

NIGERIAN HOME VIDEO AND THE LANGUAGE QUESTION

Introduction

Second language (L_2) teaching and learning in tertiary institutions is an intricate task. This intricacy is compounded by many factors. Living in the so-called jet age brings added burden on the second language learner and teacher, "for as the world grows even more complex and divided",¹ the influences on students equally become more inextricable and diversifying. The teacher himself has a lot to contend with. In addition to other things, he has to grapple with variables, both internal and external, "the relative importance or value of which, even if we were aware of them all, cannot yet readily be assessed or quantified."²

There are, for example, the aptitude and motivation of the learner, his background, interests, learning environment, etc. Apart from these, however, one of the gravest variables in education - one of the gravest unknowns - remains the amount learned without, or in spite of, the teacher.³ This is why "the activity of language teaching cannot be stimulated on a computer, that is modeled mathematically, or reduced to a systematic set of logically related procedures, or an algorithm."⁴

In recent times, a salient variable has arisen in the Nigerian society. This variable is the proliferation of Nigerian home video - a new electronic media technology - leading to the influx of films of varied qualities into the market and into the hands of unrestrained youths. This trend may raise the following questions to a critical viewer: What kind of language and structural patterns do viewers pick up from these films? Is it possible to assume that the language of home movies has strong impact on viewers' spontaneous use of English? One study carried out by Cazden shows that there is a correlation between the frequency of certain linguistic structures in the child's environment and the order of their acquisition.⁵ This is why Kotsinas argues that the language learner receives, just like

the little child learning his first language, an input of the new language mainly in the form of

- (a) language that is addressed to him and
- (b) language that is spoken around him but not directed to him.

This "overhead" language can be either target - language speakers' conversations which the learner himself does not participate in, or the language that he hears on radio and television.⁶

The purpose of this paper is to analyze segments of speech patterns of Nigerian home videos in English and draw attention to some deviant linguistic usages that we notice in them. The objective is to assess the linguistic model these films present to their audience and the functional and/or dysfunctional impact on the level of language learning among these viewers.

Popular Media in Nigeria

A significant development in the daily experience of the present generation of youths is the boom in Nigerian home videos. This came about because of the greater access to and decentralization of media activity and the growth of independent film and video companies. Home video production thus has intensified as an active, informative, entertaining power, defining, interpreting and exposing social life as experienced and understood by the audience.

The popularity of these home movies also accentuated because they addressed contemporary issues and concerns of the audience. Moreover, in a season when rising costs and widespread insecurity have virtually killed the stage theatre tradition, the video culture provides a robust alternative not only to the stage, but also, and more significantly, foreign video⁷. 1996 recorded over two hundred and twenty-two (222) video releases⁸, and the Nigerian Video Cassette Records Dealers Association (NVCRA) remarked that five new movies are released every two weeks. This proliferation got to such a competitive level that so many video works are released in a short space of time.⁹ In 2002, for example, 95 movies were released in the month of December alone.¹⁰ Considering the speed with which producers tumble out films, the presenter of *Movie Master*, a film-review television programme in the country, asserts that

viewers now have a problem of choosing.¹¹ The fact remains that the impact of these media interpenetrates every sphere of life, for apart from acting as agencies of cultural hegemony, the media occupies strategic importance in its various "roles as arbiters, educators, sensationalizers"¹². It involves the whole person kinesthetically, subliminally, emotionally as well as intellectually¹³. Moreover, it attracts the largest audience ever known in the history of communication,¹⁴ among whom are mostly youths who are at the most impressionable stage of their development. It is obvious that like other known media, the home video has educational potentials. Grow, for instance, demonstrates that the broadcast media is a powerful omnipresent part of the lives of high school students:

It occupies their time, diverts and develops their interests and exposes them to society's problems while it offers the easiest forms of escape. It is a window and a wall, an insulator and an instructor, a protagonist and a pacifier. It is communication-powerful, sometimes insidious, sometimes overt, and often controversial. It is, in short, fit subject for the classroom.¹⁵

Research presents strong evidence that the television teaches more powerfully than any previous instrument available to society.¹⁶ It has been shown not only to influence the behavioural pattern of young viewers (Skornia, 1964; Grow, 1976; Opubor and Nwuneli, 1979; etc.), but youths unconsciously develop communicative skills modeled after the speech patterns of actors.

Unfortunately, Nigerian home videos, in many cases, have a problem of quality. Quest for quick financial gains and cheap popularity masks the producers attention to quality, depth, and excellence. The linguistic models these films present have limitations for language learning, for many students cannot filter out what they hear (and see) on the television, or assume it stylish to imitate the speech patterns of their favourite actors. Kotsinas asserts that language heard on television comes in a highly non-distinctive form, and is simultaneously accompanied by attention-grabbing visual stimuli¹⁷. What therefore the language teacher

delivers in the two-hour-a-week lesson allocated to him is quickly swept away under the floodwater of the media and its profound hypnotic effect.

Home Video and Language Use

Nigerian home movies in English are suffused with idioms, interpolations from local dialects, fill in expressions of language, various speech patterns, stress and intonation differentials, etc. However, when we consider correct grammatical usages, subject-verb patterning, collocation rules and forms, the perceived difference between the actors' language and standard English usage is wide, especially in non-award winning films. In identifying them, we appreciate the fact of linguistic pragmatics and the fact too that there are different levels of usages and that a language pattern, which may be appropriate in one context (for instance, an informal context), may be inappropriate in another (a formal context).

Sampling Technique

This study spanned over a period of seven years - 1997-2003 and involved 60 home videos produced in the country. For each year, we chose a number of films. The choice of video selected was guided by the popularity of the films. To determine this, the researcher consulted some video rental clubs operating around the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and from their records obtained the most requested home videos for the years under study. From their list, the researcher made a random selection of the number needed for the study. However, more films were chosen from 2002 and 2003 in order to show the intensity and persistence of linguistic problems as the years progressed. The following are the films so selected:

Title of Films	Year of Production
Forever 2	1997
Bruno and the law	1997
Dry leaves	1997
Nemesis 2	1997
Faces	1997

Title of Films	Year of Production
Deborah and the Dragon	1997
My Cross	1998
Hatred 2	1998
Full Moon 1	1998
End-Time	1999
Executive Crime	1999
Flames of Vengeance	N.D
First Lady	2000
Day of Doom 2	2000
Trapped	2000
Dirty Game	2000
Casanovas	2000
Behold	2001
Journey of the Dead 2	2001
Guilty as Charged	2001
Igbudu 2	2001
Fire on the Mountain 2	2002
Oracle 2	2002
Sharon Stone 2	2002
Second Chance	2002
Tears and Sorrows	2002
Burden	2002
Love Affair 1	2002
Eg'Igwe	2002
Osu-Imi	2002
Easy to Kill	2002
Spanner (The Humble Servant)	2002
The Senators	2002
Big Man Big Trouble	2002
Disguise 2	2002
Honourable	2002
Battle Line 1	2002
Battle Line 2	2002
No Shaking	2002
Light and Darkness	2002
Old Soldier	2002
Game of Death	2002

Title of Films	Year of Production
Power of Love	2002
My Sweat 2	2002
Not Man Enough	2003
The Carpenter 2	2003
My Life (Akwa Nwa)	2003
Million-Million	2003
Never too Late	2003
A Date with the Queen	2003
Father and Son	2003
Blood Sister	2003
Ashebi	2003
Peace Maker 1	2003
Peace Maker 2	2003
Crazy Millionaire	2003
My Savior	2003
Ebube (Land of Tears)	2003
God Where Are You?	2003
Christian Mother	2003

Methodology

The researcher critically viewed each of the films selected for the study. In the process, she identified and analyzed the language of the films for the following:

1. Syntactic Patterns
 - (a) Concord, number, tense, case, etc.
 - (b) Use of subjunctive mood
 - (c) Collocation errors
2. Grammar and Mechanics
 - (a) grammatical infelicities
 - (b) over-generalization
 - (c) interference problem
 - (d) malapropisms
3. Usage problems
 - (a) non-English expressions
 - (b) tautology

The analysis was based only on formal speech patterns. Non-formal usages, idiomatic expressions, and appropriate transliteration of local proverbs did not form part of the analysis. Also excluded were offbeat language of cliques, gangster's usages and slangy expressions. Moreover, the sampled errors were taken from actors whose status in the film requires that their language be above board. Hence, the irregularities we identified are glaring ungrammatical usages that jar at the nerves of the educated audience. Because of space constraints and the large number of films used for the study, we opt to present below only one deviant linguistic structure for each home movie.

Title of Film	Sample Sentence	Error Type
Forever 2	The day that happens I'll pack my bag and baggages and leave this house.	Usage problem
Bruno and the law	You must be prepared to make deal with Fred.	Grammatical error
Dry Leaves	My medication they have refused me	Grammatical and collocation error
Nemesis 2	I don't have your time.	Direct transliteration
Faces	Watch your lips.	Erroneous transliteration
Deborah and the Dragon	You must bring him here next tomorrow night.	Usage problem
My Cross	I warned you not to be in an hurry...	Grammatical error
Hatred 2	I don't want Chioma's trouble	Grammatical error and direct transliteration
Full Moon 1	You this child. You are a disgrace to me.	Grammatical error and direct transliteration
End Time	We need to build an ultra modern church cathedral.	Tautology

Title of Film	Sample Sentence	Error Type
Executive Crime	We found her items in your place.	Transliteration and usage problem
Flames of Vengeance	You even taught me how to chase girls.	Grammatical error and wrong transliteration
First Lady	Are you crazy to give me a job to assassinate?	Transliteration and usage problem
Day of Doom 2	I and the manager have tried our best.	Grammatical error
Trapped	She uses every opportunity to humiliate my name	Usage problem
Dirty Game	Can we have some word outside?	Grammatical error
Casanovas	Flash that car! Flash that car!	Usage problem
Behold	There was no food in this house today.	Grammatical error
Journey of the Dead 2	You better hurry up before I start killing you in this house.	Usage problem
Guilty as Charged	I missed my way several times before I found this place.	Usage problem
Igbudu 2	What is that your name?	Grammatical error
Fire on the Mountain	Each one of them wanting me to support him.	Grammatical error
Oracle 2	Since our people start to die one by one...	Grammatical error
Sharon Stone 2	You are the lousiest ingrate I've met in my life.	Usage problem
Second Chance	No I'll come with your car.	Grammatical error
Tears & Sorrows	The heart of man is desperately wicked.	Usage problem
Burden	What is your problem?	Grammatical error
Love Affair 1	...just to make sure I came back to school.	Tense problem

Title of Film	Sample Sentence	Error Type
Eg'Igwe	Patrick of all lazy people to be your husband.	Usage problem
Osu-Imi	Daughter of devil.	Grammatical error
Easy to Kill	These guys are an imposter.	Grammatical error
Spanner (The humble servant)	I will communicate to you later.	Usage problem
The Senators	I'll seek for completely secret and secure place.	Grammatical error
Big Man Big Trouble	If you saw the way I love you...	Grammatical error
Disguise 2	Do you shop here?	Usage problem
Honourable	People call me Osama Bin Laden just because I don't tolerate.	Grammatical error
Battle Line 1	Dominic has decided to chase me out of business.	Usage problem
Battle Line 2	We better hurry her to the United States.	Usage problem
No Shaking	So Udokwu has been using the money I incur in business to pursue women.	Transliteration and usage problem
Light and Darkness	There seems to be a sudden apprehension over our activities.	Usage problem
Old Soldier	If only you will calm your anger let us dialogue it over.	Usage problem
Game of Death	Somebody is playing tricks with us.	Grammatical error
Power of Love	Who must be the wicked person to do this to my Julie?	Grammatical and Usage problem
My Sweat 2	After all these torture they have tortured him.	Usage problem

Title of Film	Sample Sentence	Error Type
Not Man Enough	If you don't chase that girl somebody else will definitely chase her.	Transliteration and usage problem
The Carpenter	I saw this boy with my two eyes.	Transliteration
My Life (Akwa Nwa)	You don't have any child to continue your lineage.	Usage problem
Million-Million	Mama that man is a dupe.	Grammatical error
Never Too Late	You are possessed with evil spirit.	Grammatical error
A Date with the Queen	Go now and fetch those traveling documents I gave you.	Transliteration and usage problem
Father and Son	Don't bring it up unless police will knock you up.	Usage problem
Blood Sister	Why are we abandoned, why?	Usage problem
Ashebi	Whenever there is traditional marriage, Emmanuella must be there.	Grammatical error
Peace Maker 1	Until all these woods is chopped.	Grammatical error
Peace Maker 2	I'll show all of you one by one in this house.	Transliteration and grammatical error
Crazy Millionaire	Three days after he has said that, Benjamin became mad.	Grammatical error
My Savior	I have looked for it in all nooks and corners of this house.	Usage problem
Ebube (Land of Tears)	And every season a young man is being taken away to be sacrificed.	Grammatical error
God, Where Are You?	We will drink and drink until we won't drink again.	Grammatical error
Christian Mother	Next time you hear about Agnes you'll pick race and run.	Transliteration and usage problem.

- Apart from the above sampled errors, it should be noted that:
- (a) grammatical infelicities are abundant in many Nigerian home movies. The errors are not inevitable. What is required is in-depth editorial work on the scripts before shooting. But the rapidity with which films are released and the number of films a particular actor is featured makes it difficult for thorough refinement of the language of the films. There is also over-preoccupation with contextual elements, glamorous life-styles as well as lavish and unnecessary display of wealth, costume, and fetish to the detriment of other salient aspects of film production.
 - (b) Many of the movies reveal indiscriminate use of vulgar terms and offbeat language in imitation of Western gangster movies.
 - (c) Many of the characters have what Turk refers to as "a dead-pan voice"¹⁸, which is the absence of intonation variety in the voice. Speeches are frequently made in a flat monotonous tone that lacks life and vigour.

Effects on Language Learners

It has been observed that much of second language learning takes place by relatively informal, unplanned imitation and use in actual communication situations¹⁹. In tertiary institutions where the English language programme is both remedial and developmental, the language teachers' efforts are frequently undermined by the students' unrestrained assimilation of media language forms.

The video usually has a halo effect, especially on youths who are not as wary or as skeptical of what they see or hear as adults. Often, youths lack the perceptual capabilities to even discriminate between things, or assume it stylish to imitate (the speech of) their favourite actors. Unconsciously, they simply imbibe what they hear and these become fossilized over time. Ferguson states that this tendency is so pervasive that

an individual in his life's time without any specific tuition, acquires new terms, meanings, jargons, slang, codes or 'registers'; he may learn new patterns of intonation, gestures, or new posture; he may

acquire a new dialect... Much, and perhaps even most, of such language learning goes on without any 'teaching', and some of it outside the conscious awareness of the learner.²⁰

It is difficult therefore to think of any aspect of our society today that either has not been influenced by the presence of the broadcast media or that has not been charged as having been influenced²¹:

*Reading, sleeping, working, communicating, use of leisure time, attitude towards ourselves, our neighbours, our government, our churches, our schools, our spending habits, and our health have all been in some fashion altered because of our use of the broadcast media, or because our fellow citizens use them (italics mine).*²²

In a research aimed at finding out the aspects of English language Nigerian students learn most from their exposure to media organs, Opata and others discovered that students acquire new words, sentence patterns, pronunciation, and idioms from them²³. This is possible since youths are easily "drawn at every turn towards eccentricities in language... and their problem is to listen to them, learn the words, feel the vibrations and not be carried away"²⁴. But carried away they sometimes are. One way or the other, this medium profoundly influences the tongue and pens of children and adults²⁵, and teachers notice them in students' speech and writing.

In discussing the many difficulties students encounter in writing, Dubrow remarks that many essays are flawed by the jargon offered by popular culture. According to him, students are seduced and betrayed by the media into coining adverbs by pasting -' wise' onto words and into repeating catch phrases like "at this point in time"²⁶. To these, we can equally add, taking from our sample movies, "each and every one", "run for dear life", "you know now", "this our", "acting strange", etc.

The Way Forward

An eclectic approach needs to be applied in dealing with the varied effects of video programmes. Parents and guardians have to monitor and control the input on their wards and direct them to

the functional dimensions of films. Grow advises language teachers to make a list, with class help, of those areas wherein the mass media have supposedly made changes in our thinking, routine, manners, mores, and activities²⁷. This will enlighten the students on the possible influences of the screen and help them develop the acumen that they will need to filter the plethora of linguistic models that come their way.

Two other linguists, Strunk and White, note that though no idiom is taboo and no accent forbidden, yet, there is need to sift the wheat from the chaff in matters of linguistic consideration. They opine that

in choosing between the formal and the informal, the regular and the offbeat, the general and the special, the orthodox and the heretical, the beginner errs on the side of conservatism, on the side of established usage²⁸.

Students themselves (and viewers alike) should have a say in what they watch. Grow believes that, just as the mass media may make us what we are, we have the opportunity and the responsibility to make it reflect what we are or what we want, or what we need. The same media that influence us may in turn be influenced by us²⁹. Grow further argues that the old concept "if you don't like it, turn it off" - is too limited for the present generation. To him, broadcasting is communication, and all communication entails not only message but response. Hence, students must be made aware of their opportunity - and responsibility - to complete the communication circle by making their concern and appreciation, pleasure and displeasure, known to those who have been licensed to serve the public interest³⁰.

The government and the video censor boards themselves need to take a strong stand and enforce quality control on films not just on content but also on language. The need for a language consultation forum where film producers can draw the facilities of language professionals should be explored. The Nigerian Film and Video Censor Board (NFVCB) should also inculcate linguistic considerations in assessment and rating of video productions.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is not to condemn Nigerian movies or to instigate invidious sentiments against them. Neither do I intend to promote linguistic purism. It goes without saying that remarkable and high quality films have come out of the stables of Nigerian film producers. Such movies as *Out of Bounds*, *Mortal Inheritance*, *Festival of Fire*, *Igodo*, *Peacemaker 1 and 2* (2003) and *Keeping Faith* (2003), for instance, are commendable. *Peacemaker*, for instance, was selected by the Nigerian Censors Board as movie of the month of March 2003³¹. The contention, nevertheless, is that many Nigerian movie directors are so much in a hurry to release their films that they do not give adequate attention to their linguistic or other literary dimensions. Hence, even though *Peacemaker* is movie of the month of March, it is still riddled with linguistic infelicities.

This being the case, since the home video is a popular means of entertainment as well as socialization and since the language patterns of actors are over time fossilized in young viewers, care should be taken by video producers to avoid blatant errors in concord, grammar, and usage. For language teachers, media effects should, from time to time, act as inputs in the language class so that the learners develop judicious discernment in dealing with linguistic matters. In the final analysis, the Nigerian home video is a prodigious development in the nation but needs a lot of refinement to excel.

Notes

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²S.P. Corder, *Introducing Applied Linguistics* (England: Penguin, 1987), p.9.

³Stevens in D. Chamberlain "The teacher-centred learner" *ELT Document 128* (Modern English Publication and British Council, 1988), p.56.

⁴Corder, *Introducing Applied Linguistics*.

⁵Cashden and Jordin, "Introduction".

⁶U.B. Kotsinas, "On the Acquisition of Vocabulary in Immigrant Swedish", in *Psycholinguistics and Foreign Language Learning*. H. Ringborn (ed.) (Abo: Abo Akademi, 1983), p.87.

- ⁷"The Home Video Scourge" (editorial), *The Guardian*, May 3, 1996, p.10.
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- ⁹C. Okafor, "Producers Dream Big-Budget Films", *The Guardian*, May 22, 1997, p.37.
- ¹⁰Chu Nwankwo, *Movie Master*, Delta Television, January 10, 2003.
- ¹¹Chu Nwankwo.
- ¹²C. Critcher, "Media Spectacles: Sport and Mass Communication". In A. Cashden and M. Jordin (ed.). *Studies in Communication*, p.132.
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- ¹⁴Skornia, p.145.
- ¹⁵E.S. Grow, "The Study of Radio and Television". In *Speech Communication in the Secondary School*, R.R. Allen, S.C. Wilmington, and J.O. Sprague (eds.). (Mass Alyn and Bacon, Inc., 1976), p.86.
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- ¹⁷Kotsinas, p.89.
- ¹⁸C. Turk, *Effective Speaking*. (N.Y.: E & F.N. Spon, 1985), p.134.
- ¹⁹C.A. Ferguson in H.H. Stern, (ed.) *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching* (Oxford: OUP, 1983), p.19.
- ²⁰Ferguson, p.19.
- ²¹Grow, p.99.
- ²²Grow, p.99.
- ²³D. Opata, et. al. "Television and English Language Teaching in Nigeria: A Critique of the NTA Instructional Television", *Educational Technology in Nigerian Education*. D.A. Onyejemezi (ed.) (Onitsha: Summer Publishers, 1988), p.204.
- ²⁴W. Strunk and J.B. White, *The Elements of Style*. (Oxford: OUP, 1971), pp. 81-2.
- ²⁵Strunk and White, p.82.
- ²⁶H. Dubrow, "Teaching Essay-Writing in a Liberal Arts Curriculum", in *The Art and Craft of Teaching*. M.M. Gullette (ed.) (Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984), p.93.
- ²⁷Grow, p.101.
- ²⁸Strunk and White, p.84.
- ²⁹Grow, pp. 87-8.
- ³⁰Grow, p.88.
- ³¹Chu Nwankwo, *Movie Master*, Delta Television, Friday, March 11, 2003.