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THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE:
KNOWLEDGE AND TOOL FOR
DEVELOPING A LITERATE SOCIETY

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BY

FUNSO AKERE

U. L. ARCHIVE



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BY

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THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE : KNOWLEDGE AND TOOL FOR DEVELOPING A LITERATE SOCIETY.

1. INTRODUCTION

The topic of this lecture requires some clarification right from the onset. The first part of the title - 'The English Language:...' was chosen in the first place because 'English' as a language has multifaceted dimensions in terms of its status and roles in Nigeria as

- (a) a second language (L2) or an added language for over 40 million Nigerians;
- (b) an official language of government business and of governance generally;
- (c) a subject of study at all levels of formal education - the primary, the secondary, and the tertiary (even the pre-primary is not left out);
- (d) a medium of instruction in the formal school system;
- (e) a *lingua franca* or the language of interethnic communication;
- (f) the language mostly used in interpersonal communication across linguistic boundaries in major cosmopolitan urban centres;
- (g) the main language of modern business and of the professions;
- (h) the dominant language of the print and the electronic media; and of entertainment and the arts;
- (i) and even in the private domain, the preferred language of most elite and literate homes.

These dimensions have serious implications for the educational, political, socio-economic, scientific, technological, human resources and, above all, the intellectual development of Nigerians. I will address these issues presently.

Secondly, the English language is a specific instance of a more general phenomenon known as **language** which is the object of study in the discipline known as **linguistics** (i.e. the scientific study of language) in which, I can here proudly proclaim, I have received my training and specialization. It is the application of the knowledge of linguistics generally and of my specialization in the aspect of it known as **sociolinguistics**, in particular, to both teaching and research in the English language at the university level for almost three decades now that earned me a chair in the Department of English of this University a little over eleven years ago. In academia, an inaugural lecture is a debt which one owes on attaining the topmost academic position in one's career. I am right now in the process of discharging this outstanding debt.

This aspect of my subject of specialization, that is, the sociolinguistic study of language, has both theoretical and applied, both specialized and interdisciplinary, both formal and functional, both rational and empirical dimensions. As an aspect of the topic of an inaugural lecture, it has significance and relevance (I presume) for an audience comprising scholars, not only of language but also of other disciplines closely or remotely related to language, all categories of users of English and of language generally, including 'lay' men and women. We are all stakeholders ! In the course of this lecture I intend to make an *excursus* into this area of my interest/specialization in the subject without necessarily boring you.

The second part of the title - "...Language (as): Knowledge and Tool for Developing a Literate Society" appears to offer a more delectable menu of sumptuous dishes. It is concerned with the following topical issues :

- (a) the significance and role of language in the world of knowledge;
- (b) language as a tool in the service of other disciplines and as an instrument for the intellectual development of the individual and the society;

- (c) language and the world of literacy;
- (d) the English language in global and Nigerian contexts; and
- (e) the realities of Nigeria's needs for improved English competence and proficiency skills especially in the educational system, in the professions, in business and industry, in public administration, in the electronic and print media, in the arts and entertainment, and in internal and international communication.

But let me sound a note of warning. Before we get half-way to the bottom of the pot, some of our enthusiastic gourmet may have lost their appetite. Those who insist on reaching down to the bottom of the pot may eventually leave here with disgust and something else that leaves a nasty taste in the mouth. This, of course, will have nothing to do with the quality of this lecture.

There is today an embarrassingly poor level of competence and a grossly inadequate proficiency in both spoken and written English among the graduates of our tertiary and secondary institutions, and among students and pupils at the various levels of the educational system. One is forced, therefore, to question the quality of education delivery process that is taking place in our educational institutions and as a corollary the quality and depth of knowledge and literacy with which their products are equipped to be able to function effectively in the competitive cognitive and communicative world.

I wish, therefore, to make the following propositions as possible glosses of the second part of the topic of this lecture :

- (1) There is a need for us to acquire adequate knowledge of the English language in order to be able to speak it, read and write in it more proficiently and more intelligibly, and to be able to continue to use it for diverse functions more effectively as literate (i.e. educated) people in a country that has the largest population of second-language (L2) users of English in the world.

This interpretation requires the provision of a wider range of opportunities for all categories of users of English in the country to improve their knowledge of and proficiency in the language.

- (2) We need to develop a literate society in the ordinary sense of having a larger population of Nigerians who can read and write not only in English, but also in our indigenous languages. This is what is usually described as the primary level of functional literacy. It has several implications for the mobilization of the citizenry for a country's developmental objectives. But more fundamentally, I think of a literate society in the more elevated sense of a society of well educated, enlightened and knowledgeable citizenry that will have the capacity and competence to participate effectively in the global village of the 21st century in which English is increasingly becoming the dominant language for the acquisition of scientific and technological knowledge and skills, the language of the information superhighway and of the new communications technologies; in other words, the language that guarantees unhindered entry into cyberspace. In this connection, we need to evolve a more serious and realistic language policy deriving from a more positive and instrumental attitude that will recognize the key role which the English language will continue to play in all spheres of development in the country. Such a policy will have to be backed up by such thorough-going planning and implementation strategies as would greatly improve the teaching and learning of English for it to become a more effective tool for the acquisition of knowledge as the hallmark of quality and functional education.
- (3) Our universities need to continue to produce well trained scholars with sound academic knowledge and specialization in English Studies (Language and

Literature) so that Nigerian scholars can continue to occupy a pride of place in the community of linguistic and literary scholars (and artists) in the English speaking world. Surely, we can still produce more Nobel Laureates ! Right here in Nigeria, most of the more versatile, reflective, articulate and intellectually sound writers and management executives in the print media industry in the last fifteen years or so have been academics with specializations in language or literary studies. Their contributions to editorial, opinion, and features columns of most of the leading newspapers are generally very articulate and pithy, such that they make such newspapers a delight to read.

2. LANGUAGE AND THE WORLD OF KNOWLEDGE

2.1 How Language relates to Knowledge.

Philosophers, psychologists, and linguists have expressed various shades of opinion on the relationship between language and knowledge. The philosopher seeks to justify or repudiate any such link depending on his philosophical orientation in the epistemological debate.

The psychologist is concerned with the kind and nature of the connection between language and cognitive development (that is the role of language in the acquisition of knowledge). Similarly, the linguist believes that there are so many aspects of human language and that there are so many ways in which language is linked with many spheres of human knowledge. He says that we should not lose sight of the significance of these neighbouring aspects of language for human understanding. He insists, however, on delimiting the boundaries of our knowledge of language in relation to the general world of knowledge. I will take up this aspect later in my discussion of the linguistic knowledge of language.

The views expressed by the German Professor of linguistics, Dieter Wunderlich (1979. 24) on the relationship between language and knowledge (i.e. consciousness) is reproduced as follows :

Consciousness is primarily something that we ascribe to the individual. He is conscious (...) of himself and his surroundings....His thoughts are not necessarily always couched in language, but language is a precondition for consciousness proper... Language is the form in which consciousness develops during social life, and in which discursive concepts and the thought processes that utilize them (cognitive activities) develop.

Halliday (1978 : 1) says that a child who is learning a language is simultaneously learning other things through language. He is building up a picture of the reality that is around him and inside him. In this way language becomes the embodiment of knowledge, that is, acquired knowledge in the context of culture. It is language that opens up the world of social reality. Language now consists of more than mere sentences or utterances. It consists of texts, or discourse, that is, the exchange of meanings in interpersonal interactions and by which understanding takes place. But in these contexts interactants understand one another beyond merely exchanging information and goods and services through the medium of language. There is embodied in the linguistic system at their disposal, that is, the language they are using, a shared system of values and of knowledge. These constitute the acts of meaning which are often established and transmitted by speakers through linguistic markers of social identity, statuses and roles.

These, in a nutshell, summarize our perception of language in the world of knowledge. I will now turn to the concept of language as knowledge.

2.2 Language as Knowledge :

Psychologists are generally not agreed on the claim of the centrality of language in cognitive processes. In some of their definitions of cognition, however, they come close to stating the obvious. One definition of cognition says that it is that part of perceiving, learning and thinking that is conscious. According to F.H. George (1962)

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cognition is defined as 'the way human beings perceive and learn, how they reason and think, even how they remember and imagine; and how their "minds" work in the ordinary day-to-day activities of life....' Cognitive processes cannot be said to be devoid of language.

Philosophers, on the other hand, claim that language provides a basis for whatever it is that people think that they understand and know. Brian Magee (1978:184) in recasting one of the doctrines of Wittgenstein philosophy of language remarks:

...in investigating language we are investigating the structure of experience. Indeed, we are investigating alternative ways of organizing a world, and therefore alternative ways of living, one might say of being.'

The underlying proposition here is that language is a form of life-support system. It is an embodiment of knowledge that transforms our thought processes, into reality. It is a form of life.

Halliday (1978) suggests that language can be considered from two points of view; one being 'language as knowledge', the other, 'language as behaviour'. Both the psycholinguistic and the sociolinguistic perspectives which inform these two points of view respectively can be said to still lie within the conceptual framework of language as knowledge.

The study of language as knowledge in psycholinguistic perspectives is an attempt to know what goes on inside the individual's head, the mechanisms of the brain that are involved in speaking and understanding, and what the structure of the brain is like to make it possible for the individual to speak and understand language. Knowledge of language in this sense is seen in terms of the capacity of the human brain in acquiring language.

The study of the individual's knowledge of language as behaviour is a sociolinguistic perspective that seeks to situate linguistic behaviour. Speaking and understanding language always takes place in some social context. Knowledge of language is a matter of knowing the

abstract system of vocal signals, the grammar and the lexicon. Knowledge of language also involves knowing how to use it, knowing how to communicate effectively with other users of the language, and to choose forms of language that are appropriate to the type of situation in which communication is taking place. This, in essence, is the form of knowledge that is described as 'communicative competence', that is, knowing how to behave linguistically. Language as knowledge (cognitive processes), knowledge of language as behaviour (communicative interactions), and the linguistic knowledge of language (formal linguistic studies) are all intricately connected; they are also linked in very interesting ways with other disciplines as shown in Figure 1.

I will now proceed to discuss the concept of language as a tool, that is, in its functional dimensions as medium of communication and interaction, and also in the sense of it being used as an 'instrument' for the acquisition of knowledge in various fields of scholarship.

2.3 Language as a Tool :

There is no gainsaying the fact that language has always held a central place in the affairs of men and society - their education, their art, and their knowledge of science. It is through the instrumentality of language that they have sought to gain an understanding of the world, that is, of history, logic, art, science, applied science and the new technologies.

Two twentieth century philosophers - Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) and Karl Popper (1972) have shown considerable interest in highlighting the functions of language in human affairs. Wittgenstein in his later work made a U-turn from his original philosophical position of regarding language as merely mirroring the world. In the book, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) published by his former students after his death, Wittgenstein argues that language should be seen as interpenetrating with our lives and our activities at every point. He maintains that "words function like tools" and that words are "like gears that mesh with the rest of our behaviour". Karl Popper (1972 : 106) identifies three worlds as the domains within which language functions. These are

- (1) the world of physical objects or physical state;
- (2) the world of states of consciousness, or mental state; and
- (3) the world of objective contents of thought, especially scientific and imaginative thoughts, and works of art.

It is within these worlds that his four functions of language are embedded :

- (a) the expressive function which involves using language in expressing internal states of the individual;
- (b) the signalling function which involves using language to communicate information about internal states of other individuals;
- (c) the descriptive function which involves using language to describe things in the external world; and
- (d) the argumentative function which involves using language to present and evaluate arguments and explanations.

The last two functions are what separate the human kind and society from the animal world.

According to Popper, language made possible, among so many other things, the formulation of descriptions of various phenomena in the world, and this made understanding possible. Furthermore, language was instrumental to the emergence of the concepts of truth and falsity, made possible the development of reason. Language, it is claimed, was itself a part of the development of reason.

Popper attributes the accelerated evolution of knowledge to “the tremendous biological advance of the invention of a descriptive and argumentative language”. In Popper’s philosophy of science, the evolution of theoretical formulations is made possible through the argumentative functions of language.

We can now climb down from this philosophical high point to look at how language as a tool functions within the various spheres of human knowledge and activities.

In the pleasurable domains of oratory, music and literature, language has been an important medium of artistic expression for all peoples.

In tourism, sports, history, anthropology, etc. language has always seemed a convenient way to classify nations and peoples of the world. In the highly intellectual disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, and science, language has bearings on questions of existence, truth and knowledge, memory and learning, and of nature itself.

Scientific observations are conducted in language. Whether as casual observers of nature, or as painstaking taxonomic biologists, we are bound to name the objects we examine, and this can only be done through the instrumentality of language. When science is expressed in mathematical formulae, language is still basically present because the language of mathematics is, to a large degree, an abstract and idealized version of the natural language used by human beings.

In the disciplines of the applied sciences, the new technologies of the computer, the internet domain, and indeed, the new world of cybernetics, language is creating an entirely new lexicon and syntax for technical and technological operations and communication.

In the established professions of law and medical practice, the disciplines of the social sciences such as economics, sociology and political science, language has always been the hallmark of successful professional practice and of logical theorizing and argumentation. In business and industry related disciplines, language has always been at hand to formulate principles, conduct negotiations, and reach conclusions and/or agreements or resolutions.

When language is turned in upon itself, it can be said to be performing two functions. The first of these functions is in creating literary works of art in the form of poetry, prose, fiction, or drama. Literary writing is art, an aspect of an art form. As literature, it has a creative intention, and language is being used in a characteristically elaborate manner in relation to the art form of which it forms a part. The literary form then is realized as a stylized use of language. The second function takes place when language is being used to describe

language. This is what happens in **linguistics**, the domain of language study/description where a whole range of metalanguage has evolved for turning in language upon itself.

The diagram in Figure 1 represents the place of language in the environment of other fields of investigation, that is, the nature of linguistic studies and their relations to other fields of scholarship. All the topics that lie outside the circle are the disciplines with which language is linked and which need language as a tool in their descriptive (analytical) and explanatory (theoretical) perspectives.

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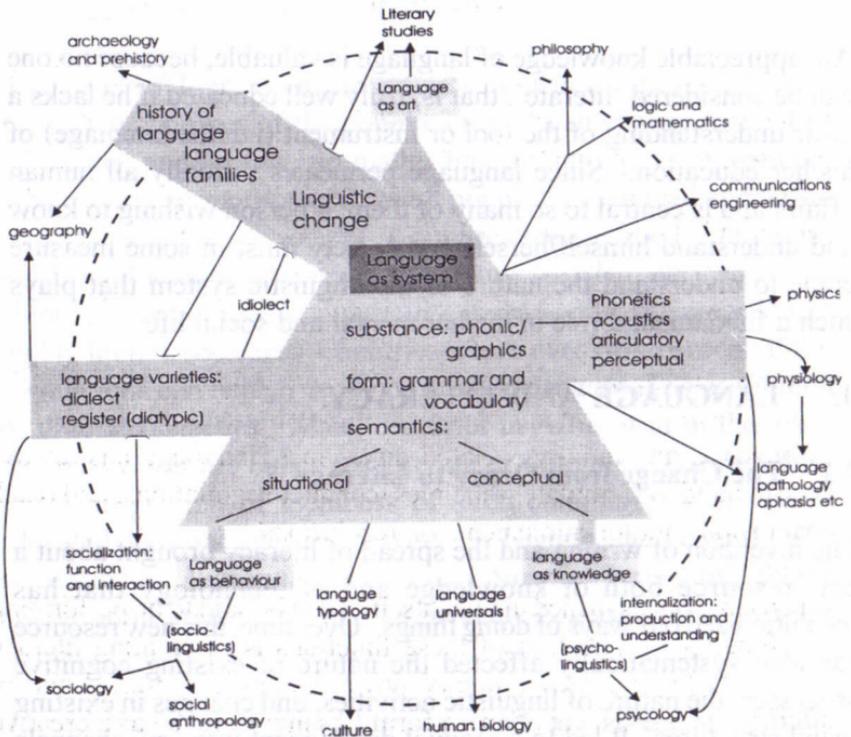


Fig 1 : Language system and its relations to other disciplines; Source: M.A.K. Halliday (1978)

The domain of language studies is represented by the circle of broken line. Everything within the circle represents the various aspects of linguistic studies. The central triangle contains topics or aspects in the core area of linguistics, that is, the language system. The three main arteries from the triangle represent the sub-disciplines of phonetics, historical linguistics, and language varieties (dialects). Outside the triangle are the boxed sub-titles with the descriptive names : 'language as knowledge', 'language as behaviour', and 'language as art'. These three represent the sub-disciplines whose perspectives on language take us beyond the narrow consideration of language as a system, but impinge on other disciplines and in so doing give us a better understanding of language as a human phenomenon. These are the sub-disciplines known respectively as **psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and literary studies.**

An appreciable knowledge of language is valuable, because no one can be considered 'literate', that is, truly well educated if he lacks a clear understanding of the tool or instrument (i.e. the language) of his/her education. Since language permeates virtually all human affairs and is central to so many of them, a person wishing to know and understand himself/herself and society must in some measure come to understand the nature of the linguistic system that plays such a fundamental role in his/her mental and social life.

3. LANGUAGE AND LITERACY.

3.1 The Change from Oracy to Literacy

The invention of writing and the spread of literacy brought about a new resource both of knowledge and of technology that has revolutionized our ways of doing things. Over time, this new resource has also systematically affected the nature of existing cognitive processes, the nature of linguistic activities, and changes in existing social structures. It led to a gradual deployment into new channels of people's cognitive, linguistic and organizational potentials. Language, of course, is the medium through which these processes of change began to be effected. The change from a culture of

oracy to that of literacy involves a transmutation of language functions from a predominantly spoken medium into a combination of both spoken and written, the latter giving greater prominence to a mode of action.

3.2 The World of Literacy.

The word 'literacy' is defined simply as "the ability to read and write". A literate individual in this sense is someone who is able to read and write. In a more elaborate sense, the terms **literacy** and **illiteracy** refer to the degree of dissemination among a society's population of the dual skills of reading and writing. A literate society is, therefore, one in which most adult members can read and write at least simple stretches of communication or messages in the language(s) of interaction in that society.

The level of literacy in any society is usually measured by the percentage number of the population that can engage in the tasks of reading and writing, no matter how rudimentary. A society in which a high proportion of its adult population can read and write is regarded as a literate society. Countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, Sweden, etc. where over eighty percent of their populations can read and write are said to be highly literate societies. Countries where over fifty percent of their populations can neither read nor write are regarded as semiliterate or illiterate societies. Many countries in Africa and in the rest of the third world are either semiliterate or illiterate. The fact that a small proportion of members of such communities are highly educated does not alter the picture. In Nigeria, the Federal Office of Statistics' *National Agricultural Sample Survey* of 1993/94 put the adult literacy rate at 49.4 percent. Nigeria cannot therefore be classified as a literate society.

Beyond the level of basic literacy, there are levels of activities associated with literacy in any society. The use of the written mode of communication promotes the development of cognitive processes in that it creates more durable sources for developing human

knowledge, and an improved capacity to store, augment, transmit, and recall that knowledge. Literacy is identified as a major factor in the patterns of social organization, in socio-economic growth in communicative strategies, in scientific knowledge, engineering and technological activities, and in language and cognitive development.

3.3 Literacy, Linguistic Ability and Knowledge.

My idea of developing a literate society, is one in which premium is placed on cultivating a high level of performance in both speech and writing that shows a good grasp of the language of communication (in this case, the English language), and also reflects the quality of mind, that is, a reflective mind, the level of reasoning, and the intellectual and professional competence of the individual.

The World Conference of Ministers of Education held in Teheran in 1965, on the theme : “Eradication of Illiteracy”, made the following declaration embodying the goals of literacy, and it was accepted by UNESCO :

Rather than end in itself, literacy should be regarded as a way of preparing man for a social, civic and economic role that goes beyond the limits of rudimentary literacy training, consisting merely in the teaching of reading and writing. The very process of learning to read and write should be made an opportunity for acquiring information that can immediately be used to improve living standards; reading and writing should not lead only to elementary general knowledge but to training for work, increased productivity, a greater participation in civil life and a better understanding of the surrounding world, and should ultimately open the way to basic human knowledge. (Quoted in *Illiteracy in Developing World*. The British Committee on Literacy : p. iv).

Literacy has been identified as the main factor responsible for the major achievements of human societies from the period of the Greek and Roman civilizations to the modern advancements of the Western

world. Third World countries, on the other hand, have been associated with relative lack of technological and economic development because of their low literacy achievements and a predominantly semiliterate culture.

The change from the oral to the written mode of communication is believed to have accelerated developments in the growth of human knowledge. Goody (1977 : 37) argues that

writing, especially alphabetic literacy, made it possible to scrutinize discourse in a different kind of way by giving oral communication a semi-permanent form; this scrutiny favoured the increase in scope of critical activity, and hence of rationality, skepticism, and logic.... It increased the potentiality for cumulative knowledge, especially knowledge of an abstract kind, because it changed the nature of communication beyond that of face-to-face contact as well as the system for the storage of information.

Education, that is, formal school education has been identified as the major factor in the promotion and development of a literate society. It is the context and process of formal schooling that the primary levels of literacy activities of reading and writing begin. Higher levels of competence in literacy activities are also a product of the educational opportunities made available at higher levels of education. In the Nigerian situation, although educational opportunities beyond the elementary level abound, facilities, both human and material, that are needed to promote higher levels of literacy through sound education are grossly inadequate. The adult literacy level in Nigeria, according to a 1993/94 *National Agricultural Sample Survey* by the Federal Office of Statistics is 49.4 per cent. The figures for 1992 and 1990 respectively were 52 and 50 per cent. (Source : *Socio-Economic Profile of Nigeria 1996* by the Federal Office of Statistics.) The write up on literacy in the Survey report attributes the low literacy rate for 1993/94 to inadequate enrolment in the school system and the absence of a large scale adult literacy programme.

There is a need, therefore, to overhaul the structure of education administration and financing (particularly at the primary and secondary levels) to pave the way for greater efficiency and improved funding. More teachers need to be employed so as to reduce the incidence of large classes in the school system. Improved facilities in the learning environment - classrooms, libraries, laboratories, workshops, books and so on, should be provided so as to enhance the acquisition of literacy, that is, literate knowledge. We need to elevate our society from the grip of an illiterate culture with its negative tendencies.

3.4 Literacy in English.

I have maintained that the concept of literacy being adopted in this presentation is one that takes the ability to read and write beyond rudimentary literacy level. To be literate is to be knowledgeable and learned, and to have adequate communicative skills in writing as well as an intelligent understanding and interpretation of what is read. Literacy in English entails the acquisition of adequate knowledge of the formal grammatical features and their functions in the language, and ability to deploy this knowledge for use in reading and writing activities across a variety of educational, professional and social contexts in a multilingual/multiethnic society in which English is used as a second language.

Literacy in English also involves a consideration of the kinds of reading and writing activities that people engage in in their daily routines of work. It involves knowing what comprehension skills are needed to be able to tackle the diversity of reading texts the average non-native user of English may or is bound to encounter in their personal and professional reading activities. Furthermore, literacy in English also involves knowledge of the different types of writing people normally engage in in their private and public lives, and the kind of communication skills needed to execute them.

Knowledge of the linguistic features of written English and some of the differences between written and spoken English is basic to a

better understanding of and a good performance in the two literacy activities of reading and writing. A proficient user of English should have an adequate stock of vocabulary, and the ability to use words correctly and appropriately in order to produce the right meaning intended. Aspects of English vocabulary which literate users should know include different grammatical classes to which words belong; the difference between content (lexical) words such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and function (grammatical) words such as articles, pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, etc. Lexical items belong to the open system of English to which new words can be added in response to new ideas and new technology. Grammatical items, on the other hand, are a closed set in the language in the sense that they do not admit new members.

Text analysts have found that written texts use wider vocabulary than spoken language, and that they contain more polysyllabic words than spoken texts. Spoken words tend to have a higher proportion of grammatical words to content words (lexical items). Grammatical items in English maintain the relationship between the lexical items and keep the text together. In written texts, the proportion of lexical to grammatical words is usually higher. This is why written texts are said to have a higher lexical density.

Literacy in English should assume adequate knowledge of the grammar of the language, that is, knowledge of the rules of English sentence formation, the structures and functions of the different types of English sentences, and the different patterns of sentence combination to achieve stylistic effects.

The specific issues of grammar which create problems for users of English as a second language are many and are generally described as 'common errors'. They occur in several aspects of the grammar of English. Take up any Nigerian newspaper any day and read, you will find examples of errors which offend against the rules of the grammar of English. Broadcasters, journalists, sales persons, public officers, students at all levels, and even university teachers all commit grammatical errors with such ease and confidence in both speech

and writing. Some of these common errors in grammar include : wrong use of tense in relation to time; confusion of tense with aspectual markers; verbs plus preposition, adjective plus preposition structures; agreement relations between subject noun phrase and verb, between nouns and their pronoun substitutions; floating, hanging or dangling modifiers and particles; use of reflexive pronouns, wrong use of superlatives and comparative forms of adjectives, and so on.

It must be emphasized that the learning of the grammatical structures of English is not an end itself. The various grammatical structures are to be used appropriately in different communicative functions. For example : the Simple Present Tense is used for the following :

- To indicate a general or permanent activity :
 - *The company manufactures a wide range of products*
- To define a truth or current belief :
 - *Company cultures evolve and develop*
- To describe how often an activity is done :
 - *Inaugural lectures hold every fortnight in Unilag*
- To indicate a fixed schedule in the future :
 - *Local Government elections come up on 5th December.*

Other communicative functions which require knowledge of specific grammatical forms and structures include the following :

- Classifying information according to its types and parts.
- Connecting and sequencing ideas using connectors and sequence markers which indicate time, logical, and textual relationships such as cause, contrast, condition, comparison, concession, contradiction, alternation, etc.
- Describing trends using appropriate verbs and nouns which express changes or movement.
- Checking and confirming information.
- Asking for and giving opinions strongly, neutrally or tactfully/weakly.
- Advising and suggesting.
- Requesting information and action.

There are, also, the common spelling problems and what now amounts to complete illiteracy in the use of punctuation. The use of punctuation is to make one's writing easier to read. It is the counterparts of the pauses and inflections that make speech understandable. Many writers these days have no idea of what the punctuation conventions of English are.

Precision and effectiveness in writing depend on the careful choice and use of words. Literacy in English word usage entails learning to recognize the words and phrases that will convey one's meaning to the reader. The development of word power comes with practice. It is a function of both style and adequate lexicon. Some of the literacy requirements of style are suitability of phrase or word choice, simplicity, precision, poise, use of stylistic devices such as idioms and figures of speech. At the level of word choice and use, some of the most common errors are exaggeration; use of posh, pompous and pretentious words; transfer of specialized vocabulary which are appropriate mainly in the writing of headlines (i.e. *tabloidese*) into serious pieces of writing or text; use of vogue words, jargon, slang, swear words.

Other problem areas at the level of the choice and use of words include inappropriate use of words with two meanings; confusing pairs, empty words, clichés, redundant words, and non-existent words such as the following :

Redundant words :

appreciate in value

chief protagonist

close scrutiny

comprise of

consensus of opinion

free gift

general consensus

in actual fact

revert back

temporary respite

Non-existent words :

*disassociate	instead of	dissociate
*preventative	instead of	preventive
*reoccur	instead of	recur
*reoccurrence	instead of	recurrence
*upliftment	instead of	uplift

An 'educated' or literate user of the language should be able to make the extra effort to always check what a word means, and then decide whether their reader will understand it without the redundant addition or the making up of non-existent words.

The ability to write effectively - and thus to reach and sway the reader - depends to a large degree upon making sensitive choices from the stock of words or phrases available to create the desired effect and so, communicate effectively. The English language is particularly rich in synonyms, idiomatic expressions and various sentence types and structural patterns so that the writer has a supply of a large number of permutations through which to convey his meaning. Ability to utilize the lexical and the grammatical resources of English proficiently for various communicative functions demonstrates an appreciable level of competence in the language and a good measure of literacy.

4. ENGLISH AS A WORLD LANGUAGE AND ENGLISH IN NIGERIA.

4.1 English as a World Language.

I have concentrated throughout the course of this lecture so far on the English language, that is, knowledge of it and its use as a tool for developing a literate Nigerian society and I have clearly defined and explained what I mean by a society being literate. I am not unmindful of the existence of Nigeria's indigenous languages and the roles they can play or are expected to play in improving the adult literacy rate in Nigeria.

The realities of the emerging trends of the functions of language in Nigeria as well as in global contexts confirm the pervasive use of English in the most critical aspects of our national and international programmes ranging from educational, administrative, economic, diplomatic, technological, scientific, and communication activities. Nigeria has the largest population of second-language speakers of English in the world (Table 1 and Figure 3). It is in consideration of this fact that I will now briefly review the global situation in which English has become an inevitable choice as a world language, and then turn to the Nigerian context.

English has become the dominant language in many spheres of activities in the world. In terms of its population of speakers, it is the language that has the largest population of speakers among the well over 6,000 languages of the world. It is estimated that by the start of the twenty-first century there will be approximately 1,500 million speakers of English in the world. This figure represents the estimated populations of three types of English speakers. These are (a) 375 million first language (L1) speakers, that is, those for whom English is a first or native language; (b) 375 million second-language (L2) speakers, that is, those of us for whom English is a second or an added language; and (c) 750 million foreign-language (EFL) speakers.

According to a press release issued by the British Council in 1995 at the start of the **English 2000 Project**, the dominant status of English as an international language and the most 'populous language' in the world is no longer in doubt.

World-wide, there are over 1,400 million people in countries where English has official status. One out of five of the world's population speaks English to some level of competence. Demand from the other four-fifths is increasing.... By the year 2000 it is estimated that over one billion people will be learning English. English is the main language of books, newspapers, airports and air-traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, diplomacy, sport, international competitions, pop music and advertising. (British Council, English 2000 press release, 23 March 1995. Source: Goodman & Graddol 1996)

The **English 2000 Project** report (British Council), and two recent publications : **The Future of English ?** (David Graddol, 1997) and **English as a Global Language** (Crystal, D., 1997) have confirmed the growing world supremacy of the English language. The factors responsible for this phenomenal spread, apart from the implantation of English in several countries which came under British colonial administration, include the following :

- (i) the adoption of English as one of the six languages accorded official status in the United Nations after World War One in order to maintain international order; the other languages are Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian and Spanish (Figure 2);
- (ii) the fact that only English and French have been adopted among the six languages of international and intergovernmental organizations;
- (iii) the rise of the US in the 20th century as a superpower that has spread the English language alongside its economic, technological and cultural influence;
- (iv) the adoption of English as the preferred language for international communication by 22 multilingual countries that account for about 5,000 of the world's 6,000 languages; these are countries that have between 100 and 850 languages each.

In terms of the hierarchical ordering of the world's over 6,000 languages, English and French are at the apex and are referred to as the big languages. (Fig. 2). Among the five important 'working languages' of the United Nations, English and French are the most frequent choices. Many international organizations that have adopted a dual English/French policy include the GATT (the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), OAU (Organization of African Unity), ILO (International Labour Organization).

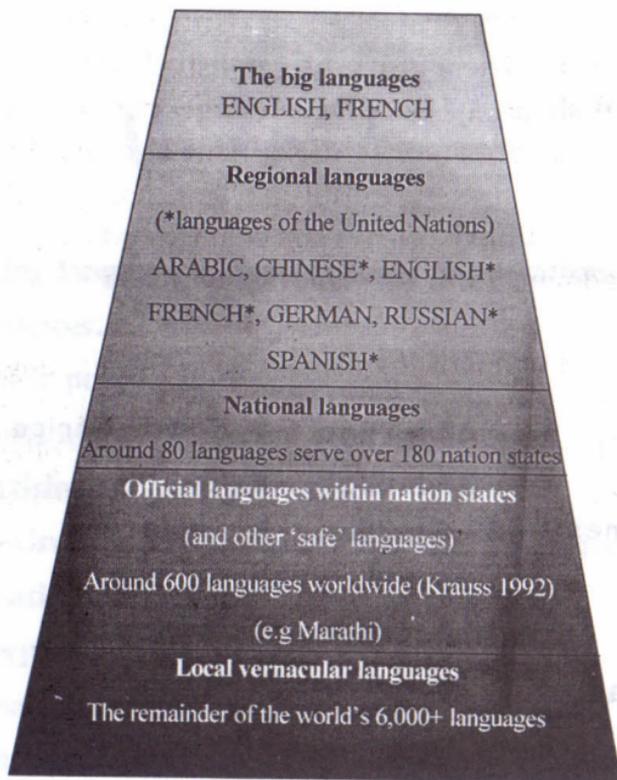


Figure 2: The World Language Hierarchy
Source: David Graddol (1997)

English is reported to be at the apex of the complex political, economic and cultural hierarchy of languages in the world, while French is pushed to the position of the world's second international language (Graddol, 1997). Figure 2 shows a pyramidal structure of the world's languages classified hierarchically as (1) the big languages, (2) regional *lingua francas*, (3) national languages, (4) official languages within nation states, and (5) local/indigenous languages. English appears in four of these five language groups.

Graddol (1997 : 11) lists 63 countries in which there are substantial populations of second-language speakers of English. Twelve of this number represents countries with over 5 million second-language speakers of English (Table 1). Nigeria tops the table with an estimated 43 million L2 speakers of English while India and Philippines are trailing with 37 million and 36.4 million respectively.

1. Nigeria	43 million	7. South Africa	10 million
2. India	37 million	8. Nauru	9.4 million
3. Philippines	36.4 million	9. Cameroon	6.6 million
4. U. S. A.	30 million	10. Canada	6 million
5. Palau	16.3 million	11. Malaysia	5.9 million
6. Pakistan	16 million	12. Nepal	5.9 million

Table 1: Countries with over 5 million second - language speakers English. (Source: Crystal)

4.2 The Domains of English in International Contexts.

The realization that the world has virtually become a 'global village' necessitates a closer consideration of the major international domains in which English has become the dominant language. Table 2 lists twelve such domains. There can be no meaningful development in any nation if access to these domains is blocked as a result of linguistic barrier. Only a relatively small number of languages apart from English have access to these domains in a significant way. French, German and Japanese belong to this group. Since the dominant language of operation in these domains is English, effective and productive participation in them requires adequate competence in the language.

- 1. Working language of international organisations and conferences.**
- 2. Scientific publications**
- 3. International banking.**
- 4. Advertising for global brands.**
- 5. Audio-visual cultural products (e.g. film, TV, popular music)**
- 6. International tourism.**
- 7. Tertiary education**
- 8. International safety (e.g. 'airspeak', 'seaspeak.')**
- 9. International law.**
- 10. As a 'relay language' in interpretation and translation.**
- 11. Technology transfer.**
- 12. Internet communication.**

Table 2: Major International Domains of English

The domain of science, for example, requires adequate proficiency in scientific English. If scientific discourse which arises out of the findings of scientific research comes easily for native speakers of English, scientists from many non-English-speaking countries and those from second language speaker countries need to write their research papers in English in order to reach a wide international audience. This calls for adequate literacy in English. The same adequate level of competence is required to be able to function effectively, say, in tertiary education, international trade, tourism, international law, technology transfer, internet communication and so on.

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It has been said that literacy in English is often associated with education and power. Education is basic to any societal development. Literacy in English especially among people in third world countries guarantees participation in the education delivery process. It is through the medium of English that access to knowledge is guaranteed for countries whose indigenous languages have not been well developed to cope with the activities of the various domains. Even countries such as Germany, Japan, China which have established traditions of excellence and literacy in their national language(s) are involved in the shift from their own language(s) to English in specific domains or in specialized disciplines. It is reported (Graddol, 1997) that among German academics claims of using English as their working language were made in respect of 20 disciplines by large percentages of their population - with subjects like Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Psychology each having over 80% of the academics claiming English as their working language. (See Table 3).

Physics	98%	Veterinary Sciences	53%
Chemistry	83%	Economics	48%
Biology	81%	Sports Sciences	40%
Psychology	81%	Linguistics	35%
Mathematics	78%	Education	27%
Earth Sciences	76%	Literature	23%
Medical Science	72%	History	20%
Sociology	72%	Classics	17%
Philosophy	56%	Theology	12%
Forestry	55%	Law	8%

Table 3: Disciplines in which German Academics claim English as working language

The significance of the data on German academics is that even in spite of their well known nationalist orientation and a strong attachment to and pride in the German language, substantial numbers of the very core of German elitism find it expedient to conduct their intellectual and academic activities in English. German academics have simply decided not to be left out of circulation in the academic world in which the global trend in the dissemination of knowledge and research findings is one that is dominated by the English language.

Graddol (1997:39) has observed that proficiency in English is no longer merely an instrumental affair; it has become a gate-keeping affair in which those who do not possess adequate proficiency in it are virtually shut out of the mainstream of educational, economic, technological, and political activities of their countries. English is used as a screening mechanism for scholars submitting papers to international journals which are increasingly published in English. He cites the following comment credited to the editor of the influential journal *Science* :

If you see people making multiple mistakes in spelling, syntax and semantics, you have to wonder whether when they did their science they weren't also making similar errors of inattention.

English has also dominated the activity of the rapidly growing world data networks called the 'information superhighway'. The traditional modes of communication by mailed letters, telegrams and cablegrams have now been taken over by new and faster communication devices such as the fax machine, electronic mail system (e-mail), multimedia computers, and cable and satellite television. All of these operate through the medium of English. The diversity and variations in the new vocabulary, new morphological structures, and syntactic patterns will no doubt increase the complexity of the English language that will necessitate updating the literacy level of its users.

If the English language is set to take over the world in the course of the twenty-first century and become 'the global language', those of us in the Third World that depend solely on the English language to conduct the affairs of governance, carry out intellectual and professional activities, engage in internal and external trade and business exchanges, conduct interpersonal and official communication intranationally and internationally, and above all provide formal education for the citizenry, will need to re-examine the priorities and the focus of planning for the development of the language to meet these needs and the other exigencies of globalization. There is an urgent need to improve the literacy level and the standard of English used in conducting our affairs.

4.4 English in Nigeria: Status, Domains and Standards

4.4.1 The Status of English in Nigeria.

The realities of the plurality that characterizes the nation's ethnolinguistic composition, the inability of successive governments since independence to implement the language policy provisions incorporated in the 1977 National Policy on Education (NPE) (revised 1981) and the Nigerian Constitution of 1979, and the pervasive use of English in all official and non-official domains, leave no one in doubt as to the official status of English. During the colonial era, the choice of English as the sole official language was automatic because it was the official language of the colonial administration in the British Empire.

Since independence in 1960, English has at various times been ascribed different status ratings as (1) sole official language (a continuation of the pre-independence status quo), (2) co-official language with the three major Nigerian languages and the other regional languages (by the provisions of the 1977 NPE and the 1979 constitution), and (3) co-official language with French (by the pronouncement in 1997 of the then military Head of State). The reality on the ground is that in spite of the *de jure* policy provisions

of shared official status, English has continued to enjoy the *de facto* status of sole official language.

The ambivalent attitude of successive civilian and military administrations towards the planning and implementation of a realistic national language policy, the uncompromising posture of various political and ethnic interest groups on the question of which language or languages should be adopted as the national language(s) have been responsible for the lack of any meaningful development of our indigenous languages. The inevitable consequence of this state of affairs is that English has continued and will continue to enjoy the status of the official language of Nigeria.

The following comment by some neutral language experts appears to me to be a succinct and an unequivocal summary of the dilemma of the Nigerian situation. In reviewing the multilingual situation in many developing countries and the problem of language policy formulation and implementation, Graddol, *et al* (1996:30) offer the following explanation on why these countries cannot select a local language for official use.

The problem is how to choose between the many indigenous languages, each of which represents an ethnic background to which the adherents are fiercely loyal. In Nigeria, for example, they would have to choose between Hausa, Yoruba, Ibo, Fulani, and the other languages belonging to different ethnic groups. The number of speakers won't decide the matter.... And even if one language did have a clear majority, its selection would be opposed by the combined weight of the other speakers, who would otherwise find themselves seriously disadvantaged, socially and educationally. Inter-tribal tension, leading to unrest and violence, would be a likely consequence. By giving official status to an outside language, such as English, all internal languages are placed on the same footing. Everyone is now equally disadvantaged. It is a complex decision to implement, but at least it is fair.

These are not my own words, but I agree with the sentiments expressed in them considering the realities of the Nigerian linguistic

and ethno-political configuration. But before the 'progressives' and the 'nationalists' of today and of the future accuse me of promoting a neo-colonialist policy with regard to the adoption of a Nigerian language as national/official language, let me make my own stand clear. I support the idea of having a definite policy on the question of designating one Nigerian language, or two or three, as official/national languages. I do not see anything wrong in Nigeria with a population of over one hundred million (estimates) people in 1998 adopting a multilingual policy. But the crux of the matter is that we are not sincere with ourselves in these matters. Our governments both at the Federal and State levels are not ready to invest financial and material resources in the development of our indigenous languages. Rather than allow the major languages to be developed and spread across the country, the minority language groups and activists of the small group languages have consistently blocked all official attempts to have the three major languages adopted as national official languages. Worse still, the speakers of the majority group languages are each adopting a new device of using their ethnic language even in public and official contexts to exclude others. Each group is plotting to impose its own language on the country. Meanwhile, English continues to be used unhindered as the official language and *lingua franca* in most transactions. My worry is that we are also not paying enough attention to developing adequate literacy in English among the younger generation who may have to depend entirely on English in the twenty-first century for the conduct of their personal and public/official communicative activities.

Figure 3 below shows that out of the 12 countries in the world that have over 5 million second-language speakers of English, Nigeria alone with an estimated 43 million speakers takes the leading position with 20 percent followed by India (17%), Philippines (16%) and USA (13%). This is the global picture with which Nigeria is viewed and looked upon as a world leader among those who use English as a second-language.

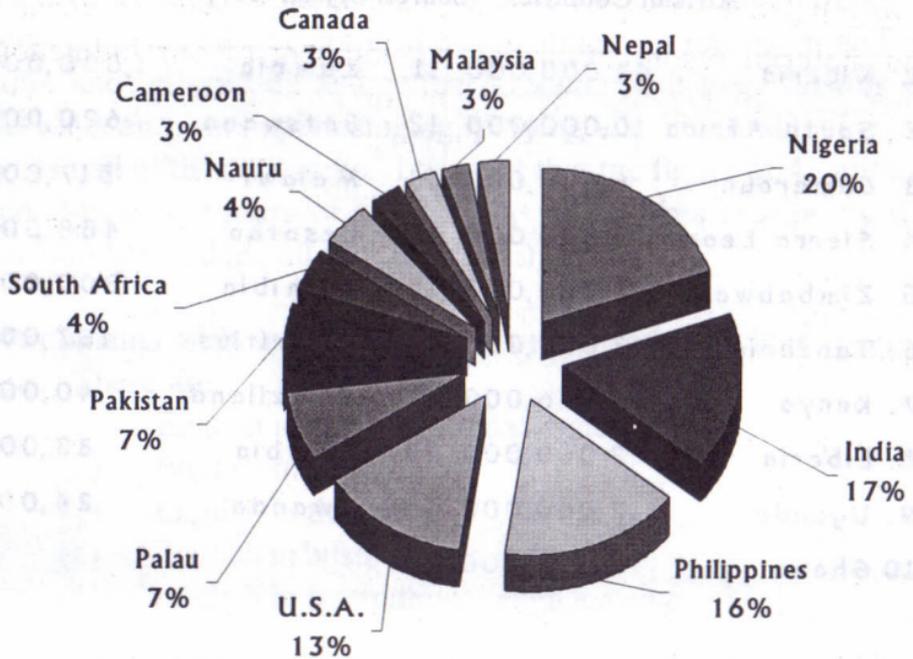


Figure 3: Percentage share of second-language speakers of English by 12 countries with over 5 million speakers.

The situation within the African continent is more revealing. There are 19 countries in Africa where there are significant populations of second-language speakers of English. (Table 4). Most of these were once under British Colonial administration. Nigeria tops the table with 43 million speakers. As a matter of fact, the figure for Nigeria doubles the combined figures (37.678 million) for the remaining 18 countries including South Africa.

Table 4: Estimated Second-language Speakers of English in 19 African Countries. (Source: Crystal 1997)

1. Nigeria	43,000,000	11. Zambia	1,000,000
2. South Africa	10,000,000	12. Botswana	620,000
3. Cameroun	6,600,000	13. Malawi	517,000
4. Sierra Leone	3,830,000	14. Lesotho	488,000
5. Zimbabwe	3,300,000	15. Namibia	300,000
6. Tanzania	3,000,000	16. Mauritius	167,000
7. Kenya	2,576,000	17. Swaziland	40,000
8. Liberia	2,000,000	18. Gambia	33,000
9. Uganda	2,000,000	19. Rwanda	24,000
10. Ghana	1,153,000		

Table 4: Estimated Second-language Speakers of English in 19 African Countries. (Source: Crystal 1997)

4.4.2 Domains of the Use of English.

If we do a painstaking listing of all the domains in which English functions in both official and non-official capacities, we will discover how pervasive the use of English is in our private, national and international communicative interactions. Some of these domains are already listed in the introduction to this lecture. It would be true to a large extent that the English language has taken over the entire written communicative activities of the entire nation both private

and public. Over ninety percent of all written communication in this country is done in English. The case of oral communication is slightly different. With 43 million speakers of English, one might say that only about 40 percent of oral communication is done in English. But a closer look at the quantity of oral communication done in English by 43 million people compared with what the remaining 60 million Nigerians who actually communicate orally in the local languages might tilt the quantity in favour of English. In recent times, I have been interested in observing the quantity and intensity of use of the English language by the New Pentecostal churches in their sermons and prayers in the assemblies, on television and on radio, and on crusade and retreat grounds with huge crowds of adherents and worshipers singing, praying and 'fellowshipping' in English all at the same time. I thought that the figure of 43 million second-language users of English was an underestimation by the time you have added all the 'born again' users.

Five domains of the use of English should be of particular concern to us. These are:

- (1) English in the educational system
- (2) English in governance
- (3) English in the media
- (4) English in business and industry
- (5) English in international engagements

You might say these five major domains also cover the entire range of the domains of the use of English in Nigeria; that we have been using English effectively in all of them; and so why the worry?

It is true that our English-medium educational system has produced Nigerians who have been able to put up world-class performance in all these domains of activities. Our secondary schools, colleges of education, polytechnics and universities were places of sound educational attainments up to the early seventies. Literacy in English was no barrier to educational achievements. Products of Nigerian secondary and tertiary institutions had no difficulties with English proficiency for academic purposes.

These products were the ones that have gone into the professions, into academics, into business and industry, into politics, into the newspaper industry, and so on. Nigerian academics are known all over the world. Most of them are in the USA, the UK, Saudi Arabia, and in universities in Southern Africa. The quality of the product of our educational institutions was hardly questionable.

The quality of our judicial system and legal practice was the best in Africa. Many of our older jurists were of world rating and had performed creditably in international engagements.

The press in Nigeria used to be a leader in Africa in terms of the level of literacy of our renowned journalists. Many of the old hands are still around. There are barons of the business and industrial sector who belong to the class of literate Nigerians who write and speak well. But theirs is an ageing or dying generation!

The situation today is different. Proficiency in English for the majority of those in our formal education system is very poor. Most students at the secondary school level cannot communicate intelligibly in English. Some of them find it difficult to learn in English. The alternative of using an indigenous language or the mother tongue is non-existent. A newspaper report (*The Guardian on Sunday* of October 18, 1998 page 23) on why pupils score low grades in English Language in the SSC Examinations record the following comment by a secondary school student:

While it is possible to cope with other subjects easily, English Language, despite its status as a second language, is made difficult to understand.

I don't need to be told that my spoken English is not good enough and this is affecting my reading and understanding of textbooks. At least, one requires a good understanding of the language not only to pass it as a subject but (sic) to have a good understanding of other subjects.

The percentage credit passes in the SSCE results of the West African Examinations Council has hardly exceeded the ten percent mark for the past ten years on the average.

Most students in our universities do not fare better. One only needs to read through a page of material that is original, that is, material that has not been 'lifted' from a book or journal to find so much illogicality or incoherence of ideas apart from numerous errors of grammar and word choice. The newspapers are full of errors of sentence structure and style usage especially in the news reports and features columns. Lawyers' briefs, written submissions and advocacy in the law courts leave much to be desired. It is poor standard of expression everywhere! Even official government documents are not free from such common errors and mistakes that should not occur in a society that is literate in English. For example, the copy of the *Main Report* of the Vision 2010 Committee has the caption of the opening page signed by the Chairman and a former Head of State as FORWARD instead of FOREWORD! Some of the minor errors in written texts are of course committed by our semi-literate typists who pose as typesetters and computer-literate school leavers who are not literate in English.

4.4.3 Question of Standards and what to do.

The issue of standardization in the varieties of English (or New Englishes) emerging from different parts of the English-speaking world is one that has concerned many linguistic scholars. In countries where English is a second language, the differences in the educational attainment of the citizens have been responsible for the differences in grammatical, vocabulary, and style usage of the emerging varieties of English. There is a need for standardization if the language is going to continue to be used in many formal domains. Some of my views on this score have been expressed in several publications (Akere, 1978, 1979, 1986, 1990b, 1995).

We are currently engaged in a collaborative research project with English language scholars in the Universities of Ibadan, Zaria, Kano, and Nsukka on the topic 'Survey of Nigerian English Usage' as part of the world-wide corpus based descriptions of the varieties of English used in different parts of the world. (Akere, 1997). When completed, the research will produce an up-to-date description of

the educated variety of English as used by Nigerians. The following comment in a recent publication: *The English Studies Book* by Rob Hope (1998: 228-229) is pertinent here :

America, India, the Caribbean and Australia now all boast 'standard' English. Each of these is to a greater or lesser degree distinct from what must now be specified as *British Standard English*'. The differences span the whole linguistic range from accents and spelling through vocabulary and grammar to contexts and communicative functions. For the most part these standards are mutually intelligible and this has huge potential advantages for certain kinds of international communication.

What I have advocated so far, therefore, is for us here in Nigeria to arrest the current down-turn in the standard of our English expression, improve the literacy level of English usage in the various domains of communicative activities so that we can maintain a sufficiently high level of intelligibility not only among ourselves but also with the international community of speakers/readers of English.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. English in the Educational System :

Since English plays a very critical role at all levels of the education delivery process, there is an urgent need to carry out a comprehensive review of the **English as a medium** and **English as a subject** provision at the primary and secondary school levels so that we can maximize the gains of the two strategies. The following specific issues should be tackled :

- Review the English curricula of both primary and secondary schools so as to put more emphasis on the acquisition of the basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.
- Undertake a programme of massive retraining of the teachers currently teaching English in the school system.
- Undertake an evaluation of the English texts currently being

used in the system and make recommendations as to which ones are adequate and which are not.

• English Language and Literature teaching at the university level should be made more functional. The rigid emphasis on 'Language' or 'Literature' should give way to more pragmatic programmes in **Literary, Cultural, Communication, and Media Studies**. Courses such as **Rhetoric, Composition and Writing** should also be introduced. The General Studies course called the **Use of English** should also be more thoroughly taught so that it can have a great deal of impact on the English skills of students.

2. **English in the Professions:**

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Apart from the Use of English course which most of our fresh graduates had during their undergraduate programmes, there is hardly any further professional English language and communication skills training for professionals such as lawyers and judicial officers, accountants, industrial relations personnel, medical practitioners. All these categories of professionals need language skills improvement courses to be organized for them periodically.

3. **English in Business and Industry :**

Different categories of operators, managers and chief executives of industries and business concerns need language and communication skills up-dating courses.

4. **English in the Media :**

The training of practitioners in both the electronic and the print media should include courses in media English (i.e. English for journalists, Newspaper English, Oral Communication Techniques and Pronunciation of English for broadcasters).

5. English for Civil Servants and Legislators :

These categories of people should be given adequate training in literacy activities and communication skills training such as the following :

- | | |
|----------------------|---------------------------|
| * Letter writing | * Presentations |
| * Report writing | * Project proposals |
| * Writing of Minutes | * Budget proposals |
| * Speech writing | * Drafting of resolutions |
| * Preparing briefs | * Drafting Communiqués |
| * Public speaking | * Drafting of treaties |

The task that I have undertaken here has been rather daunting for me. It has involved having to find convincing arguments for why some of us here are considered 'literate' while others are referred to obliquely as being 'illiterate'; why we have to keep learning English so that we can use it with confidence, correctness of grammar and appropriate choice of vocabulary, and above all with finesse and cadence in style. I don't know if I have argued my case to a logical conclusion to merit discharge and acquittal.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, since you are a lawyer, and the presiding judge in this case, you are the one with the appropriate legal and academic knowledge to make the distinction between a purely legal advocacy and a simple matter of linguistic argumentation, and therefore, rule in my favour.

For the rest of us, ladies and gentlemen, we shouldn't worry much about the intricacies of English grammar and what have you. We should just learn as much as would be necessary to make us appear 'educated', in other words 'literate' when we speak or write. We should take consolation in the fact that even native speakers complain about the illogicality of English, their own language.

The Americans are responsible for the rapid spread of the English language to many parts of the world in the latter part of this century. Yet it was one of them who once described English as a 'crazy language' about which he had the following to say (Richard Lederer, nd. extract from **Crazy English**):

English is the most widely used language in the history of our planet. One in every seven human beings can speak it. More than half of the world's books and three-quarters of international mails are in English. Of all languages, English has the largest vocabulary-perhaps as many as two million words - and one of the noblest bodies of literature. Nonetheless, let's face it : English is a crazy language. There is no **egg** in **eggplant**, neither **pine** nor **apple** in **pineapple**

and no **ham** in a **hamburger**. **English muffins** weren't invented in **England** or **French fries** in **France**. **Sweetmeats** are **candy**, while **sweetbreads**, which aren't **sweet**, are **meat**.

We take English for granted. But when we explore its paradoxes, we find that **quicksand** can **work slowly**, **boxing rings** are **square**, **public bathrooms** have no **baths** and a **guinea pig** is neither a **pig** nor from **Guinea**.

And why is it that a **writer writes**, but **fingers don't fing**, **grocers don't groce**, **humdingers don't hum** and **hammers don't ham**? If the plural of **tooth** is **teeth**, shouldn't the plural of **booth** be **beeth**? One **goose**, two **geese** - so one **moose**, two **meese**? One **index**, two **indices** - one **kleenex**, two **kleenices**?

Sometimes I wonder if all English speakers should be committed to an asylum for the verbally insane. In what other language do people **drive on a parkway** and **park in a driveway**? **Recite at a play** and **play at a recital**? **Ship by truck** and send **cargo by ship**? Have **noses that run** and **feet that smell**?

You have to marvel at the unique lunacy of a language in which your **house can burn up** as it **burns down**, in which you **fill in a form** by **filling it out** and in which your alarm clock **goes off by going on**.

English was invented by people, not computers, and it reflects the creativity of **human race** (which, of course, isn't really a **race** at all). That is why, when **stars are out** they are **visible**, but when the **lights are out** they are **invisible**.

And this is why, ladies and gentlemen, when I **wind up my watch** I **start** it, but when I **wind up this lecture** I **end** it.

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