

AN EVALUATION OF THE ROLE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN THE FIGHT AGAINST COVID-19 IN A MULTILINGUAL NATION: A CASE STUDY OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Like all other outbreak of pandemics in the history of the world, one of the challenges posed by Corona Virus otherwise known as COVID-19 is that it is very strange to the medical world, with little or no available record for it. In combatting it, especially as precautionary moves, governments of many nations had to embark on sensitization of their citizens using language. However, in Nigeria's context there is a challenge arising from the fact that Nigeria has about 450 languages used distinctly by those that have the languages as their mother tongues. In view of this reality, this study focuses on the role of English language in combating COVID-19 in Nigeria, which is a multiethnic and multilingual country. It aims at evaluating how English broke through the linguistic barrier that would have ordinarily been posed by litany of tens of hundreds of ethnically based languages scattered all over the nation. The work adopted qualitative methods as secondary data were reviewed to form opinion. Hence, the study identifies several important issues regarding the positive influence of English in fighting COVID-19 in Nigeria multiethnic context. The findings are expected to be a useful tool for policy makers in Nigeria and other multilingual countries in forming opinion on why English should be the lingua franca in multi-ethnic nations.

KEYWORDS: *English Language, Role, COVID-19, Multilingual, Nigeria*

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INTRODUCTION

The global outbreak of Corona Virus disease (COVID-19) in around March, 2020 brought about an abrupt halt to all global activities and institutions; daily life and activities of almost all humans on the world map changed from the known normal to an inexplicable extraordinary one. At about mid-March 2020, the outbreak was at its peak in countries like South Korea, Japan, China, Italy, Iran among others, with high rate of spiral contagion and human casualties. It became more worrisome when nations that experienced initial lull from this pandemic later faced the devastating effects thereof (Finset, et al.). As a result of this pandemic, many nations shut down all their interactions with other nations. Thus, international relations was hitched for the months the rage of the pandemic lasted. And while it appears that some nations and/or people are not affected directly by the virus, its perturbing effects on the international policies of affected nations impinged on the economy of the unaffected nations.

As the COVID-19 pandemic raged hydra-headedly in its reigning days, by mid and towards the end of the month of March (2020), many nations of the world had taken measures as to curtail the spiral, contagious spread of the disease;

such as, closure of all institutions of learning across all levels; malls, shops, restaurants, churches, mosques, and companies were shut down, while workers from many offices with the technological means were told to work from home, and some infected persons have to be quarantined (Finset, et al. n. pag.). The situation peaked at seaports, airports and land borders were shut and international transportation halted. Worse still interstate and intercity movements were restricted. All these were measures geared towards stemming the spread of the disease to the larger (global) population.

As COVID-19 snowballed into a pandemic, governments across the world were forced to provide honest, clear, concise as well as valid educative information to their citizenry in order to combat the scourge especially so as the virus is novel to the present generation. To this end, Lancet asserts that adequate and accurate information dissemination among the global populace will be the most potent way to fight the scourge, especially as a preventive measure against the panic that attends the diseases (n. pag.). This places a great responsibility on medics, political, traditional and religious leaders as to provide adequate as well as accurate informative/educative contents that will enlighten their subjects/followers.

In view of the educative role of information dissemination with regards to health education, Finset et al. further assert that “Health communication is a key and necessity in saving lives during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Hence, accurate and well-developed health communication can facilitate how societies handle uncertainty and fear, promotes and accomplishes adherence to necessary behavioural change...” (n. pag.). It does not stop there, effective communication is not only a product of language but it is also totally dependent on language as the conduit by which it must be passed to the public. With Nigeria in context, Nigeria is a nation with diverse ethnicities and indigenous languages. Thus, if any citizen would resolve to communicate in his/her own language with another person from a distinct ethno-linguistic background that will portend some hitch of understanding. Given any context, particularly a multilingual one, to educate and enlighten the people, it is expected that “Messages should be coded in a common language which is not private but one acceptable and known to both the sender and the receiver” (Onuh and Uwadiogwu 63). This will be particularly necessary where the sender and the receiver are not of the same ethno-linguistic background. Thus, Hybels and Weaver assert that to achieve effective communication both speaker and listener must share a commonly accepted language (93).

Nigeria government was faced with a challenge beyond the ordinary routine as the force of the virus and pandemic milled into the country in the middle of March 2020. The government was tasked with the need to confront the pandemic headlong. Measures were therefore put in place among which is educating the people using language, viz English.

Thus, this paper seeks to evaluate the role(s) of English language in combatting corona virus in Nigeria’s multi-linguistic context. It is concerned with unravelling how English broke through the linguistic barrier that would have ordinarily been posed by tens of hundreds of ethnically restricted languages scattered all over the nation to educate citizens on the dangers associated with the COVID-19. Further still, it seeks to contend that in spite of being tagged an inheritance from imperialism and colonization, English language in Nigeria is distinguished for its unifying and communicative functions. Hence it provides information that in (multilingual) Nigeria, the presence, influence and relevance of English language break such brick walls created by litany of competing indigenous ethnic based languages in fighting COVID-19 through sensitization. In achieving this, the researcher adopted a qualitative research, reviewing majorly works that are related to the conceptual issues of this topic.

MULTILINGUALISM

According to Abel et al, “Language is a symbol or sign of human existence in any situation hence the inevitability of contacts within and outside the system. The concept makes self-expression possible so as to be able to communicate effectively” (2). Danladi asserts that, “Long before the postmodernist, the value of language began, the primacy of language in human history has never been in doubt” (n. pag). On a general scale, language is a major aspect of the people’s culture.

There are various linguistic contexts or societies all over the world. We have mono-linguistic, bi-linguistic and multi-linguistic societies. In this paper, attention shall be focused on multilingualism since that is one of the prominent concepts of this work. Multilingualism, according to Adedimeji, “Multilingualism is a sociolinguistic phenomenon that arises as a result of language contact. It is a situation in which two (i.e. bilingualism, specifically) or more languages operate within the same context (qtd in Mohammed, n. pag).” Adedimeji posits that multilingualism is brought about by such factors as “political annexation, marital relation, economic transaction, cultural association, educational acquisition and religious affiliation (qtd in Mohammed, n. pag).”

Eka avers that multilingualism is “a sociolinguistic phenomenon that arises as a result of language contact.” It occurs where two or more languages are used interchangeably within a given geographical entity (21). And when Nigeria is taken to context in the choice of official language, the best option made is to have adopted English as its official language. This is because it readily cuts through linguistic and cultural boundaries. On the import of its wider acceptability, Brumfit opines that “...English language does no longer belong exclusively to those that speak it as mother tongue or first language; but rather, its ownership now rests with the people that use it; no matter their being multilingual or monolingual” (qtd in Onuh, and Uwadiogwu 67). It is now the mother tongue of those nations that use it for all its official and essential purposes (Baugh, 61). This, no doubt, is the positional role of English language in Nigeria and all other multilingual societies.

According to Igbokwe (cited in Onuh and Uwadiogwu 66) communication in a multilingual setting or society is the process of transferring information in form of ideas, intentions, feelings, expectations, attitudes, perceptions and or commands through means as gestures, speeches, signs, writings, symbols, and all other forms of expression. It has to do with how messages are encoded and sent; received, decoded and interpreted into a concise and meaningful information. Thus, it is a transaction of ideas and meanings between major actors – sender and receiver – particularly as to generate meaning and response. Therefore, effective communication is a product of three meaningful processes “thought development, encoding and decoding” (Hybels and Weaver 93). That is idea, thought, concept, feeling must emerge from the source; this has to be developed into a meaningful message, designed to a given mode, verbal or non-verbal, sent, received and be decoded by the target audience, then translated or interpreted into a meaningful message as to be acted on.

Given any context, mode of communication could be oral (verbal), written or signs/symbols. It is basically concerned with how meaning is ascribed to message towards achieving a common understanding as the sender expected of the receiver. It is pertinent to state that communication can be adjudged effective if there is a common language by which a sender encode his message and the receiver easily decode and assign meaning to the information received same, devoid of noise and ambiguity. Thus, the most pivotal concept to communication especially towards educating people in a multilingual context is a common language that both the sender and receiver could readily operate on.

ETHNO-LINGUISTIC REALITIES OF NIGERIA

According to Onuh and Uwadiogwu “The multi-ethnic/multilingual nature of Nigeria predisposes it to some far reaching implications such as ethnic rivalry, suspicion, distrust, lack of patriotism and most recently; insurgency” (63). No one would agree less with this position. Even beyond these challenges as highlighted by Onuh and Uwadiogwu, Nigerian is also fraught with the challenge of agreeing on one particular language among the litany of her indigenous languages which are practically ethno-categorized. Thus, “To ensure that intended ideas are effectively communicated in a multilingual Nigeria, a common, acceptable and national language should be used” (63).

On the premise of Isayev argument, “language is a nation’s most obvious and most important attribute. There is no such thing as a Nation without a common linguistic basis” (12) so it is for Nigeria. Thus, Nigeria is a stereotyped example of multilingual as a result of its litany of ethnicities. Nigeria being a multi ethno linguistic nation, as ever before, is bedeviled with the problem of national language question. Therefore it is prone to the dominant challenge of interaction across ethno linguistic divides using any of her own languages. In view of this, Hybels and Weaver intone further that effective communication can only be achieved if the result is that of both intentional and unintentional information are well shared and interpreted among diverse entities with the resultant actions. And to put this challenge to bar, the nation needs to adopt a particular national language.

As a multilingual nation, Nigeria consists of different ethnicities, races and diverse languages. The United Nations data puts her current population at 206,139,589 people, on a land mass stretching over 910,770 sq. Km (Trading Economy). It is located on the western flank of Africa by the Bight of Benin, It is unique for its diverse hundreds of indigenous languages spoken. Major among these languages are Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Edo, Ibibio and Tiv. Its administrative capital is located at Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory as created by decree promulgated in 1976; a shift from its former capital Lagos (Udo n. pag.). On nations it is in contiguous relationship with, Udo further asserts that “Nigeria is bordered to the north by Niger, to the east by Chad and Cameroon, to the south by the Gulf of Guinea of the Atlantic Ocean, and to the west by Benin. Nigeria is not only large in area – larger than the U.S. state of Texas – but also Africa’s most populous country” (n.pag.). Until the year 1914, Nigeria was a conglomerate of splintered ethno-political nations with each ethnic nationality operating with its distinct language.

As a result of the multilingual configuration of Nigeria, any attempt to foist any of its indigenous languages, even among the three major contending language – Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo on the entire nation, as lingua franca will definitely create some ethno-political tension. Therefore, English has been serving as the major lingua franca in Nigeria. British colonialists were the midwives of the amalgamation squarely placed English on the people of Nigeria as its official language. Thus, making English the linguistic fulcrum that binds the different fragmented linguistic enclaves to a rallying point. This unifying role of English language becomes necessary in the face of the daunting challenges posed by over 450 indigenous languages, as further exacerbated by the number of their speakers spread across a wide geographical expanse (Danladi n. pag.).

According to Isayev (as quoted in Mohammed n. pag), “language is a nation’s most obvious and most important attribute. There is no such thing as a nation without a common linguistic basis.” Therefore, with Nigeria in context, Adedimeji asserts that:

One of the dominant and pervasive problems in Nigeria, and in Africa at large, is the language question. Language, being a potent vehicle of transmitting cultures, values, norms and beliefs from generation to generation, remains a central factor in determining the status or nature of any nation. ...for national integration, cohesion and development, there must be a language acceptable to all in running a nation's affairs.

Still on the number of ethnic languages in Nigeria, Bamgbose suggests that Nigeria has about 400 indigenous languages almost operating along the path of distinct ethnicity, the context within which they are spoken and understood (n. pag.). And according to Akindele & Adegbite there are over 250 ethnic nationalities in Nigeria (70). This restriction posed by ethnic based languages allows for unfettered acceptance of English language as the principal language of national discourse. The exaltation of English above the indigenous languages suggests that communication is best achieved among diverse linguistic backgrounds through the use of English. It infers that, except if the major actors are bilingual by which they can interact using any of the indigenous languages, for communication to occur between (two) persons of different linguistic origins then English should be used.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

Concluding on the relevant roles English plays on the global plane, Abel et al, argue that "English language has attained a dominant status in Nigeria in spite of the country's multilingual context" (1). To reinforce this assertion, Cholakovavers that:

Nowadays, English is the most spoken language in the world, not only as a first or as a second language, but also as a foreign language. People use English mainly to communicate with other people...to send and receive messages that will be understood by both speakers and receivers. Hence, English has a special status and role that is globally accepted ... (35).

Similarly with its undisputed role as the lingua franca for those whom it is not their mother tongue, Seidlhofer avers that "communication in English between speakers with different first language" (339). It is a communication means for such people "who do not share a mother tongue and yet, given the globalized society in which we now live, have the need to interact" (Swann and Seargeant 9). Hill adds that English as lingua franca "...is a third language used as a communicative bridge between those who do not share a common first language."

The use of English has also been observed to reduce ethnocentric related fears for it is a bridging language where there are cases of languages contending for the place of national language or lingua franca; it helps to avoid a case of linguistic conflict as well as enabling easy communication (Cholakova, p. 35). This is rightly so as Nigeria has about 450 ethnic languages and an ascendancy of one of the languages among all others would create a sort of ethnic tension.

When people from different races, cultures, ethnicities and languages meet they need to interact using a language that they may be understood. Thus, in the Nigeria's context where there are various people from different linguistic backgrounds, with increasing need to communicate among themselves and that they may be understood as well, is one of the major factor that promotes English as the lingua franca.

Although its relevance may be measured negatively as it is often prone to a form of a clout of elitism and marker of "been been-tos" among the elite particularly those that have travelled America and Europe for one reason or another, yet English has been prominent as creative language. It has become prominent in both technical and non-technical writings. For ages, English is being used in "bill-boards and announcements in electronic and print media" (Mohammed n. pag.).

Aside of the fact that it is used for factual and fictional writings, it is also used for political writings and enlightenment campaigns in Nigeria.

Some school of thought in Nigeria so believed that English has negative effects on Nigeria's corporate image. In support of this, Achebe intones that "It was humiliating to have to speak to one's Countryman in a foreign language, especially, In the presence of the proud owners of that Language. They would naturally assume that, one had no language of one's own" (214). To them, English is an agent of neocolonialism and imperialism in Nigeria. For they believe that after Nigerian independence, there is no need to have allowed English to continue to serve as its language of national discourse. In view of this, Ogunwale posits that:

....the use of English ...represents our colonial master's symbol. It portends that we still remain within the bounds of their shackles and still linguistically and culturally tied to the apron string of colonialism. No wonder why the so called elites are neither typical Nigerian nor British in the directions of their language attitudes and orientations. As a matter of fact, when they communicate, they intersperse every sentence in native language with English (n. pag.).

This position notwithstanding, in the Nigerian multilingual setting, English has performed many functions; its positive roles far outweighs any negative roles anyone can ascribe to its existence and roles in Nigeria. While stretching on the role of English language, Bamgbose says it is one of the major heritage the British left behind in Nigeria after granting her independence. He intones further by saying it is the language of "government, business and commerce, education, the mass media, literature and much more internal as well as external communications" (n. pag.).

The shades of seeming demerits notwithstanding, in Nigeria, English language has continued to play certain prominent roles. So far, it has remain the language of education through the propagation and exchange of knowledge has been made possible in Nigeria. It is by default the official language of Nigerian government, as almost all government official transactions rest on English language. Official briefs, minutes, correspondences, circulars, memoranda, are written out in English language. Commercial activities are also favoured by the use of English. Since our linguistic reality consists of diverse languages, thus business, trades and all commercial activities are ran on the oars of English language commonly and majorly assisted by Pidgin English where necessary. In another level, English in Nigerian multilingual context has been the language of international communication. Nigeria's dealing with other nations have been hinged on English, only to be interpreted where necessary. International businesses and transactions beyond Nigeria's geographical territory is best carried out not in any of Nigerian languages, hence the most favoured language is English. More importantly, in Nigeria, English has been the language of the frontline media. It is the most extensively used language as far as media, print or electronic, is concerned. English in Nigeria also found a firm sitting in Nigeria's legal parlance. Most Nigerian legal documents are written in English; from the colonial days, all the volumes and versions of Nigerian Constitution, are written in English. Accordingly, science and technology in Nigeria has also rest firmly on English. This phenomenon is also so as most formulae and chemical names are written in English. Lastly, it has also been the language of social interactions among people of diverse ethno-linguistic origins (Mohammed n. pag.). Further to its role in the corridor of governance, they posit further that:

In politics, the place of English language is prominent. Politics has its own distinct features in Nigeria, considering the structure of government, quota system and cultural dispositions. It is used in our legislative houses, conference etc. moreover, the place of English in ensuring that political activities cut across all the ethnic groups in the nation cannot be over-emphasized (70).

Thus far, English language has been functioning as a unifying force as well as communicating tools among many tribes and dialects in Nigeria. It is the language through which the people have been integrated. This integrative function is such that cuts across every facet of Nigeria's daily living and interactions. One of the greatest blessings of English language in multilingual Nigeria context is that it eliminates the supposed fuss and sentiments that would have arisen as one language contends for superiority and prominence over the other. This rightly positions English as the language of wider communication (LWC) in Nigeria multilingual context. Most interestingly, "English is instrumental to formal education" (Mohammed n.pag.). Not only that the language is taught in school, it is also the main language by which education is transferred from one person to the other.

COVID-19: THE 2020 PANDEMIC

In the recent past, pandemics such as SARS, Ebola, HIV/AIDS, West Nile Virus, and Lyme disease were notorious for the disturbance of environment and ecosystem. In early 2020 the whole world was confronted with another health challenges known as Corona Virus 2019 shortened to COVID-19. COVID-19 – an irresistible infection – has spread all over the world, negatively affecting individuals' lives and wellbeing as well as setting off a chain of regulation. Measures at curtailing it incorporate "social distancing, confining movement of individuals, and partial restriction of movement, closure of ports, air terminals, manufacturing plants, business and banks, bringing the world economy nearly to end" (World Health Organisation).

Actually, the year 2020 started like every other years with pomp and pageantry but the whole global system was shockingly brought to an abrupt halt with the pandemic imposed on it by the force of the outbreak and spread of COVID-19. The first human reported case of this disease was recorded by health officials in December 2019 in a wholesale food market in Wuhan District of China. Majority of the earliest casualties were found among visitors, shop owners and market workers in the district. During one of his regular media briefing on Corona Virus 19, the WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros, on 22nd April, 2020, said with a tone of caution that "we have a long way to go. This virus will be with us for a long time". He added that "the world cannot go back to the way things were. There must be a "new normal" – a world that is healthier, safer and better prepared" (World Health Organisation).

Many theories that surround the outbreak of this disease. Available evidence posits that the disease has a "zoonotic source". Many researchers found that evidence does not support that SARS-CoV-2 is a laboratory construct. As the pandemic rages, environmental samples were taken from Wuhan food market in December 2019 and the result returned positive for SARS-CoV-2, suggesting that Wuhan City food market was the epicenter of the virus or at least it played an initial role in amplifying the outbreak (World Health Organisation). Since the outbreak the disease (COVID-19) has continued to spread at an alarming rate all over the world with thousands of casualties. As a conscious effort curtailing the spread of the disease, the WHO declared COVID-19 as a "global pandemic on 11 March", 2020, many nations imposed measures (World Health Organisation). Nations of the world having taken a cue from the declaration of the WHO began to take steps in curtailing the spiral spread of COVID-19. In this decisive fight, Nigeria also drawn the sword by marshalling all her health/medical arsenals while the pandemic lasted.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AS A TOOL IN FIGHTING AGAINST COVID-19 IN NIGERIA

As a language with a global relevance, the advantage of English can be felt in all human activities. Demand for its knowledge is becoming increasingly high. This is because fora such as conferences, seminars, workshop and meetings at

the international plane largely rest on English as the language of interaction. It has also been very relevant in sustaining international tourism. Its proficiency and fluency helped citizens of two countries with different languages to communicate effectively (Cholakova, 35).

According to Coleman, there are four primary roles of English thus, "English for academic success, English for international employment opportunities, English for international communication, and English for global education." Relatedly, English as a language can find its place and function in business, in the workplace, in commerce, in education, science and technology, and in the media (qtd in Cholakova 37). In relation to this, Onuh, & Uwadiogwu avers that "English language plays a vital role in creating awareness and enlightenment of the public on national issues. In this era of insurgency in Nigeria, it is the only language that is in use to bring to focus, the ordeal of the victims" (70).

When COVID-19 started in Nigeria, it came with a pent up fear against the global community and most particularly Nigeria. The anxiety is premised on the fact of how deadly and how contagious it is particularly among the old adults in the society. The worry is further heightened by the fact that in most cases the disease could be asymptomatic in the incubation period, within one or two weeks of contacting the disease hence spreading its contagious fangs unknowingly. This throws a difficult task to the laps of medics and political leaders especially in keeping citizens safe.

In Nigeria, this uncertainty portended greater challenge of what information to be disseminated to the public about this unpredictable situation. This is made worse since major actors in combatting the pandemic only have little or no experience about the virus/pandemic except only to revert to historical myths of similar occurrences in decades and/or centuries in the past. Given this dicey scenario, there is need to educate Nigerians on needed precautions as the virus and pandemic raged. However, Nigeria like all other multilingual society needs a language upon which she will educate her citizenry about the virus and the attendant pandemic.

In view of the uncertainty of COVID-19, Finset, et al. suggest what to be done. According to them, in all openness and honesty, it is of high relevance that what is known and the unknown about the virus and the pandemic be taught to the citizenry. And that what is seen as facts should be treated with a pinch temporal value and whatever change at any point in time should be communicated. Thus, there should be consistent spread of specific, clear and unambiguous information; more so that it is important that it be demonstrated to the public as for them to be able to take decisions especially towards safety given the worse situation of uncertainty during the pandemic. Also that emotions should also be acknowledged – for some individuals may come under the fears of uncertainty of sickness that can lead to panic. As we must admit that fear comes naturally, in response to the pandemic, it will however not go away if ignored except it is adequately addressed (n. pag.). In reducing the risk of the spread and the attended anxiety of the pandemic in Nigeria's multilinguistic society a common language is indeed of high relevance and demand since the new normal must deserve that there is attitudinal change.

In combatting the pandemic, especially for those in isolation in isolation centres, one of the major measures adopted to stave the likely anxiety that may arise from the fear of stigmatization as well as the psychological effects thereof, neuro-linguistics came to play. Neuro-linguistics which feasts on language in treating the psychosocial medical challenge of patients suffering from trauma as to let off any likely mental effects of the disease on the patient.

Federal Government of Nigeria through the Ministry of Health, as a means of mitigating the spread of the virus and the pandemic had to engage volunteers that would sensitize people from house-to-house especially in Local Government Areas where the virus/pandemic was most prevalent, on the danger of COVID-19 (Healthwise). It is of

interest that when the volunteers were trained they were trained in English and while discharging their duties, they delivered the contents in English only to interpret to any of the needed indigenous languages where the recipients of the sensitization may not be literate in English. In conjunction with the Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Health, some non-governmental agencies embarked on a massive awareness as to create awareness for the people about the scourge in sensitizing the public about the danger of COVID-19. For instance, United Purpose, carried out sensitization to the public on it as to debunk some of the misconceptions the public held about it. This sensitization was also carried out in English to the public. Other international organizations like WHO Africa rolled out their sensitization materiel in combatting the virus and its disastrous fangs, particularly in Plateau State, using English language as the major tool of communication (WHO Africa).

The new normal of behavioural change in relation to COVID-19 are clearly stated thus: "Wash your hands regularly! Cough in a tissue or in your elbow! Keep distance - Social distancing! Clean surfaces! Do not touch your face!" (Finset, et al. n. pag.). As simple as these messages are they would not have only become a challenging task if the Nigeria government would be interpreting them to each of about 400 ethnic based languages in Nigeria but that would have also caused a lot of resources to implement. It would have tasked much of human, financial, material, and temporal (time) resources to accomplish if the interpretation of the personal and public health cautions would be replicated into all the ethnic languages. However that does not necessarily ruled out the need to have some of those cautions in local languages, at least for the benefit of those that may not be literate in English language and that was actually carried out by some concerned states that house those indigenous languages.

It has also been discovered that there is always is a sort of semantic shift or variation when one tries to interpret a text from one language to the other. To this end, Abel et. al. posit that, "Some lexical item in native English have had their semantic range restricted, shifted, or extended ... A few word retain their old meanings no longer current in native English contexts. It is noted that the dictionary meanings of these word differs from the Nigerian English usage" (8). Thus, it would have posed a great danger if we much attempt is made by the Federal Government of Nigeria to interpret relevant cautionary information about COVID-19 to all the languages in Nigeria.

Also that the diseases is neither ethnic nor regional based brought about a great task. There would have been a great challenge if English language is not the Nigeria's lingua franca. That is, since the pandemic is a warlike situation and virus like a bullet not addressed to anybody but a matter of 'to whom it may concerned'; nor is it restricted to a particular region in Nigeria, possibly with a single language, brought about complex situation. This brought about the possibility of an Igala man been the medical personnel attending to a Fulfude man where communication may not be possible except done using an agreed on language. This further strengthens the contention of one of the prime functions of English as language of interactions. Thus, English provided an easy avenue for interaction between medics and patients of COVID-19 in Nigeria. Moreover, since test results and prescriptions among other necessities were written or communicated to COVID-19 patients in English. Interestingly, manuals for most of the medical appliances are written in English language. Similarly, prescription manuals/leaflets.

Also, on a daily occurrence, the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) in conjunction with Presidential Task Force (PTF), the two major public medical outfits in Nigeria saddled with the responsibility of managing the issue of COVID-19 did organized press conference. The press conference did included notable individuals and professionals e.g. The PTF Chairman - Boss Mustapha, Minister of Heath - Dr Osagie Ehanire, Director General of NCDC – Dr Chikwe

Ihekweazu among others would come out to address the nation on the state of affairs of the pandemics. And in doing this, English was the best option and was actually the language used as this avails the advantages of cutting through linguistic plurality of Nigeria. Some states follow and adopt the same method. For instance, Lagos State being one of the states that were worse hit would on a daily basis address Lagos residents through the Commissioner for Health, Prof Akin Abayomi, on the state of affairs of the pandemic particularly within the state using English language. In the same way, posters, handbills, fliers, billboard, signage, jingles and many other media strategies were adopted to educate the populace with English as the language of orientation.

CONCLUSIONS

It is incumbent on every nation to ensure the safety and protection of her citizenry in periods of uncertainty as wars, epidemics, and pandemics. Responsible nations with means often put all arsenals together in combatting such unforeseen challenges. At the break of COVID-19 in Nigeria, the government was compelled to marshal all necessary means and efforts in fighting the spread of the virus as well as dousing the tension that arose from COVID-19 pandemic. In Nigeria like many other nations, air, land and sea borders were closed, isolation centres were set up, and movement was restricted as people were locked down for many weeks and public places were also closed down. While these measures and many others were being taken the nation was also concerned with the sensitization of the people. However, Nigeria as a nation is peculiar for being multi-ethnic and multi-lingual in nature. Thus, educating all the citizens in their distinct indigenous languages would have posed a great deal of task. English came as the rescuing language that staved off the challenge of what could have been a daunting task. Thus, this work contends that the multilingual reality of Nigeria in focus, English is not just a language of rallying point but also that which helps in combatting the novel corona virus as this helps to penetrate distinct indigenous languages in educating Nigerians of diverse ethnicities in the face of the unconscious contention among the ethnic languages.

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