

Chapter 12

Leaving Out No One: Multilingualism and Inclusiveness in Public Health Awareness Campaign Messages in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic altered human activities in several ways. It affected how people communicate and use language. Nigeria, with over 500 languages and just one official language, exploited multilingual resources to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter examines multilingualism and linguistic diversity in the discourse of COVID-19 public health awareness campaign messages in Nigeria. Thirty COVID-19 campaign messages in form of posters, audio jingles, videos, brochures, and sociolinguistic field interviews (30 unstructured one-on-one interviews) with some selected members of rural communities were analyzed. The study found that indigenous languages, multimodality, and translations were utilized as mass mobilization tools to promote inclusion. The study concludes that multilingualism and multimodality deliver COVID-19 sensitization messages effectively, increase access, and promote inclusiveness. It further suggests the localization of public health crisis in line with the sociolinguistic dynamics in multilingual settings.

INTRODUCTION

Language is an important tool in any human society, and it constitutes an integral part of human existence. In its various forms and manners, it is the tool for conducting human affairs in all contexts of the society. It is through language that humans communicate and manage personal and societal aspirations. These crucial roles that language plays in the socio-political, education, economy, health, and the overall development of nations have been stressed by several African scholars (Adegbija, 1994; Alamu & Iloene, 2003; Djite, 2008; Adedimeji, 2010). Thus, the choice of language for pursuing all human developmental goals and aspirations in multilingual contexts usually leads to serious debates as a result

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of the multilingual profiles of these countries. Also important is the desire for equity, quest for inclusiveness, and the need to observe the linguistics rights of citizens. This becomes crucial, particularly in the midst of a global pandemic. The outbreak of COVID-19 in late 2019 took the whole world by surprise and the virus has been described as one of the greatest challenges of the human race in the 21st Century. With the outbreak of COVID-19, the world has continued to modify how people live and conduct their affairs. Nigeria, the most populous African country with a population of 210, 852, 900 (*World Population Review*, 2022), did not have enough medical facilities that could be deployed to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, emphasis was placed on mass awareness and sensitization about the virus and how people could avoid being infected. Invariably, language becomes the main weapon for mobilization on the different media platforms.

Not only is Nigeria a multilingual country; it is one of the countries of the world with very complex linguistic diversity. Nigeria is one of the three countries in the world with more than 500 languages within their borders. Nigeria (with 517 languages) comes after Papua New Guinea (840 languages) and Indonesia (711 languages) to emerge as the third most linguistically diverse country in the world (*Ethnologue*, 2019). However, in spite of this huge linguistic complexity, as reflected in the presence of hundreds of languages, there are millions of indigenous people with little or no formal education, and consequently not proficient in the official language (English), and who do not speak any of the “major languages” (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba). Further, no other language, including the most widely used Nigerian Pidgin (henceforth NP) is accorded official status. Apart from the official language (English), mostly spoken by educated people and less commonly used by people with no formal education, there are hundreds of languages spoken by the people and dominant in different regions of the country. Prominent among these indigenous languages are Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. These three languages are often described in the literature as “major languages” probably because of the regional presence they each seems to have in different parts of the country or their numerical strength and dominance in the three major segments of the country, even though none of them can boast of actual national spread. Other indigenous languages apart from these three “major languages” widely used by Nigerians in various locations of the country abound. Without any basis for their mention other than for just this academic purpose of illustration, some of these languages include Fulfulde, Isoko, Edo, Efik, Ibibio, Idoma, Kanuri, Ikwerre, Tiv, Kalabari, etc.

Furthermore, the list of languages and the discourse of multilingualism and linguistic diversity in Nigeria cannot be completed without talking about the Nigerian Pidgin (NP), a language that many scholars (Egbokhare, 2021; Faraclas, 2008; 2021; Akande & Okesola, 2021) have described as the “real” lingua franca of the country because of the roles it plays in inter-ethnic interaction across and among various distinct groups in the Nigerian sociolinguistic space. NP is a hybrid language that combines English and indigenous languages of the people of Nigeria. It is the most prominent language in Nigeria in terms of numerical strength, accessibility, and spread across all social classes in the country. Even when some educated people do not want to use NP due to issues of prestige and attitudes, they understand and can decode messages in it and respond accordingly. It is for these reasons that many people believe that it is the lingua franca in spite of the lack of recognition or assignment of roles to the language. Although, with no functions assigned to it or any official recognition, NP does not carry the limitations that other languages in Nigeria carry, in that, it accommodates speakers across social and geographical boundaries. For instance, English, the official language, is limited to mostly people with at least some level of formal education, and consequently comes with a social demand on speakers. The three “major languages” (Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba) also have geographical limitations, in that they are all dominant in specific regions and largely confined in use to these different regions of the country with no national spread.

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