Benjamin Whorf in 1938. These two exponents advanced the idea of relativity in language and went further to establish the link between language and the society. Language for them mirrors the society. According to www.dictionary.com, the Sapir Whorfian theory states that “...*language greatly influences the modes of thought and behavior characteristic of the culture in which it is spoken*”. Invariably, it follows that the language of a given society has a reasonable influence on the value system of that society.

Analyzing from the Nigerian context, this theory can be said to be true because the adoption of the English language in Nigeria as an official language has assigned certain privileges to it, such that English language has become a symbol of prestige and societal recognition, success, and respectability. But does it have to be so? This was not necessarily the case during the era of our founding fathers such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, and Abubakar Tafawa Balewa who won recognition for themselves as statesmen with their qualities of patriotism, integrity and custodians of the ideals of the Nigerian society.

Today, we find half-baked elites and even the so-called elites displaying certain unwholesome behaviours in the cover of impeccable communication skills in English language that tends to earn them the attention of the citizens. Such fraudsters hide under this linguistic cloak to perpetuate

atrocities as kidnapping, political scavenging, and financial related crimes, sometimes referred to as '419'. Others hiding under this cloak of fine English include the half-baked elites who cannot positively contribute to the society with their acclaimed knowledge and exposure.

No doubt the adoption of the English language as the official language in Nigeria comes with its associated cultural values and implications. Craze for high level of performance in the English language has become the order of the day, such that if one cannot attain a high level of performance in the use of the language, one is regarded as irrelevant in the scheme of things. Little wonder that criminals cash in on this misrepresentation of values to swindle unsuspecting citizens.

It is common knowledge that many fraudsters dress corporately and communicate in 'Queen's English. No consideration is given to their track records and proven integrity. This situation ultimately results in deceit, crime, mismanagement of resources, and other unpatriotic traits which undermine societal development.

English Language and Good Command of the Language

English language has attained a vantage position on the global scene. It is the most widely spoken language in both the native and non-native environments across the world and Nigeria is not an exception in the quest for this language. Most of the speakers of English require the language not just for external purposes, but for internal purposes. In Nigeria, well over 170 million people speak the language as the official language of the country.

Lado (1957) opined that to know English, the learner must be able to communicate in the language in a manner that the native speaker will accept as his own. Hall (1978:55) adds that in order to understand the target culture in a second language such as English, one must "transcend one's culture which can be only by making explicit the rules by which it operates". In the same vein, Spackman (2008:3-4) observes that,

... learning a new language while living in the culture involves coming to term with the new ocean you are swimming in .This is acculturation which can have two meanings. The general meaning is just the process or act of adjusting to the new culture.

Good command of English entails having a good mastery of the rudiments of the language, expressed in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Most linguists agree that a good command of English entails a reasonable competence in the grammatical levels of the language –phonology, morphology, stylistics and semantics. For the purpose of this study, however, a good command of English is limited to the spoken abilities in the language at a mastery level.

Granted that English language comes with its associated culture of fluency, Nigerians must desist from placing undue importance to fluency in the language and try to harmonize it with the cultural values of the people as a means of societal assessment of individuals.

Social Respectability

According to Oluwafunmibi Ojewale (www.education news .com.ng), social respectability is concerned with gaining credibility and earning trust from others. When an individual or persons in a given society are accorded respect or regard for who they are or what they represent or what they have to offer, social respectability could be said to be in force. Whatever an individual does, be it a heroic act or otherwise, once it lacks group or societal acceptability or endorsement, then social respectability becomes a mirage.

Fundamentally, conducts and values endorsed in these contemporary times may not be validated as social respectability in the pre-colonial Nigeria.

Social Respectability in Nigeria

Basically, every society has its values. Fundamentally, certain behavioral or attitudinal patterns, whether exhibited consciously or unconsciously, exude acceptance by members of a society. The attitude in focus has to be in tandem with the norms, customs and values with the Nigerian system. That is to say that there are different human conducts that accounts for the acceptability of persons within the Nigerian society.

Given the dynamic nature of the human society, it should be borne in mind that what was obtainable and termed acceptable qualities many years ago may or may not be considered as qualities for acceptability in our society today. Consequently, the need arises to briefly discuss certain qualities that can earn someone social respectability in the Nigerian society, starting from the pre-colonial times, to the post-colonial era in the history of Nigeria.

Social Respectability in the Pre-Colonial Era

The pre-colonial era could be seen as the period prior to the advent of the colonial masters. It is the period that precedes the inception of Western education in which “the ingenious people of Nigeria had certain cosmological ideas, which formed the basis of their system of values” (Ogugua et al., 2019:190). As such, some of the qualities that make an individual respectable then would include: Wealth, adjudged by having many wives, numerous children (both biological and adopted), large expanse of lands, large yam barns and herds of goats and, sometimes, cattle. Other qualities include the possession of warring or wrestling skills, recognizable title-holding in the society, being custodian of traditional customs who impart traditional values such as proverbs, idioms, riddles, folklore, songs and aphorisms to the younger generation and, above all, sense of high moral standing in the society. Integrity, honesty, and dependability were held in very high regard and individuals with such qualities were acclaimed and regarded as noble, *amadi*, in theirin the society.

Social Respectability in the Post-Colonial Era

The post-colonial era refers to the period in Nigerian history when the Western culture and civilization has been implanted into the Nigerian system. It is characterized by the use of English language, adoption of the dress code of the white man such as dressing in suits and corporate wears, the scramble for white collar jobs, and a host of others. Some of the qualities that can be considered as meriting social acceptability and respect, in alignment with Western accretion, include the following:

- **High educational qualification**

A person who acquires Western education and certain educational qualification is usually held in high esteem in the Nigerian society. Such personalities are considered to be experts in their different fields and regarded as authorities in their various disciplines.

- **Natural accent**

Speaking English language with the Western accent is basically commended for effective communication. This is so because the audience will be impressed and motivated to listen with rapt attention. In the contrary, a person who speaks English with elements of interference from his native language will receive little attention as he creates the impression that he lacks the knowledge of expression as well as the subject matter resulting in communication barrier.

- **Timbre**

This is the quality of voice a speaker uses in communication. The tone, pitch and the intensity of voice as well as the proper use of diction with which a speaker communicates can earn him or her societal respectability because such a person is adjudged to be intellectually exposed and responsible.

- **Wealth**

This has always remained a criterion for social respectability in most cultures of the world. Even the Bible confirms that money ‘answereth all things’. Consequently, in the new culture, a man of wealth is regarded as a man of great influence and has the bargaining power and vantage position to excel in every situation. This has led to the quest for wealth and the idolization of materialism in the Nigerian society. Yet, the saying goes that “Money is the root of all evils”.

- **Political, economic status**

Virtually all past and incumbent presidents and other dignitaries in the political arena, including governors, senators and the like, are held in high esteem even when some of them have failed the people in their vocation as leaders. The same applies to astute and globally acclaimed successful businessmen.

- **Religious status**

The idea of religion could be said to be the worship of a supreme being who can sustain and protect his adherents. Today, the practice of religion in Nigeria and the world supports the maxim of Karl Marx that “religion is the opium of the people”. That is, religion makes people not to feel mistreated no matter their situation. It provides the much-needed succor in the face of poverty, deprivations, inequalities, injustices, irresponsibility of leadership, violence and terrorism suffered by the greater number of people. Thus, the leaders of religious denominations and groups, including the Pope, Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, pastors and Imams, etc., are accorded societal respectability by virtue of the positions they occupy and what they stand for. Most of them are seen as representatives of the Supreme beings on earth and intermediaries between the Supreme beings and their followers

- **Family background**

Nigerians tend to have regards for individuals who come from respected and influential families. Such persons are assessed based on the credibility of their parents and their good societal image. This earns them societal positions of authority and other social privileges. Again, some Nigerian families live in affluence and invariably pass their ancestral wealth to their generations which also earn them social respectability in the society.

- **Self-confidence and effective use of paralinguistic Features**

Babajide (1996) notes that eighty-five percent of speech/or oral delivery are paralinguistic. The non-verbal clues used in spoken English include gesticulations, body posture, eye contact, facial expressions and even dressing. These are powerful tools for effective communication, which boost the speaker’s self confidence amongst his audience. When a speaker gains the approval of his audience, he equally gains their respect.

Some of these post-colonial requirements for measuring social respectability must be reevaluated, and some totally discarded, in our society today. Other measures of respectability obtainable during the pre-colonial era in Nigeria, such as hard work, integrity, cultural values, skills and honesty, must be accommodated as marks of social respectability in Nigeria.

The Nexus between Good Command of English and Social Respectability in Nigeria

English language is the official language of government, business, education and administration in Nigeria. Though it is used side by side with the three major Nigerian languages, it has taken the vantage position in communication within Nigeria. It is the general language of the media and an overwhelming percentage of newspapers and magazines are published in English. English language is also the acceptable language for social gathering, parties, and other public occasions. By virtue of the multi-cultural nature of the Nigerian society, English language helps to fill the gap as the language that fosters unity amongst the diverse ethnic groups in the country. Indeed, the absence of

English language in Nigeria will make it difficult to create a cordial atmosphere for co-existence amongst these groups.

In view of the importance accorded the English language in Nigeria, there is the demand for social acceptance and respectability through the use of the language amongst the educated and even the illiterates. Possession of a good command of English by an individual in the Nigerian setting seems to be a ticket to gaining public attention and acceptance. Little wonder that we find criminals and persons of fraudulent character fake their personalities and project themselves as respectable citizens through the ploy of good command of spoken English to swindle unsuspecting citizens. Even politicians who do not have the interest of the people at heart deceive the citizenry with high flouting vocabulary and polished English to gain their acceptance, because an average Nigerian is usually impressed by a person who exhibits a good command of the English language which has become the language of social mobility and success in the Nigerian society.

This study calls for a caution in the significance accorded to fluency and competency in the speaking of the English language in Nigeria, vis-à-vis the assessment of the true behavior, character and motive of the person speaking. Criminals and persons of dubious character take undue advantage of this respectability accorded to competent speaking of the English language in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Language serves a major function in the education of an individual and education is an essential element of social respectability in the society, Nigeria inclusive; hence the intrinsic connection between a good command of the English language and social respectability. It is evident, from our discussion above, that a good command of English places the individual on the status of the elites which presupposes exposure, education and social acceptance. However, Nigerians must reduce undue emphasis on good command of English amongst individuals and place more emphasis on enduring societal values such as a proven track record of the individual based on integrity, honesty and reliability, to help the reduction of crimes and achievement of national development.

Recommendations

The following are recommended:

- i. Discourage undue emphasis on good command of English language as a yardstick for social respectability.
- ii. Inculcate certain enduring societal values, such integrity, hard work, and dependability, through related subjects in the Nigerian educational curriculum.
- iii. Nigerians must be wary of criminals including leaders and politicians who hide under good command of the English language to attain their selfish goals in governance.

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