

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION FOR MORAL RE-ENGINEERING IN THE ERA OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract

Language, among others, is a vehicle for human interaction and social control while the primary aim of communication is mutual intelligibility, yet ensuring that common understanding is often fraught with problems. This paper highlights the role of language and communication as it serves for the purpose of ensuring standards of behaviour. It examines some of the causes of this phenomenon (antisocial behaviour) as well as the positive and negatives impacts, of information technology on society and recommends, among other things, the positive utilization of language and information technology in teaching indigenous cultural values, folklores and literature as a way of promoting moral rectitude and socially acceptable standards of behaviour, especially among the youth of today.

Introduction

Language is a vehicle for human interaction. With it, individuals share ideas, feelings and exercise control over others, such that law and order is maintained, while the primary aim of communication is mutual intelligibility. However, achieving that feat is often fraught with problems thus leading to misunderstanding, deviant behaviour and other negative human actions.

Language is a double-edged sword such that if inappropriately employed in communication, it can fuel the vices in the society; on the other hand, it can promote the virtues of hard work, respect for others and love for fellow man. There is no doubt that if our thoughts are positively guided by love for others, our actions and the words employed in communication will reflect same and in like manner, if our thoughts are negative, it will result in evil deeds and other immoral actions.

Events around us portray glaring cases of indolent youths, cultism, robbery, corruption, gross indiscipline, examination malpractices and several instances of man's inhumanity to man, coupled with the varied but more sophisticated forms of crimes associated with modern information technology. Again, these modern technologies can reach selected or a mass audience with information thus, making language in communication to become more than ever, a veritable means of social cohesion and to instill moral discipline among Nigerians.

Essentially, a writer employs language to present a story. In that manner while entertaining the reader; also the author presents a lesson to-be imbibed. Thus, the message of a story cannot be divorced from the language used in presenting the story. African traditional folklores and stories often merge the fictional with real life events to present stories with a moral lesson, at the end. For instance, the stereotype portrayal of the wily or cunning antics of the tortoise is a case in point. Even the parables of Jesus Christ as portrayed in the gospels contain a moral lesson design to guide human conduct.

In the light of the foregoing, this paper examines the role of language and communication as they serve for the purpose of exercising control and to promote acceptable standards of behaviour, here described as moral re-engineering, especially in this era of modern information technologies.

What is Moral Re-engineering?

The Oxford Advanced Learning's Dictionary, defines morals as anything "concerned with principles of right and wrong behaviour" or adhering to acceptable standards of conduct with others in a particular milieu.

Very often, ethical principles are equated with morals. It equally has to do with knowing what is right or wrong and being able to adhere or develop attitudes that conform to expected norms of conduct (Ibodje, 2000). For instance, the need to be just, to be fair and to respect others. However, in literary history, between the 15th to 16th century, a group of plays in the literary world came into prominence, called morality plays. The major theme was the portrayal of good behaviour. Characters were presented to symbolize good and bad qualities expected of individuals with a view to promote high moral standards, within the society then.

Every society, culture or groups of people have certain values and recognized standards of behaviour which members are expected to comply with or strive towards, while deviants would be sanctioned. However, the various crises in the country today raises the fundamental question; where are morals heading? It has also dramatized the need to re-orientate and rehabilitate the social-culture values we hold, through the proper application of language employed through music, movies, literary works and other information technologies to communicate the need to demonstrate proper ethical standards.

In reaction to the overwhelming catalogue of societal shortcomings, the military regime of General Buhari and Idiagbon used information communicated through force, to propagate the war against indiscipline (WAI) in 1984. The results were far reaching, hence the need to sustain that tempo in a subtle manner though the proper application of moral ideas communicated through good music, literary works, novels and other information technologies that preach decent virtues that will not only entertain but persuade youths to adopt a positive attitude towards their life pursuit.

While stressing the importance of moral re-engineering in the society, Nash (1971), maintains that moral and cultural values are the foundation of any society, without which the society is heading for doom.

It is the working assumption of this paper that most disturbances in our academic environment ranging from gross indiscipline, cultism, thuggery, lack of respect for a rule of law, indecent dresses etc can be linked to the negative language and attitude imbibed from some modern musical lyrics and negative contents found in some web sites and other modern technologies.

Writing to corroborate the foregoing, Afoko (1984), submits that, communication in all its forms eliminates ignorance, strengthens good neighbourliness, encourages commerce, good government etc. According to him, communication goes beyond news dissemination and aims at building a morally upright and disciplined society where the rights of others are respected by fellow citizens. It is only a well organized, disciplined and honest society that can attract the much needed investment, both locally and internationally.

The situation in Nigeria today, becomes more worrisome when the family which should serve as the foundation to inculcate sound moral values, in the youth has failed. Instances of broken homes are on the increase, in other cases, parents leave very early for work when their children are still grappling with sleep and work late, with little or no time to share in the child's world. The issue becomes pathetic, when we consider fact that house helps who are sometimes saddled with the responsibility of catering for children are themselves in need of supervision.

The term moral re-engineering, is thus, adopted in this paper, to imply attempts to develop and instill moral discipline and standard ethical values especially among the youths when they are still malleable. It is good to develop proper character training in the formative or growing years of the child because, just as melodious sound constitutes music, so language and values imbibed during the child's growing years remain the enabling medium of building a just and egalitarian society.

What is Information Technology?

Soola (1998) describes information technology as the application of technology to information management, while Lucey (1995), sees information technology as the acquisition, processing, storage and dissemination of verbal, pictorial, textual and numeric information by a micro-electronic based combination of computing and telecommunication.

From the foregoing, information technology has to do with the application of science and technology to communicate information by making use of any of the electronic means to disseminate sound values, record data and perform so many positive tasks within the home, workplace and society; thus, making life easier more comfortable for all. Every organisation, family and society makes decisions and exercise control over others, based on the quality of information available.

The most common types of information technologies available range from; cell phones, computers and the internet, movies, satellite transmission etc. however, the current trend of adopting negative and foul language in some rap music that contains unprintable lyrics is worsening issues. The themes of such songs, often glorify hatred, violence, occult and revolt against authority based on this, some youths want to maintain a negative attitude in their daily activities.

One major function of language and literature, is its ability to transform its audience through satirical works. As demonstrated in Achebe's (1967), *A man of the people*. It is a portrayal of the ills of politics such as corruption and other kinds of electioneering malpractices. The character of chief Nanga, the corrupt politician, who seeks power without a focus or a development plan for the society is condemned by readers, when compared to the idealistic character of Odili. These messages are presented, with the aim of effecting a positive change among the readers. An audio-visual adaptation of such a work it is hoped, will go a long way, to

transform the attitude of the average Nigerian positively.

Socio-cultural Impact of Information Technology on Maral Re-engineering

According to Kuna (2005), societies have ethical standards and normative systems governing behaviour, defining general guidelines in social relation that set standards for the determination of right and wrong" - such moral imperatives guide the relations between individuals in a society and any deviation was appropriately sanctioned.

In Nigeria today, the need for moral re-engineering, is underscored by the high immoral and unethical standards rampant in some tertiary institutions. A casual look at any campus, will reveal appalling attitude such as: cultism, indecent dressing, examination malpractices, corruption and gross indiscipline.

Certain factors such as the presence of negative language and attitude imbibed from ; some types of information technologies have been directly linked to the adoption of unwholesome values by youths. This argument is premised on the fact that, traditional African values abhors negative attitudes and encourage respect for fellow men.

In pre-colonial society, moral/ethical discipline was enforced effectively by different bodies such as: the age grade system, members of the extended family, council of elders/chiefs presided over by the village head. Then, everyone was responsible to the other. The misfortune of one was shared by all such that, "every individual had a sense of obligation to the sustenance of the moral and social order of the community" (Ibodje 2005).

Moral discipline, was also maintained by the fear of the omnipresent eye of a supreme being, assisted by the spirits, ancestors and other deities. Judgment was instantaneous and there were diviners, chief priests and other agencies who acted as spokespersons for the gods. If anything went wrong, or a member of the community commits a crime, a diviner is

consulted to ascertain the culprit. Thus, you could leave the door to your house open for days and nothing will be stolen.

Ibodje (2005), citing Wiredu (1980), corroborates the foregoing such that, everyone agreed that in a society;

What is morally good is what benefits a human Being: it is what is decent for man-what beings dignity, respect, contentment, prosperity, joy, to Man and his community and what is morally bad is what brings misery, misfortune and disgrace

The notion of an overall and all seeing presence of a Supreme Being, was debunked by the contact with the Western world. With it, came colonialism and its attendant spiral effect on the African way of life, religion and language. Again Ibodje (2005), agrees, with Ududerm (1992) and Nduka (1975), that, what emerged was a move from our African communal life style to individualism, from "spiritualism humanism to materialistic humanism" thus, causing a total erosion of African cultural values, way of life, dances folklores and communal lifestyle for an impersonal lifestyle.

Our culture is our greatest asset but in the face of modern information technologies, African cultural values and tradition are fast disappearing. It also has great implications for the moral well being and long term development of the country. However, a knowledge of IT is vital in all aspects of national development. Osofisan (1997), argues that, information technologies are making the world into a smaller, more efficient, happier and richer place for the nations that participate in them, thus, Nigeria cannot be left behind. Since it is difficult, however, to control information flow from satellite transmission or the internet, Nigeria should react by setting up more Websites alongside enriching the content and quality of programming on our local television and radio stations, to promote positive aspects of our culture. This will let the upcoming generation know about our rich cultural heritage and history. Promote our

artifacts and tourism potentials to attract other nationals coming into Nigeria instead of the continual exodus of our youth to foreign lands. The content of such broadcast should preach unity, despite our diverse cultural and religious background, decent ethical conduct, respect for hardwork and societal values and such other issues that will promote a positive outlook among Nigeria youths should be encouraged.

Oyeleye (2005), submits that the English language continues to be "the main Lingua Franca of information technology" while a corollary view point holds that, learning a new language entails learning a new culture. (Nash 1971). According to him, in our language, as in our behavior generally, we are compelled by the power custom. It provides us with clues as to social roles and expected patterns of behaviour within those rules, it prescribes for us the parts we should play, at table, in the street etc. we are able to communicate effectively, almost mindlessly, because we have mastered the relationship between language and the social conventions of our culture. Thus, learning the language of the colonial masters implies imbibing a new, way of life.

In Nigeria today, some parents, as a mark of sophistication, forbid their children to communicate in their mother tongue (LI) The implication of this becomes more striking with the findings of a survey by the global research group (network wizard 1999), which reveals that, only 43% of all online population are not English speakers while 57% are speakers of English language.

These are salient issues with far reaching implications. The unchecked exposure of the tender minds to various information technologies can affect youth negatively or positively. For instance, Sina (2003), submits that, research has confirmed that most children who are hostile to the world tend to be the heaviest viewers of media violence. Besides, concern has been expressed about certain negative content available on the net; such sites that portray objectionable content such as: violence,

pornography for the tender mind can only encourage immorality. The danger is real such that, in about a decade from now; Nigeria may emerge as a nation without a culture. The younger generation are exposed to uncensored information and a culture not relevant to the immediate environment. This will no doubt negatively affect their disposition towards commonly shared societal values leading to deviant behavior, If this continues, our cultural values and history will be totally eroded bringing about a sort of cultural imperialism which will seek to enslave the African mind leaving in its wake a cultureless or a culturally disorientated people (Otokhine 2000). All these equally contribute to the falling morals in the society. In its September 27, 2004 edition, "Tell" Magazines in one of its article "surfing in troubled waters" reports the story of a 14 years old boy Olaniyan and his addition to watching pornography on the internet, with disastrous consequences. His grades dropped and only patient handling and counseling saved the situation. This is just a tip of the iceberg.

Shiabu (1969), attributes the causes of moral decadence to the collapse or weakening of the extended family relationship, which was used in the past to maintain a balance between our rights and obligations as well as provide "security and moral sanctions for our private and public conduct in the society". He argues that, the collapsing extended family system has led to "the break down of the moral and legal sanctions in our communities" and the result is obvious today for all to see, juvenile delinquency manifest in; gross indiscipline cultism both within and outside the campus, unemployment etc. He contends that, our youth suffer from identify crises because they know nothing about the traditional African way of life, neither have they mastered the new ways of life sufficiently thus leaving "then in a vacuum of moral-less values"

Kuna (2005), attributes the cause of the breakdown of moral values to the harsh economic situation poverty, coupled with the

rise of powerful criminal groups connected to the state and the craze for titles, certificates and all kinds of paper qualification.

Egwu (2001), submits that the media, has without knowing it, contributed greatly to this growing malaise, because most African elites would prefer to read "Time magazines" rather than real local newspapers and magazines. In like manner, our youth would-rather watch foreign films, musical and programmes and that is reflected in current hair styles, mode of dressing, talking and behaviour and even music unfortunately, he laments that African do not copy the best but the worst that is Western. Hence, Shiabu (1969), concludes that science and information technology has become the dominant culture of today's world, so it must be utilized positively for the benefit of society, culturally, morally, technologically and all round.

Implication of IT on Moral Re-engineering

Undoubtedly, the white man dominates IT and overtime, according to Egwu (2001), it is what he dishes out to African that Africans accept passively. Here, it is time to wake from our slumber and use information technology to communicate our cultural values to all.

Many children grow deviant behaviour because they have uncensored access to watch programmes designed for adults. Most programmes have parental guidance to indicate the category or age bracket of viewers thus, with no adult to effect control, children have unlimited access to view programmes. Hence the need to create awareness and a national consciousness through information technologies to extol the virtues of handwork, honesty and commitment to national development so as to overcome corruption, indiscipline and the 'get rich quick syndrome'¹ as well as other vices militating against the growth of the nation. It will put in check vices like truancy, fraudsters, riots and other negative attitudes that our youth cherish.

The contact with the Western world and subsequent colonialism has already brought in its wake a change in value system and a confusion of identity, as well as a silent and unhealthy competition to succeed that is why Shiabu (1969), submits that, our educational system in Nigeria is certificate oriented with emphasis on paper qualification not productivity or manners. In this era of IT, our educational training should include moral training, shared responsibility for the society and respect for dignity of labour. Also, the development of sound moral values is as important as our socioeconomic development such values built on love for hard work, patriotism, respect for others and the rule of law, is vital, if the nation must move forward.

The need to make the citizenry to participate effectively in nation building, through literary works and in information technology is not negotiable, in the present dispensation, literacy has gone beyond the ability to read and write, Nigerians must be computer literate and in other types of information technologies. The implications are far reaching because: the primary goal of information technology is to make data and information readily available, faster and cheaper than ever. So they should be applied positively to promote high values.

Recommendation

1. The foundation for everything starts from the home, parents should work together, so as to instill sound, moral training, discipline and confidence in their children.
2. Teachers serve as models, Educators should emphasis sound moral values in their students, by being first disciplined, before they can extend same, to those they leach.
3. The students should be complimented or praised for a job well done' and punished when they disobey.
4. The rules and regulation of the school should spell out appropriate sanction for an offence committed and this must be followed religiously.

5. Our educational programmes, and information communicated through various information technologies should portray African rich cultural background, customs and content.

Conclusion

The language used in communicating ideas through the various forms of information technologies is a double edged sword. When properly employed it can facilitate the proper moral re-engineering of the society hence this paper supports the submission by Uujamhann (1998), that, policy-makers should promote an educational programme filled with a knowledge of sound communication skills to facilitate the search for social justice, conquer poverty and promote National development. In this manner, the youth should be made to know the moral responsibility they owe the immediate society, family and nation.

Osunketan (2004), believes that if the objectives stipulated in the National policy on education (1981), are followed, the nation will produce citizens who are builders and not loafers or who believe that they can jump into sudden wealth. According to him, the national policy on education emphasizes the importance of moral education alongside religious training as necessary for the development of sound attitude and character training. It also aims among others at producing citizens who:

- a. Respect the growth and dignity of the individual.
- b. Inculcate moral and spiritual values on interpersonal relations.
- c. Shared responsibility for the common good of the society.
- d. Respect for the dignity of labour.

Thus, what the nation needs to grow strong and great, is the sincere commitment, discipline and strong will on the part of our leaders to encourage and implement the national policy on education fully because as Adegbola (1997), puts it, it will serve as.

A tool for the transformation of society, for the building of a free and democratic society, a just and egalitarian society — a land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens"

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