



## APPLYING FUNCTIONAL LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION IN HANDLING COVID-19 ISSUES IN NIGERIA

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**Abstracts:** Handling the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic scourge on the society requires a concerted effort through effective communication, with appropriate language for educating the masses and unraveling some teething issues. The novel pandemic disease demands new skills, abilities, attitudes, values and other forms of behavioral patterns for a healthy society and healthy living; in fact, a new sense of responsibility. Information/messages for educating the populace on the novel disease and vocabulary items introduced into the linguistic ecosystem must be packaged in an appropriate language and communicated appropriately in order to elicit the right responses/feedbacks. The paper, through a qualitative methodology (personal observations, etc.), aided with some purposive library materials, elucidates the uses of functional language and communication in handling the pandemic issues in Nigeria, with the view that when effectively deployed, will keep the public adequately enlightened on effective safety measures and personal hygiene practices. The communicative values of language and the roles of communication in managing the scourge of the pandemic through appropriate communication channels and language, form the major thrust of the paper. The information therein serves for awakening a sense of responsibility in all and sundry on health protocols, helping people to keep abreast of challenging issues of the moment.

**Key words:** - Functional language, communication, COVID-19 pandemic

### Introduction

Language and information dissemination (communication) are very important in achieving a desired behavioral change and in building a virile society. Language as the primary means of communication carries along with it vital information, including transmitting educational information of any type. The corona virus pandemic (COVID-19), which took the world by storm between late 2019 and late 2020, had many infected, resulting to psychological traumas; with attendant nightmares which are yet to be demystified. COVID-19, has no doubt brought changes in both the economic and day-to-day living of people and has invariably created some new vocabularies. The

acronym, 'COVID-19' itself, 'social distancing', 'self-isolation', flattening the curve; etc. are some new linguistic innovations, hence, some linguistic shifts into the linguistic repertoire; with attendant changes in the attitudinal patterns of people.

Certain groups of people, particularly the illiterate and rural dwellers have become vulnerable in the face of new communication gaps arising from the introduction of new vocabularies created by the novel pandemic disease. Language is the tool by which human beings carry out communication; a means of interaction and information dissemination. Language and communication are inseparable, in the sense that there can scarcely be a communication without a language.

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The major purpose of any communication is to pass across information from one person (communicator/encoder) to another, (the receiver/decoder). Dissemination of information is an important attribute of human life, carried out on daily basis, and must be packaged in an appropriate language as to achieve a communicative impact, hence, the relationship between language and communication. Lyons (1981:32) in this regard points out, “indeed, it is difficult to imagine any satisfactory definition of the term ‘language’ that did not incorporate some reference to the notion of communication”. This underscores the fact that the message of any communication must be transacted in a well-designed language system for it to be effective, since both are meant to produce positive reaction from the receiver.

Communication is a basic feature of all human communities and organizations. Communication primarily, is the process of transmitting or exchanging and receiving messages, information or data between two entities. This includes all the ways through which we can let other people know and share our thoughts, feelings, experiences, and knowledge. Communication consists in a sender and a receiver sharing a common code or language and a ‘safe’ channel, so that the former encodes the message and sends it for the later to decode. In any communication, the communicators have to use a language or set of symbols which both of them mutually understand. Harris (1979) refers to this as ‘a common frame of reference’, without which, mutual intelligibility in communication cannot take place. Communication occupies a central position in the day-to-day process of every society, and it is aimed at conveying some meaningful information between the sender and the receiver. That is to say, every speaker must have a definite meaning in mind, which they wants to share with the receiver, hence, “understanding the intended meaning of an expression is the core of the communication process” (Engels 1995). When a message is sent, received, and understood, it is then that communication has taken place between the interacting

persons, hence, meaning is the essence of every communication.

Human communication, which uses language, is word-based and verbal. Language, which is specific to human, is the medium of every communication. Language, as well as communication is dynamic and evolving, accommodating new changes and innovations from time to time, hence, the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on the linguistic ecosystem. COVID-19 pandemic has no doubt created some linguistic shifts which need to be handled to bring about understanding and linguistic equilibrium. Messages/information on COVID-19 pandemic are reported through language; intended of course, to achieve a communicative value; hence, the paper addresses the need for a functional language and communication for handling COVID-19 pandemic issues in Nigeria.

Responding to the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic on the society requires a concerted effort through effective communication, with the appropriate language as a means of communication. Hence, effective communication to vulnerable groups during times of emergency depends largely on well-organized information system and this among other issues, forms the crux of this paper.

The purpose of the paper is to highlight the use of functional language and communication as tools in achieving the effective management of the COVID-19 pandemic issues. Data was collected through purposive relevant library materials and personal observations during the scourge of the pandemic.

Theoretically, both language and mass communication theories are crucial to this study. Language is not just a means for the communication of thought; it is the very creation of thought. The article adopts the functional theory of language. The functional theory of language views language from its functionality or the roles/functions of language in a social setting. Functional theories of language propose language as fundamentally a tool or an instrument for achieving a means.

Mass communication theories on the other hand, is dynamic, and changes with the new media of



communication. However, based on what communication intends to achieve in this write-up, attitude change theory becomes more appropriate because it underscores how media plays an important role in understanding what communication does in shaping opinions, and the behavior of individuals in the society. Dependency theory, in particular, explains how the degree of our dependence on the media and their content is a major “variable in understanding when and why media messages alter audience beliefs, feelings, or behavior” (Defleur 1975:126) Dependency theory explains how media influences people in times of change or crises.

Conceptually, Language, which is as old as mankind is primarily an auditory system of symbols and the tool of significant expression, used in human society for the purpose of communication and transmitting information, culture and the totality of the way of life of a people. For its unique importance to human existence, language is said to represent the totality of any community that has it. Hence, Emenanjo and Bleambo (1999:34), agree that “language is key to the heart of the people...” This is because you cannot talk about the history, culture and the day-to-day living of a people outside of their language. Similarly, Crystal (1997), says, “language is the major means... of showing where we belong; distinguishing our social group from another..., language is the repository of the history of the people ..., it is their identity”.

The importance of language to human existence cannot be over-emphasized. Most of the things that make human existence necessary – the historical artifacts, culture, heroic deeds, etc, are handed down through language. Languages besides enhancing interpersonal relationships and co-existence among people, are valuable because, “they promote community cohesion and vitality, foster pride in a culture and give a community and (thus a work force) self-confidence” (Crystal 2000). Human language is often described as semiotic system, using certain well agreed upon symbols or signals to convey meaning from one person to another within a given speech community. Semiotic is a branch of study which investigates the properties of signaling systems, both natural and

artificial, especially with regard to the meanings or messages that they convey. It is essentially a communication of meaning (i.e. the message) with signs (i.e. sounds and symbols). Language plays a significant role in communication and subsequently in society building.

#### **Communicative Role of Language**

Most of the important roles of language which found expression in this article are summed up in its communicative values as follows:

- i. **Information role:** the most important function of language is for individuals to pass across information from one person to another. Language serves as a means of understanding ourselves and our society.
- ii. **Expressive Role:** Language serves as a means by which one can express one’s emotions/wishes, feelings or desires and attitudes towards one’s fellow beings or a state of affairs. Exclamations and swear words are some examples of this.
- iii. **Phatic Communion role:** Through language contacts, relationship can be established with other people within one’s speech community or beyond. A good example is found in greetings and exchange of banalities and pleasantries.
- iv. **Directive role:** we can use language to influence the behaviour or attitude of other people. Language can be used to obtain information as in asking questions, to stimulate actions as in issuing orders, commands, or by making requests. This can be found in media campaigns to persuade some actions like social distancing in COVID-19 messages, or to dissuade some actions, like converging together in this era of COVID-19, encouraging use of nose masks, constant washing of hands, use of hand sanitizers etc.
- v. **Ideational role:** This is the role of language for seeking the compliance of the forces of nature in accordance with the people’s beliefs or faith. We find this function of language in prayers, libation, incantations, divinations and some rituals performances, and making wishes.
- vi. **Performative role:** Language can be also used to bring about a sudden change in the state of affairs in



the real world as soon as the utterance is made. Examples, in conducting weddings; where a priest or a pastor, or a magistrate pronounces a man and a woman married or joined together, or in a law court, when a magistrate or judge hands down a sentence on someone for an offence, or declares someone acquitted, etc.

vii. **Persuasive function:** Language is used to persuade; thereby trying to turn someone from an evil way into a righteousness one. You can use language to turn an evil society to a good one. It can also be used to dissuade certain societal ills, and promote a good behaviour among members of a community. This is found in the use of language in the mass media. Language is used to advertise and inculcate a desired behavioural change among the citizenry and to dissuade an undesirable or a harmful attitude/behaviour. Also, appropriate language in education (formal or informal), produces attitudinal change. This is one of the functional uses of language. It is found in media campaigns and advertorials uses of language.

#### **Communication and some means of communication**

Communication centers on creating an understanding between a communicator and an audience, when a message is sent by a communicator through appropriate media/channels (Engel 1990: 25). Communication is taken in its broadest sense here as an individual and collective activity embracing all transmissions and sharing of idea, facts and data. Diverse means of communication are available: and are majorly electronic and print media. Electronic means includes - radio, television, computers, and the social media like, the Internet, YouTube, twitters, facebook, instagram, WhatsApp, text messages, emails, neon signs, electronic billboards, etc; while the print includes newspapers, pamphlets, leaflets, magazines, billboards, etc. Most of these electronic media-backed information technologies disseminate information at a supersonic speed to millions of audience in a matter of seconds. Today, the question is no longer the medium, but the message and the language for packaging them

Every message comprises the communicator, (the personnel), the message (the content/information), which

is transmitted through diverse signals - as written or verbal; the medium or the channel through which the message is communicated - which could be either face-to-face (one man to one man) or by the mass media.

Communication is made up of these key elements:

-Communicator: A person (or a group) with a message to be sent to another with an intent

-Message: the content which is transmitted in the form of various signals such as the spoken word and gesture (the information to be passed across).

-Medium: the channel used, such as face-to-face interaction or mass media (which has more than one person in the audience)

-Audience: The person or group which is the target of the message

-Feedback: The signals used by the audience to indicate their response to the communicator.

The message is targeted at an audience and every communication seeks a feedback or an expected behavioural change. In communication, it is argued that 'the medium is the message' but in functional language use, based on the importance of language and its function, in this context, we argue that 'the language is the message'; because language can make or mar any piece of communication, hence the concept - functional language.

#### **Functions of communication**

Communication has both individual and communal functions. Adequate information flow is crucial to the survival of every nation, state and even individuals. Functions of communication in any social setting as adapted from (MacBride 1980:15) include:

1. **Dissemination of information:** the collection, storage, processing and dissemination of news, data, pictures, facts and messages, opinions and comments required to understand and react knowledgeably to personal environment, national and international conditions, and for positioning one to take appropriate decision.

2. **Socialization:** Communication provides a common fund of knowledge, making people active participants of the society in which they live, which



foster social cohesion and awareness thereby permitting active involvement in public life.

3. Humans communicate to make important ideas common knowledge, thereby increasing information uniformity and sharing of experience. Hence, there is always a motivation for human communication which anchors on sharing of ideas.

4. Humans communicate to promote and transmit desirable attitudes, thereby increasing uniformity of opinion

5. For stimulation of personal choices, and aspirations; the fostering of individual/community activities, geared to pursuit of agreed aims.

6. Debate and discussion: exchange of facts needed to facilitate agreement for clarifying differing viewpoints on public issues; and supplying of relevant evidence needed to foster greater popular interest and involvement in all stages of life are provided through communication.

7. Preservation cultural heritage: the dissemination of cultural and artistic products for the purpose of preserving the heritage of the past; the development of culture by widening the individual's horizons, awakening his imagination and stimulating his aesthetic needs and creativity.

8. Education: the transmission of knowledge so as to foster intellectual development, the formation of

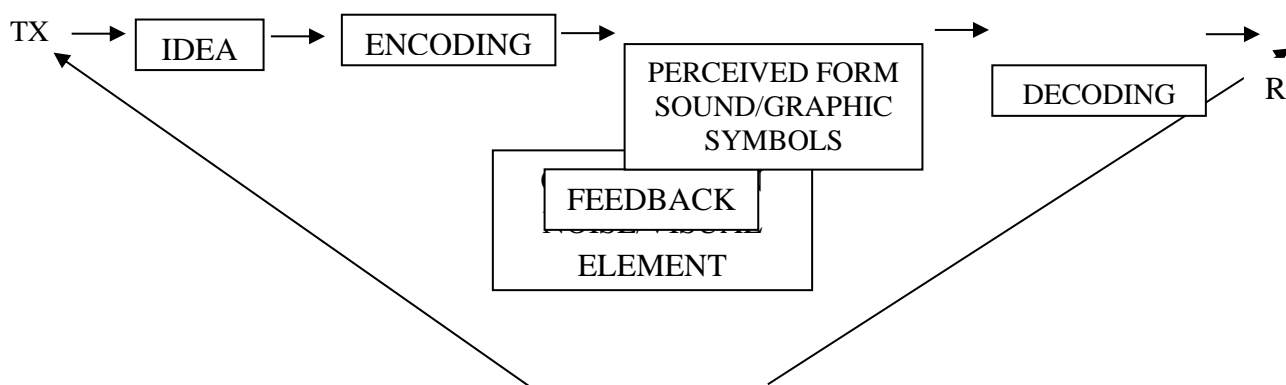
character and the acquisition of skills and capacities at all stages of life.

9. Entertainment: the diffusion, through signs, symbols, sounds and images of drama, dance, art, literature, music, comedy, sports, games, etc. for personal and collective recreation and enjoyment.

10. Integration: the provision to all persons, groups and nations access to the variety of messages which they need in order to know and understand each other and to appreciate others' living conditions, viewpoints and aspirations.

Besides, the individual functions; communication is a vital need for collective existence of entities and communities. A society as a whole cannot survive in this era if it is not properly informed about political and diplomatic affairs, international and local events, weather conditions, etc. Governments and nations need varied information from the diverse corners of the globe on trends in demographic variations, harvest results, water and natural resources supplies, etc., for effective dynamic future planning Thanks to advancements in technology and information and communication gadgets which have reduced complexities in information dissemination.

Below is the Communication Process (culled from Utuk 1995:5)





### **The Corona virus disease (COVID-19) and the pandemic**

The novel Corona Virus disease (COVID-19) was first recorded in the Wuhan province of China in the later part of 2019. The disease was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) for its ability to mutate and massively spread unhindered with supersonic speed, around the globe. The massive spread and the ravaging nature of the disease led to a global shutdown from the first quarter of year 2020. The pandemic conferred a new status to the whole world, where the fundamentals of free movement and association were drastically curtailed and the whole world was forced to a lockdown. It was a transitioning from a freedom-loving world to a world covered down by a highly contagious and infectious pandemic disease. The entire world system was ultimately made to settle into 'a new normal' while its fast-forwarding process was paused for a season. Sit-at-home laws were handed down to the entire population of the world, with its compliance strictly monitored, using data from smart phones in some technologically advanced nations. Movement was restricted only to the most essentials. Economies grounded to a halt. Family members were separated, incomes vanished, places of worship - churches and mosques alike, were closed down, while free movements were restricted to the barest minimum.

COVID-19 has been a nightmare, a ubiquitous invisible enemy! Apart from creating insecurity and economic challenges, it has also created some psychological effects. This has brought a traumatic challenge to the entire population of the world; hence, some levels of expertise are needed in handling the attendant psychological disorders to adjust to the new pattern of life. The disease being as powerful and pandemic as it were has changed the cause of the history of the world and has also succeeded in creating some new linguistic disequilibrium, and hence, new vocabularies. By the changes in the linguistic equilibrium, new meanings and vocabulary items on public health concepts have emerged into the linguistic ecosystem, while some existing words and phrases have assumed new or added

meanings; new terms have also been created by the novel situation. Terms like COVID-19 itself, self-quarantine, taking shelter, social-distancing, contact-tracing, self-isolation, flattening the curve, 'droplet transmission', biosafety, and some phrasal 'instructions' like 'stay safe' and being 'responsible', etc., have almost become some sort of mantra and default conclusions to many adverts/messages sent across to other people nowadays, especially on the social media.

How does the general populace get this needed information effectively packaged and which language is suitable, especially for the vulnerable rural dwellers and the illiterate? Hence, functional language and communication for managing the situation at hand becomes a panacea.

#### **Functional language**

A functional language is a language that has the advantage of being both handy and effective in communication to convey the intended message, without barriers. Functional language is an effective use of language in situations and areas of need at a particular point in time. It is a language of day-to-day conduct and administration of situations/conditions as they emerge. For instance, language is needed for greetings, explaining rules/codes and emerging issues and conditions. From the point of view of this paper, functional language is the language that works for the moment; which includes, exposing the populace to and giving people needed basic knowledge about some critical issues through the language of the environment. In a pandemic situation like COVID-19, a functional language is necessary for providing basic steps for preventive health practices. A functional language is an effective language that is capable of managing the effects and traumas of the day.

Enforcing some guideline, e.g., the use of face mask, hand-washing, safety practices/protocols, quarantine, etc., are packaged in appropriate language and communicated through some convenient channels. The language can be used to educate the populace effectively in a short notice through the primary mode of communication. Besides, people have to learn some new



concepts like 'lockdown, hand washing, mask wearing, biosafety (measures), etc. Each of these concepts is transmitted via the medium of language. The language and the medium of communicating the concepts become major issues of study to avoid misinformation and half information.

### **COVID-19 and Linguistic Shift**

Covid-19 is not just a pandemic viral disease; it is now a name that has entered the linguistic repertoire of every human society across the globe within a short period of time. With the pandemic viral disease, the world and its inhabitants have had to adjust to 'a new normal', and learn about new health concepts, like, 'social distancing', 'droplets', 'transmission, 'flattening the curve', and other such health terminologies. People have to understand the basics of some protocols/containment measures such as 'lockdown', 'contact tracing', 'hand washing', 'mask wearing', observing personal hygiene, like hand sanitization and other protocols for the prevention of the highly contagious infection. Understanding these concepts and much more, requires the application of functional language and an effective means of communication. Hence, language choices and the mode of communication become imperative for communicating the fallout of this global pandemic to the citizenry. In order to deal with the global emergency, information has to be made available to the populace on public health matters, especially on efforts at minimizing the risks of individuals contracting the virus. Challenges of misinformation matter a lot as individual outcomes have greater influence on the overall course of the Covid-19 pandemic than is the case in most other disasters. So, effective language and the right communication models are the instruments needed for handling this emergency situation.

### **Language and Communication in addressing COVID-19 challenges**

While effective transmission and reception of communication can be hampered by a phenomenon called noise, incompetence in the use of language by the speaker or writer creates semantic problems in understanding and translation of messages. This

subsection puts into perspective some of the roles of functional language, communication and effective information dissemination in tackling the COVID-19 challenges and the pandemic issues. The roles of language and communication in addressing the COVID-19 issues takes root from the functions of both language and communication as means of broadening an individual's mind on world affairs, transmitting data and information. Every bit of useful information is channeled as a message of education through an appropriate language and some modes of communication to achieve desired changes in attitude.

Having earlier listed the functions of both language and communication, we can see that both are of vital importance and go hand-in-hand in handling COVID-19 matters of any sort. Communication /information dissemination is meant to elicit a form of feedback or reaction from the hearer/receiver in the form of behavioural change.

Any information needed to impart any form of education is packaged in a language. Language in itself is intricately and intimately linked with the process of information dissemination; while information dissemination on the other hand involves socialization, integration and development of individual's skills and intellect for survival, growth and development. Language and communication are therefore inseparable in building a virile society. An effective communication is a product of well-packaged information through a language well understood by the hearer/decoder. The role of language as a medium of instruction in any educational process and awareness campaigns programs cannot be overemphasized. That communication takes place or not depends on effective language use.

A functional language that captures the interest of the masses is needed in transmitting COVID-19 reports; language being crucial in transmitting preventive measures and messages needed to effect a behavioural changes and how to manage 'the new normal' through preventive measures and to provide more permanent protections from disasters



### **Methodology of Using Language and Communication in Reporting COVID-19 Issues in Nigeria.**

All communications and information dissemination through any mode are geared towards enlightening the populace on affairs bordering on safety and healthy living, hence, needs be packaged in an appropriate language. Most of the channels of communication including the internet and other social media outlets have been agog with messages on safety protocols on COVID-19. Several of the communication channels are already in use:

1. Face-to-face communication using advocacy groups like leaders of opinion, groups and associations like the church, mosques, town, village and ethnic associations and leaders as the case may be.
2. Advocacy programmes through radio/television bill boards, handbills and advertorials on papers and magazines.
3. Media campaigns using jingles, advertorials; Radio Nigeria (FRCN) and National Television Authority (NTA), use a lot of these jingles and physical demonstrations to illustrate safety protocols. A lot are also being done on most of the international media (electronics), demonstrating lots of actions encouraging social distancing, displaying contact numbers for emergency calls, etc on the pandemic and suspected cases. There are already a lot of media campaigns going on worldwide at the moment through various modes of communication, geared at encouraging safety, protocols, employing the persuasive use of language.
4. Enlightenment programmes for rural dwellers using the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate environment to drive home the messages to check the pandemic should be invigorated.
5. Language and education programmes put in music, dramas, composed in the languages of the people can persuade good morals and discourage deviant behaviours, especially among the more vulnerable ones in the society, like women and children, should be encouraged.

6. Health protocol programmes couched in appropriate languages, using pamphlets and leaflets can bring positive changes among the populace, is vital in keeping them informed before health issues and challenges of noncompliance with rules and guidelines.

7. Communication channels like, Churches and Mosques should organize counselling programmes for communicating issues hygiene and health protocols. We believe that use of language through effective communication mode can help in inculcating, positive and responsible behavioural attitudes in handling covid-19 matters to achieve a healthy Nigeria.

8. Text/WhatsApp messages: though common and easily available to all and sundry, these channels have been very effective in communicating COVID-19 messages even to the grassroots.

### **Challenges facing the language and communication process**

1. Multilingualism/language diversity: this poses a challenge of choosing the language to use as default by the communication companies for use in sending messages on phones and WhatsApp, where many languages are spoken. This is challenge to choosing a functional language to operate in a multilingual setting.
2. Power supply: lack of power/electricity, especially in the rural areas hampers the use of some electronic communication channels effectively.
3. Cost of data: where data is involved in sending messages, this can be hampered by exorbitant costs which may be unaffordable by a good many of the populace.
4. Illiteracy among the rural dwellers: this hinders effective communication, especially when it is done in the language they don't understand.
5. Complacency on the citizens: up until now, many people especially in Nigeria still believe that the COVID-19 pandemic is a scam. Even the death of loved ones to the disease was not convincing to a lot of people. People are being persuaded to take the vaccines made available for free. The information on discovery of variants of the disease is funny to many both elites and the grassroots.



6. False information and unverifiable rumours: because of availability and accessibility of information in the social media, effective communication is almost impossible. People post and share whatever contrary to the true situation. Inability to manage the information available to the public is a serious challenge to the use of functional language and communication manage the fallouts of the COVID-19 pandemic situations.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

We have so far discussed functional language and communication in handling the fallouts of COVID-19 pandemic. The functions and contributions of each of the concepts were highlighted. COVID-19 pandemic is no doubt a public health challenge which deserves more than a cursory attention in reporting its transmission to the public and healthcare practices, using appropriate language for driving home the message.

However, it is our recommendation that default messages sent by communication outfits should be in the languages understood by the target audience. In the presence of language diversity, the language of the immediate environment or the mother tongue of the target audience should be the choice for effective communication.

Communication companies and the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) should work in collaboration Nigerian linguists to use the mother tongue of the audience or the language of the immediate environment as the default for phone ring tones as a quick reminder of what to do in times of emergency.

Nonetheless, since the cause and possible permanent cure for this plaguing disease have been controversial, everyone has to take responsibility for themselves, persuasive language use and communication approach is recommended to get the grassroots observe health recommendations and expert advice for safety.

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