

THE LINGUISTIC ADVANTAGE OF THE PROLIFERATION OF CHRISTIAN CHURCHES IN EASTERN NIGERIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Introduction

The era of Christian missionaries can be regarded as the golden age of English language education in Nigeria, for the missions' aggressive approach to English language education produced prodigious results in their pupils and students. Ogu (1992: 70-71) recounts that as soon as the "mission schools were established the missionaries did exactly what the churchmen did in England centuries ago, when with one hand they carried the Latin Bible and with the other hand the Latin grammar". Ogu (P.71) concludes thus: "Christian education in Nigeria became therefore an important instrument for spreading a type of standard English..... The overall effect of the use of English as a medium of instruction in mission schools was that soon English became associated with the Christian religion and civilization...."

Presently, English language education has fallen off its golden height and has continued to tumble downwards towards a linguistic bog. The dwindling performance of students in English examinations,

the very poor use of English by many university graduates and government officials, and the general lack of interest in the basic literacy practice of reading attest to the fact of falling standards. It is, however, in these days of massive linguistic impropriety that the ever-multiplying Christian denominations (Onuh, 1999: 18-53), through their virile evangelical activities, have indirectly been inculcating English language skills in both the young and old in eastern Nigeria, where Igbo is the dominant language. These Christian denominations seem to be offering far greater opportunity, materials and motivation for the development of language skills than a great majority of the present public schools.

In order to establish that the proliferation of Christian churches is, at least, a big linguistic advantage in eastern Nigeria, investigations were carried out. Forty-two weekly gospel programmes were listened to on different radio stations and television channels. Sermons in streets and on buses were also listened to. Forty-five religious tracts, Christian magazines, devotional pamphlets, and newspapers were equally collected and studied. The type of books, including the Bible, which people carry about daily were

observed and noted. Also observed included church services and other weekly Christian activities, including the manner of saying prayers in Christian gatherings. All this has led to the findings and conclusions that follow.

Before considering the findings, we will briefly examine the relationship between language and religion, hoping that this examination will make us comprehend why the language skills of those who are actively involved in religious activities improve by leaps and bounds.

Language and Religion

There seems to exist a mysterious and symbiotic relationship between language and religion. This explains the reason for the meticulous attention paid to language by different religions and religious denominations. Careful thought on the relationship between language and religion has led to the conclusion that both language and religion have God as their sole source. This conclusion can be substantiated.

Biblical accounts trace the origin of language and languages to the divine. The Biblical account of creation implies that God was the first to utter words and with words He created the universe. Linguistically speaking, it means that the vocal symbols uttered by God miraculously translated into concrete referents. Apart from being the origin of language, God is also responsible for the multiplication of tongues in the world (Genesis 11).

While the account of the origin of language and languages may seem distant, the inexplicable, miraculous linguistic drama in the New Testament of the Bible (Act 2:1-40) does not; it rather presents a compelling evidence that language has a significant, spiritual dimension. In this event of mass communication, the apostles of Jesus, who spoke in their native language, without any technological device, were able to communicate instantly with a large crowd from over fifteen different linguistic nationalities. When viewed from the perspective of the listeners, this linguistic marvel nearly corresponds to a known language situation called *xenoglossia*, which is a situation in which someone miraculously speaks a language he has never heard or learned in the past. This is why in religious circles, especially among exorcists, the incidence of *xenoglossia* is normally seen as a proof of spiritual possession.

Apart from the rare phenomenon of *xenoglossia*, there are rampant cases of *glossolalia* or speaking in tongues, which Christian Pentecostal and charismatic groups exhibit on daily basis in their worship sessions. These groups strongly claim that they speak genuine but unknown languages through the power of the Holy Spirit; they also claim that they are sometimes given the power to interpret the tongues.

At the level of pure linguistics, theories of language ability and acquisition also see language as a phenomenon that is more than mere human intellectual contrivance. Modern linguists, whose father is believed to be Noam Chomsky, accept the idea of mental grammar and the

existence of innate knowledge, that is, the knowledge a child already possesses before encountering his mother tongue. For Chomsky, nature fits each child, at birth, with a Language Acquisition Device (LAD), which enables him to understand and use one or more languages.

In support of Chomsky, Jackendoff (1993:29) maintains that Universal Grammar (innate knowledge) is "unconscious and inaccessible" and not "learned", and that it is rather "the machinery that makes learning possible". As regards how a child comes to have innate knowledge, Jackendoff (Pp. 29-30) offers an elaborate explanation and concludes that the "mechanism for acquiring innate knowledge is genetic transmission, through the medium of brain structure." We can, therefore, conclude that it is God who equips every child, at conception, with a language acquisition mechanism that enables him to learn and use languages. This mechanism is so effective that a child can simultaneously learn and use two or more languages, as evidenced by many Nigerian children raised outside their ethnic nationalities. It is the presence of this divine device that can satisfactorily account for the wonder of language varieties and the human capacity to acquire and use them right from childhood.

The Language of Christianity in Eastern Nigeria

The English language is up to today regarded as the language of Christian religion, so much that

about 80% of church services, sermons, Christian radio and television programmes and prayers in social and quasi-religious gatherings are conducted in English. For example, it is only one Christian programme "Mepee Akwukwo Nso Gi" that is presented in Igbo out of the 42 used in this research. Four others, "Victory Hour", "Hope for our Generation", "Flame Hour", and "Back to the Bible", are presented in English and interpreted in Igbo, just as Sunday sermons are done in many pentecostal churches. "Intervention Hour" is the only programme presented with a mixture of English and Igbo, while "The Apostolic Prophetic Bible Ministry", "The 700 Club", "Back to God Hour", and "Turning Point" are not only presented in English but also presented by whites. In addition, all the tracts distributed in eastern Nigeria are written in English; no Igbo tract has been seen.

The predominant use of English in religious activities is, however, a more common feature of the Pentecostal churches. For them, it is an unwritten law that prayers should be offered in English in social gatherings, even when the business of the group is going to be conducted in the local tongue. The less educated members of these Christian groups are not even deterred by their poor ability to use English as they struggle with the language in prayer sessions and street preaching, portraying the impression that, perhaps, God does not accept prayers offered in a local language.

Tracts, Magazines and Newspapers

Another encouraging discovery is that volumes of Christian literature

written in good, modern English still exchange hands daily among Christians in these days when the youths parade the streets, dutching VCD plates and video tapes tenaciously in both hands. Tracts are distributed on buses, in the streets, offices, market places and at homes. It has also been noticed that 79% of the tracts collected for the purpose of this work was foreign authored.

The popular magazines that have continued to inundate homes and offices include: The Word Among Us (Catholic), Christian Women Mirror (Deeper Life Bible Church), Awake and The Watchtower (Jehovah's witness). Rhapsody of Realities is a devotional pamphlet published monthly by Christ Embassy Church. The Christian Union (CU) has a set of three devotional pamphlets published yearly: Daily Guide (for adults), Daily Power (for secondary school students), and Daily Milk (for primary school pupils). Our Daily Bread is yet another widely used devotional pamphlet, published by the ministry in charge of "Back to God Hour" a radio programme. Apart from Christian Women Mirror, Awake and The Watchtower, all others contain daily Scripture readings in addition to a lengthy reflection on each day's reading. We have also observed other periodic magazines that emanate from seminaries, theological schools, and other Christian organizations.

Awake appears to be the magazine most widely distributed because its readership cuts across

denominational divide. As it is published semimonthly, piles of back numbers can be found in almost every home. The three fold reasons for its wide acceptability are: the low price of the magazine, the home to home method of distribution, and the enticingly research and scholarship value of the content of every edition.

The readership of the Christian Women Mirror is increasingly battering denominational walls, as many Christian women, irrespective of denomination, have embraced the monthly magazine.

Apart from tracts and magazines, there are Christian newspapers, which are published and circulated among Christians. The ones identified include: The Lumen (Catholic Diocese of Umuahia), The Leader (Catholic Diocese of Owerri), Catholic Guide (Ahiara Diocese), Caritas (Catholic Diocese of Onitsha), and The Christian Voice (Anglican, Owerri). That these papers are published monthly is an indication that they still have readership and patronage.

Bible Versions in Circulation

Judging from the ever increasing number of Christian denominations and from the enthusiasm with which their members seek to know and propagate the word of God, we assume that a copy of the Bible can be found in every family in eastern Nigeria. The first ocular sign of conversion to Christianity is the possession of a copy of the Bible. Priests and pastors are never tired of admonishing their congregations to peruse the Bible and other spiritual books. In the Catholic Church, a

recurrent maxim to give such admonition some force is a statement credited to St. Jerome: "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ." (The Catechism of the Catholic Church, rev. ed. P.57).

A number of the versions of the Bible are in circulation. Some of the versions actually found in people's possession included the following:

- King James Version
- The New King James Version (1982)
- The Promise (Contemporary English version, 1995)
- Revised Standard version (1965)
- New Revised Standard Version (1989)
- The New Testament (New International Version, 1988)
- The Jerusalem Bible
- New Testament, Psalms, Proverbs (Gideon International)
- Good News Bible (1979)
- New Living Translation Holy Bible (1996)
- Baibulu Nso (Igbo translation)

The Radio and Television Programmes

It is a bit difficult to declare that Christians read Christian literature with the same amount of eagerness with which they accept or buy it. What is certain is that they listen to or watch religious programmes. Sometimes, Christians and non-Christians listen or watch because they have no choice; this is the situation sometimes when all the radio and television channels are coincidentally occupied with

religious programmes at the same time. Commenting on the Pentecostals' massive use of the electronic and print media, Onuh (1999: 85 86) describes it as "Pentecostal invasion" of the media. He observes that, "They are like locusts on every channel of the Television and Radio (sic) and on the pages of virtually every Newspaper (sic) eating away at the wholesome doctrine already planted in the hearts of many."

The television audiences of these Christian programmes can be categorized into two the immediate and the distant. The immediate audience comprises the church member listeners who are present during every recording of the programme while the distant consist of all those who sit in the comfort of their homes and watch the telecast.

One major linguistic characteristic common to the programme presenters, either on the radio or on the screen, is eloquence. The presenters usually present, in the light of the gospel, long and sustained discourses on varied subject matters. They exhibit good command of the English language and utilize rhetorical devices like repetition, suspense, alliteration, rhetorical questions, parallelism, anecdotes and humour. The eloquence, with its captivating effects, can be attributed to the preachers' high level of educational attainment, and supernatural support.

The Linguistic Quality of Tracts, the Bible and other Materials

In addition to examining the linguistic and communicative qualities of Christian orations, the language of the available tracts and some versions of the Bible was similarly scrutinized.

It is already known that elevated language and style are usually associated with works by Christian scholars and serious documents emanating from churches. The language quality of the version of the Bible and tracts examined bear further testimony that Christianity is always language sensitive. From the assessment of these tracts, Bibles, magazines and newspapers, we can conclude that the linguistic quality of Christian literature is high, in terms of grammar, lexis, mechanics and expression.

One can also notice that most of the latest versions of the Bible bear indications showing that their language is modern. The foreword to the Good News Bible, among other things, states that: "This translation does not follow the traditional vocabulary and style found in the historic English Bible versions. Instead it attempts to present the Biblical content and message in standard, everyday, natural English." A note in The Promise (P.vi) has similar information; it states that "the language is contemporary and the style is lucid and lyrical."

These new versions are indeed an improvement on the older versions. They have modernized the archaic English lexis and structures found in the older versions, making the language fresher and easier to understand. For example, The King James Version, including the Revised Standard Version presents Rom. 6:23 as "The wages of sin is death..." while the Good News and The Promise present it as "For sin pays

its wage death..." and "sin pays off with death..." respectively. Also King James Version translates Jn 3:18 as "He that believeth on Him is not condemned" while the Good News and The Promise render the same verse as "No one who has faith in God's son will be condemned" and "whoever believes in the son is not judged" respectively.

The Negative Linguistic Influence of Christian Literature and Programmes

We want to admit that some linguistic errors have been observed in some Christian radio and television programmes and written materials used in this investigation. We have already mentioned the existence of dated words and structures in the older versions of the Bible. Such archisms are also found in hymn and prayer books and are still passed on to the younger generations of Christians. Some of the archaic words include: art, canst, cleanse, dost, doth, hast, hath, nigh, reigneth, thee, thine, thou, whist, wilt, wondrous, ye, etc.

A number of grammatical and mechanical errors were identified in some of the tracts. The majority of the errors came from locally produced tracts; only one major error came from one of the foreign tracts. Some of the errors are presented below:

- It happens that no body want to be called a sinner ...
- ...God who is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscience ...
- ...there is another disease which is much more stronger than Aids...
- ...but when death comes, every activities will cease.
- Man's reconciliation with God is

possible only if he/she receive Jesus...

- ... a dangerous looking man approached the preacher ... (foreign tract).
- Shut up! And sit down! Reprimanded the driver. But I must get down and now echoed back Charlie.
- ... and you will begin to enjoy on the joy of salvation.
- Stop This Bus I Must Go Down (Tract title).

- (i) When You Are Tempted To Sin Remember Hell-Fire (Tract title)

In addition to these written ungrammatical structures, some unacceptable expressions are often heard on the lips of some of the preachers. Some of the errors are "emphasize on," result to, and "Jesus is alive". In the area of pronunciation, "omniscience" is sometimes mispronounced; there are also admixtures of British and American pronunciations. A notable example is the pronunciation of "God" which, in a sermon, swings from /gDd/to/g^d/ like a pendulum.

It is true that frequent and long contact with archaic and ungrammatical sentences can greatly harm the grammar of a learner of English. However, the percentage of the linguistic errors encountered in the course of this investigation is so insignificant that it cannot, in any way, constitute a major hindrance to language development.

Conclusion

The massive number of Christian literature, written in good and contemporary English, that presently circulates among Christians and non-Christians, and the availability of numerous, regular, Christian radio and television programmes in English, which inundate the homes of the people, force us to conclude that the Christian religion is strongly and steadily promoting and enhancing literacy education and the overall English language education in eastern Nigeria. The Christian literature and programmes daily provide the people with the means of contact with English, and this contact is necessary for the development of the language in a second language environment like ours.

To be specific, Christianity, through its activities, facilitates the acquisition and development of the English language skills of listening, speaking and reading. Christians enlarge and sharpen their listening skill as they listen to their educated pastors during church services, crusades, seminars and in radio and television programmes. As regards speaking, Christians improve their speaking skills as they eagerly attempt to communicate the message of the gospel to others on buses, in offices, at market places, along residential streets and at homes. Since English is regarded as the language of Christianity and since the gospel message must be preached "in season and out of season", every Christian first makes attempt to present the message to his listeners in English. This effort improves the communicative

competence of the less educated but zealous preachers, though grammatical blemishes may be profuse.

Reading is the skill most positively affected by the Christian evangelistic activities. It is encouraging that in this period of socio-economic hardship, when most literate people (apart from students, teachers and the very few that read secular newspapers, magazine and pool materials) have divorced reading from their lives, Christians still read volumes of printed materials in English daily. Christianity is a way of life, and as such, daily Bible reading in the family or in the Church is an obligation. A Christian daily reads either his Bible or a commentary to it, or his Christian book, newspaper, magazine or a new tract. Apart from private and family reading, churches train their members in the art of public reading and speaking. On Sundays and other worship days, two or three members of a congregation read lessons. In the Roman Catholic Church, there exists, in each parish, a group called "Lay Readers' Association." It is the responsibility of this group to rehearse and read lessons during Sunday and daily Masses in accordance with the Church's liturgical calendar. The activities of this association surely assist her younger members who are still in school to develop and sustain reading and speaking skills.

Christianity is, therefore, a motivating factor in the development of the English language, especially in the

imparting and sustenance of the skills of listening, speaking and reading. Surely, the writing skill is also positively but marginally affected. The implication of all this is that parents, guardians and teachers should encourage their children and students to be actively involved in Christian religious activities. In eastern Nigeria, Christianity is likely going to be playing this significant role far beyond this 21st century.

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