Analysis of Elements of Africanism in the Nigerian Linguistic Landscape

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Abstract

This study attempts to assess how much of africanism is ingrained in the Nigerian linguistic landscape, specifically, in the language of commercial signs of shops in two of her major cities. It is premised on the multimodality approach that assumes communication and representation go beyond language. It focuses on analyzing and describing the full repertoire of meaning-making resources that people use (visual, spoken, gestural, written, three-dimensional, and others, depending on the domain of representation) in different contexts, and on developing means that show how these are organized to make meaning. Therefore, the Nigerian linguistic landscape is examined in this study to identify elements of africanism contained in the language of commercial signs of shops to determine the languages that have the indication of becoming locally relevant among the existing languages in Nigerian major cities. The influence of English on the African culture in Nigeria is also examined through the symbols and pictures presented in the selected commercial signs. Two major Nigerian cities, Lagos and Port-Harcourt are purposefully selected mainly because of their heterogeneous linguistic nature. The study is qualitative and explorative and since it examines symbols in commercial signs to ascertain elements of africanism in them, semiotic resources are employed in its analysis.

Keywords: Linguistic landscape, Africanism, Nigerian indigenous languages, Semiotics, Multimodality.

1.0 Introduction and Literature

1.1 Concept of Linguistic Landscape (LL)

Linguistic landscape as a new discipline in Sociolinguistics has always had its origin attributed to Landry and Bourhis (1997). They define it as the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration (Landry & Bourhis 1997: 23). Spolsky and Cooper (1991); Ben-Rafael, Shohamy, Amara, and Trumper-Hecht (2006) corroborating Landry and Bourhis are of the opinion that linguistic landscape is used in sociolinguistics to study how languages are visually used in multilingual societies to identify the most salient languages used in public signs and to indicate what languages are locally relevant, or give evidence of what languages are becoming locally relevant (Kasanga 2012). Bobda, (2007) conceptualizes linguistic landscape (LL) in two major ways. On one hand and in a general sense, he explains it as the setting/environment of language use or the presence and use of language(s) within a geographical area, that is, it "can be synonymous with or at least related to concepts such as linguistic market, linguistic mosaic, ecology of languages, diversity of languages or the linguistic situation."

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On the other hand, it means signs/linguistic objects visible in the public sphere (e.g. Ben Rafael et al., 2006; Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Gorter, 2006). But for Backhaus (2007) linguistic landscape means a myriad of written messages on public display in every urban environment such as office and shop signs, billboards and neon advertisements, traffic signs, topographic information and area maps, emergency guidance and political poster campaigns, stone inscriptions, and enigmatic graffiti discourse. This study however, identifies with Landry and Bourhis' definition as LL is used to study language of public signs in heterogeneous major cities in Nigeria: Lagos and Port- Harcourt.

Expectedly, public and commercial signs in multilingual societies should use more than one language in order to communicate with as many people as possible. For instance, in Quebec, multilingual signs and packaging are a matter of law, hence, signs must be written in both English and French (Bill 101, *Charte de la langue française*). Also, in the US, many states such as Texas consider public signs a legal matter; therefore, some warning signs about consuming alcohol or smoking while pregnant are required to be in English and Spanish.

Several studies with diverse foci in the Nigerian linguistic landscape such as meaning in the language of public signs (Adetunji, 2013), language policy (Shohamy, 2006; Spolsky, 2009; Ndimele, 2012); English in the Nigerian linguistic landscape Adetunji (2015), constitutional challenges of development in a multilingual country Adedimeji (2010) have been done. However, the current study has a divergent focus from the existing scope of studies as it attempts to assess how much of africanism is ingrained in the language and symbols of public and commercial signs found in heterogeneous Nigerian major cities: Lagos, and Port Harcourt. Sebba (2010) already admits that LL as a relatively new discipline has no specific orthodoxy or theoretical framework yet, hence the flexibility in the choice of areas of study. Beyond Nigeria, other African linguistic landscapes have been examined such as Ethiopia, Raga (2012); and South Africa, Abongdia & Foncha, (2014). LL study in other parts of the world includes Thailand, Singhasiri (2013); etc.

1.2 Language of Linguistic Landscape

The choice of language by a sign writer "connotatively expresses either an 'indexical' or a 'symbolic' meaning (Scollon and Scollon, 2003). In other words, the type of language selected for public signs can either manifest the environment or community within which the sign is being used or it can signify something about the product or business which may however have nothing to do with the place in which it is located (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 119). Linguistic landscape can be described as containing three main components, the sign, the sign-producer (author, writer), and the sign-consumer (reader, addressee). The sign-producer and the sign-consumer are the human participants who process the (non-human) sign. This suggests that while the sign-producer makes meaning with the sign and expects the sign-consumers to understand the meaning, the sign-consumer readily expects that the sign making and meaning be predicated upon his/her prior knowledge (Collins & Slembrouck 2007) or real-world knowledge (Kallen 2009: 274). This assumption on the part of the sign consumer is significant because it would be the major basis for his/her interpreting the sign in line with the sign-producer's intentions. The explanation given here suggests that the language of the LL must be the language of the people such signs are meant for. In other words, communication between the sign writer and the sign receiver can effectively take place when a mutually intelligible language is used to write the public/commercial signs.

1.3 Linguistic Situation in Nigeria

Nigeria's linguistic diversity is a microcosm of Africa as it showcases as many as 520 living languages. Of the living languages, 510 are indigenous and 10 are non-indigenous (Blench 2003, Blench, 1992, Blench 2011, Campbell and King 2011). But, her active major languages are Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Ibibio, Edo, Fulfulde, and Kanuri. Hausa as one of the most spoken Nigerian languages by 18.5 million native speakers are found in Sokoto, Kaduna, Katsina, Kano, Bauchi, Jigawa, Zamfara, Kebbi, and Gombe States. It is also the second language of about 15 million more people in Nigeria making it the most spoken language in sub-Saharan Africa (Ethnologue, 2015). In Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States, Igbo is the principal language spoken by about 24 million people. Igbo is also spoken in some parts of Akwa Ibom (Ika LGA), Delta (Oshimili, Aniocha, and Ndokwa LGAs) and Rivers States (Ikwerre, Bonny, and Ahoada LGAs) (Blench, 2016). Yoruba is the native tongue of the Yoruba people and is spoken by approximately 18.9 million people concentrated in Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Kwara, and Lagos states and parts of Kogi State.

In addition, about 2 million people speak Yoruba as a second language. Yoruba has over fifteen dialects including Awori, Ijesha, Ilaje and Ila (Ethnologue, 2015).

Another thriving language in Nigeria is the Nigerian Pidgin English which is a blend of English and ethnic Nigerian languages spoken operating as a kind of lingua franca across Nigeria. Although, it is a second language for at least 75 million Nigerians, it is the native language of 3 to 5 million people mainly concentrated in the Niger Delta region (Ethnologue 16th ed., 2009). On the whole, the unifying language in Nigeria for a long time has been the English language (Adebileje, 2002). It is the language of commerce, education, politics, technology and religion. Some scholars are of the opinion that while English has come to stay in Nigeria, it constitutes a great threat to the development of our numerous indigenous languages (Fishman, 1997; Wurm, 1998; Woodbury, 2012).

1.4 Language of Africanism

According to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, africanism is a characteristically African cultural feature, such as a belief or custom. It is a linguistic feature of an African language occurring in a non-African language. Nigeria, as a former British colony has the English language bequeathed to her by the colonial masters. Hence, English as the lingua franca in Nigeria has undoubtedly wielded strong influence on her languages and cultures. Scholars have argued that European colonization in Africa generally has led to the elimination of various cultures, worldviews, and epistemologies to the extent that Africa might be the most adversely affected by imperialism (Monga, 1996; wa Thiongo, 1986). In other words, colonialism was instrumental in the devaluation of endogenous African languages. Nevertheless, as language reflects culture in any society, it is expedient that communication is revalidated and reproduced to portray the African culture.

This is to say that communication is germane to language (Nyamnjoh, F.B. & K. Shoro (nd). Therefore, a fundamental pan-Africanism objective is to seek ways of revalidating African languages, seeking lingua franca from the creative domestication and blending of colonial languages with endogenous African languages, and simply using the colonial languages in purely African ways. Amos Tutuola skilfully employed this in the Palm Wine Drinkard and his other novels (Nyamnjoh, F.B. & K. Shoro (nd). Although, Amos Tutuola's use of language may not be a perfect model of language of africanism, it is important that we allow language, as a means of communication to reinforce the culture embedded within it so that as a carrier of culture, it sustains the ability of people to communicate and reproduce themselves in dignity (Ngugi1986:13-14). In essence, language is intrinsically connected to a people's culture, history, ability to relate, and in summary, a people's identity (Akinwunmi 1992; Ngugi 1986, 1997, 2005; Anyidoho 1989; Mazrui 2005:64; Okolo 2007).

Lustig (2013) explains that cultural identities are central, dynamic, and multifaceted components of one's self concept and they exist within a changing social context. Consequently, language is regarded as an important factor in culture identity since communication that comes with sharing a language promotes connections and roots to ancestors and cultural histories. This implies among other things that our languages must be preserved in order to leave a legacy or cultural heritage for generations unborn.

Cultural heritage is the legacy of physical artefacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations. Cultural heritage includes tangible culture (such as buildings, monuments, landscapes, books, works of art, and artefacts), intangible culture (such as folklore, traditions, language, and knowledge), and natural heritage (including culturally significant landscapes, and biodiversity).

1.5 Semiotic Resources

Semiotic resource can be described as the term used in social semiotics and other disciplines to refer to a way of meaning making. Van Leeuwen (2004) describes semiotic resource as "the actions, materials and artefacts people use for communicative purposes, whether produced physiologically – for example, with our vocal apparatus, the muscles we use to make facial expressions and gestures – or technologically – for example, with pen and ink, or computer hardware and software – together with the ways in which these resources can be organized". The inference drawn from this definition establishes connections between form and meaning, which in turn highlights Bakhtin's notion of intersexuality.

Hence, connections such as genres, modes and media can be recognized at all levels of social and cultural groups. In explaining semiotic resource further, Semiotic resources are constantly altered by sign makers (people) who shape and combine semiotic resources to reflect their various interests (Kress, 2010). Semiotic resource is one of the four core concepts of multimodal research. Multimodality as an inter-disciplinary approach views communication and representation from a larger perspective that goes beyond language. The theoretical assumptions of multimodality are explained in three dimensions.

The first theoretical dimension is the assumption that representation and communication always draw on a multiplicity of modes, with the aim of adding to meaning. It pays attention to analyzing and describing the full collection of meaning-making resources that people use (spoken, visual, written, gestural three-dimensional, and others, depending on the domain of representation) in different contexts, and to the development of the means that show how these are organized to make meaning.

The second assumption of multimodality is that over a period of time, resources are socially shaped to become meaning making resources. These meanings, social, individual or affective are further articulated according to the requirements of the social groups or communities in the environment. These organized sets of semiotic resources for making meaning are referred to as modes which realize communicative work in distinct ways – making the choice of mode a central aspect of interaction and meaning (Bezemer, 2014). When a set of resources continues to be used for a long time in a community, it becomes more articulated and if these resources are commonly understood and organized to have same meanings by a community, then they become a mode within such community.

The third multimodal assumption is that people orchestrate meaning through their selection and configuration of modes, foregrounding the significance of the interaction between modes (Bezemer, 2014). Thus, all communicational acts are shaped by the norms and rules operating at the moment of sign making, and influenced by the motivations and interests of people in a specific social context (Bezemer, 2014). Hence, the study focuses on examining commercial signs as they affect the public based on the intention of the posters and whether or not the commercial signs reflect the language and culture or social background of the concerned public.

2.0 Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative and explorative approach to gather data. Since it examines the language and symbols in commercial signs to ascertain how much of africanism is ingrained in them, it also employs semiotic resources in its analysis.

Data Collection

Since linguistic landscape analysis relies on photography and visual analysis, pictures of randomly selected commercial signs are taken in commercial public places in Lagos and Port-Harcourt. About 100 pictures of every visible sign are collected.

Data Analysis

Data collected are analysed based on the following classifications:

(i)   language used from the multimodal approach (i.e. monolingual/bilingual/multilingual)
(ii) identification of symbols depicting africanism from the semiotic perspective
(iii) language functions in commercial sign
(iv) location of commercial signs

3.0 Findings

Table 1: Commercial signs in Lagos

Picture 1

Picture 2

Picture 3

Picture 4

Picture 5

Picture 6

Picture 7

Picture 8

Table 2: Commercial Signs in Port-Harcourt
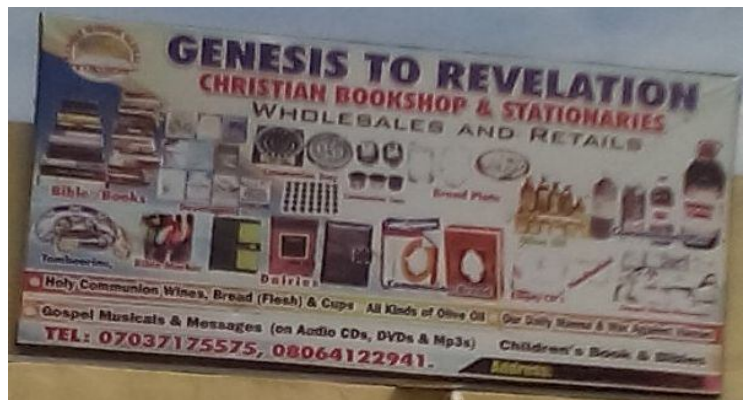

Picture 1

Picture 2

Picture 3

Picture 4

Picture 5

Picture 6

Picture 7

Picture 8

(i) Language use

In Table 1, analyses reveal that commercial signs that are randomly shot around Shoprite complex in Ikeja, Lagos have only English (monolingual) as the language used as portrayed in pictures 1-8. No other indigenous language(s) are used on the signs despite the fact that Yoruba and Pidgin English are the predominant languages in this area of Lagos. All the names portrayed are Europeanized. Picture 8 however has the text messaging style to its language use where 'D' is substituted for 'The'. Also, figures are used along with letters in the language of pictures 6 and 9 to depict time. Analyses in Table 2 reveal that commercial signs that are randomly shot around Airport Road, Port-Harcourt have only monolingual (English) as the language used as depicted in pictures 1-8. However, a little bit of French is seen in Picture 3 and in Picture 8, letter D also replaces determiner 'the'. It is also observed that commercial signs in this location carry indigenous names which incidentally have been Europeanized e.g. Picture 1, 3, 6, 7, and 8. The style of using names in commercial signs writing is also found in all the pictures in Table 1 except in Picture 8. The use of numbers in all the pictures in Table 2 is predominantly for giving contact information for the purpose of further communication between the sign writer and the sign consumer. All the pictures except Picture 6 are saturated with different symbols to advertise the products being sold. This method could be doing what indigenous languages would have done for non English speakers. Findings from the language used here suggest the impossibility of using indigenous languages for commercial signs of shops.

(ii) Identification of symbols depicting africanism

All the symbols depicted in Table 1 are products being advertised except for picture 8 that shows instruction/information. Picture 4 has the image of an old white chef as the symbol of KFC. Picture 7 contains the picture of a beautiful white lady. In essence there is no symbol depicting africanism as conceptualised in this study.

All the symbols illustrated in Table 2 are products being advertised except Picture 6 that gives information on the type of service being rendered. Symbols tally with the written headlines in all Pictures 1 to 8 except Picture 6. Furthermore, Pictures 2, 3, 4 and 8 contain Europeanised objects. There is also no Africanised symbol in any of the pictures.

(iii) Language functions

In all the signs in Table 1, language functions can be grouped into four major types: arousing curiosity e.g. Picture 1 and 5; giving instructions e.g. pictures 4, 6 and 8; giving information e.g. pictures 2, 3, 7 and 8; advertising e.g. all pictures but 8. In Table 2, the language and figures used in all the pictures function only as advertising and giving information about the owner of the business and what the business is all about. For instance, information on names of owners, objects being sold, whole sales or retail, phone numbers etc is given through the language used.

(iv) Location of public/commercial signs

Pictures 2 and 3 in Table 1 are located on the streets, held high on big fluorescent-like posters while picture 4 is a small cute banner with silver frames placed on the walk way in the shopping complex. However, pictures 1, 5, 6 and 7 are plastered on top or windows of the shops and picture 8 is hand-written on a wall. Although location varies, almost all the signs have the same shape except for pictures 2 and 8. The innovation in picture 2 should be noted where five different public signs are compressed into just one. Table 2 has its pictures 1 to 8 on big, wide posters hung high on or plastered to the wall on top of the shops. None is hand-written.

4.0 Discussion

In both cities, Lagos and Port-Harcourt, findings reveal that indigenous languages are not popular and none is used as the language of public/commercial signs for shops. Conversely, in the real sense of it, people do not speak as much English as it is being projected by the language of public/commercial signs especially in a public place such as the Ikeja area of Lagos where data were collected. This negates Scollon and Scollon (2003) opinion that the type of language selected for public signs can either manifest the environment or community within which the sign is being used. The predominant languages in the area of study in Lagos are Yoruba and Pidgin English. Also, the languages used in the Airport road, Port-Harcourt are different dialects of Igbo and Pidgin English which are not the language of the public/commercial signs.

The use of English as the language of commercial signs could be as a result of the heterogeneous nature of the cities where the question of which indigenous language should be used is never answered. But, this leads to another question. Does everybody in the two cities read and speak English? Certainly, no! Hence, the heavy use of symbols to depict objects being sold especially, in the pictures found in Port-Harcourt. So, if one cannot read, pictures of objects on public signs will give the information needed. However, the fact that Lagos public signs are not as heavily laden with symbols depicts a higher literacy level of people in this area of Lagos. Apart from this, the quality of the design and make-up of commercial signs of shops in Lagos shows high cosmopolitan level of the city and how fast it is being westernized.

The elements of africanism being sought in this study are African indigenous languages, names, native dresses, hair dos, and such things that will reflect our culture. Results show that none of these was found on commercial signs of shops in both cities. This confirms Monga (1996) and wa Thiongo (1986)'s observations that European colonization in Africa generally has led to the elimination of various cultures, worldviews, and epistemologies. A few public signs in Port-Harcourt that have names do not show indigenous names per se. The names are foreign and some indigenous names are coined to sound foreign. Such an act, especially in commercial centres of the two cities depicts people's world view and disposition to their cultural beliefs. Nevertheless, in some other areas of our culture, people still exhibit strong belief, though still modernized, for instance, Igbo and Yoruba marriage and burial ceremonies. However, in some other areas, where the use of language is involved such as the focus of this study, people prefer to be Europeanised using English by all means. It is a complex social situation.

Hence, semiotic resources used in the two mega cities of Lagos and Port Harcourt are foreign to the communities as far as their cultural beliefs are concerned. It is even interesting to discover that those who do not communicate in English tend to understand the English signs and symbols on the sign posts or it may be that people who make the sign posts assume they understand.

Functions of the language of commercial signs of shops in Port-Harcourt are for advertising and giving information, whereas in Lagos, language functions include arousal of interest, invitation and instructions. One can infer that people in Port-Harcourt are shrewd business people with strict business interest whose process of reaching out to customers (commercial signs) is devoid of any aesthetic features. On the other hand, Lagos people can be described as people who love creating effect, what is referred to as 'effizy' in social jargon, they are glamorous people and it reflects in the construction of their commercial signs.

Locations of commercial signs of shops in the two cities also corroborate the researcher's opinion of the sightly disposition of Lagos people. While almost all the pictures in Port-Harcourt are located on the wall, only one is written on a wall in Lagos (Bobda, 2007).

5.0 Conclusion

Blommaert & Maly (2014) are of the view that the most immediately sensitive indicator of social change is language and that while language sums up specific values and beliefs of a people, it is also used as an effective tool for shaping and describing people's perceptions and interpretations of their world view. In the light of this, results from the study tend to authenticate the view of some scholars that European colonization in Africa generally has led to the elimination of various cultures, worldviews, and epistemologies to the extent that Africa might be the most adversely affected by imperialism (Monga, 1996; wa Thiongo, 1986). In addition, English as the lingua franca in Nigeria has undoubtedly wielded strong influence on her languages and cultures.

The only way to truly preserve African cultures is by preserving the languages in which they exist and grow. To preserve our heritage and restore pride in our cultures, our languages must be used at local levels and, more specifically, we must use languages recognisable in our communities to prevent language death (Ngugi1986). It should be noted that the role specific cultural systems play in shaping peoples' world view cannot be shoved away.

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