

The Language Factor and Internet Penetration in Nigeria: A Practical Assessment

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Abstract

Efforts towards greater linguistic diversity in internet usage have often been seen as means of achieving increased internet penetration. Perspectives in this regard are based on several stated or unstated assumptions, one of which is the view that people who do not speak the major internet languages such as English or are not fluent readers in them would naturally opt for their own languages if/when such languages are used on the Internet. This paper presents the argument that in the Nigerian context, assumptions such as this may be misleading in view of findings in past studies which show that Nigerians generally do not enthusiastically embrace the acquisition and use of literacy skills in indigenous languages. In this regard, this article x-rays all the unstated assumptions behind quests for more language options on the Internet with specific reference to Nigeria. It concludes that the provision of Nigerian language options online would not significantly enhance internet penetration in Nigeria without broader adjustments to the roles and status of indigenous languages, as well as greater socio-economic inclusiveness in governance. The article therefore recommends holistic linguistic, socio-economic and political reforms to fight general social exclusion for which linguistic exclusion of any form may be merely symptomatic.

Keywords: *Internet, Indigenous languages, English, google, information*

Introduction

The Internet has become a ubiquitous entity in society, governing information processing dissemination, education, entertainment, commerce and so on. It is indispensable as a modern “enabler of

economic growth and opportunity” (Kende, 2017). So much of human activities are today driven by the Internet that anybody or group of persons with no access to the Internet are at risk of exclusion from mainstream societal functions, and could be consequently deprived of the attendant opportunities and powers. The Internet is about information, and information is primarily delivered in language. This means that the language factor is a critical matter in internet access. Whoever will connect to this vast interlocking web of information and diverse activities must be reasonably competent in the languages in which the system operates. This is believed to be a critical factor in the digital divide characterised by unequal access to the Internet between the advanced world and some developing societies (Osborn 2006, Olubode-Sawe 2010, Johnson, Pejovic & Stam, 2011). This is because over 80% of information on the Internet is provided in just ten languages (Internet World Stats, 2019). None of these ten is an African language. Many Africans either do not speak any these ten languages or they do not possess sufficient competence in them to be able to access the information presented online despite the fact that some of the languages are ex-colonial languages which still function as official languages in most African countries.

Several scholars who have explored this issue have concluded that the inclusion of African languages as vehicles of dissemination of information online would increase access and reduce the digital divide. For example, Olubode-Sawe (2010:573) wrote:

The presence of Yoruba and other indigenous languages on the modern communication gadget will have a significant impact on social interactions in these languages among the users. The first issue is that of access. Those who are literate only in indigenous languages can compose texts and email messages in their own languages. Such a development sends a strong message about the value of indigenous languages to its speakers [sic], especially the younger people.

Ordinarily, this logic seems impeccably accurate. It seems that this perspective accounts for the fact that in recent times, Google has made some attempts to achieve linguistic inclusion by involving more

languages, including some Nigerian languages. Now, the Google search page comes with options of user guides and prompts in Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba as well as Nigerian Pidgin. cursory observations made by this researcher based on informal scrutiny and questioning of students seem to suggest that these Nigerian language elements are simply often ignored by users. It is in the light of this that this article attempts a scrutiny of the basic underlying assumptions of internet linguistic inclusion advocacy, specifically as it affects Nigeria, with the aim of sensitising stakeholders to the criticality of some more important areas requiring intervention if greater inclusiveness is to be achieved in internet usage. Prior to this, the article explores some background issues and general perspectives on the language factor in internet penetration, as well as general trends in Internet penetration and internet use in Nigeria.

This article is not making the claim of being a presentation of novel ideas, concepts and perspectives. It is simply intended to help achieve a more concentrated focus on associated challenges that must be addressed more urgently so that efforts at linguistic diversification on the Internet, targeted at Nigerian users will not produce redundant internet content.

General perspectives on Language and Internet penetration

The fact that internet traffic is hugely dominated by ten of the world's thousands of languages is a stark reality demonstrated by statistics sourced from Internet World Stats. Some major languages (English, Chinese, Spanish, Arabic, Portuguese, Indonesian, French, Japanese, Russian, German) account for 80% of internet traffic. As stated previously in this article, scholars have variously identified language as a critical factor in the global digital divide. For example, Johnson, Pejovic, Balding, & Stam (2011) argue that there are several other crucial factors such as infrastructure challenges, limited technical staff, poor data, and poor data collection mechanisms especially in remote areas with widely dispersed communities with poor roads. In addition, the language barriers pose additional challenges. Also, Osborn (2006) examines the dynamics of internet access in Africa and argues that beyond the matter of physical access, which relates to availability of concrete infrastructure and hardware, there is the challenge of "soft access", which has to do principally with the availability of internet content in indigenous languages, and of course the possession of

literacy skills in those languages. These, the scholar sees as critical limitations that must be overcome if the bulk of the African population would have “real access” to the Internet. According to Osborn, efforts by private organisations and individuals in the diaspora to intervene and enhance the development of local language content and internet literacy in Africa portend much hope for the removal of the linguistic impediment to internet access in Africa.

This perspective is also shared by West (2015) who laments the fact that in many places in Africa, content is available only in a non-native language, thereby linguistically excluding local speakers from internet services. The criticality of several other challenges like infrastructure limitations, high cost and low levels of digital literacy are also highlighted by West (2015).

Olubode-Sawe (2010) explores this issue from the perspective of the adverse effect of globalisation on African languages, pointing out that the dominance of internet space by English has served to reduce the worth of African languages. She argues that it is imperative to develop African languages so that they can be suitable for use in accessing information in this modern age. The point here is that the language factor is presented by this scholar as a critical element in enhancing access to the digital world.

This perspective obviously must have informed the decision of the Tenth World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) to set the target of placing all world languages on the Internet by 2015 (Neira, Jimenez, Ania, 2009). Obviously this lofty goal has missed the target.

Mutume (2019) also laments the paucity of internet content in non-European languages, pointing out that it is a “growing area of concern” in a situation where the original design of the Internet “had a strong technical bias towards English” with several systems and tools based on English or other Western languages, thereby forcing programmers “to be functionally literate in those languages to generate content.” Mutume points out that it is in light of this that a study by the Pan African Localisation Project concluded that “Limiting people to the use of ICTs in a foreign language tends to exacerbate the digital divide, makes ICT adoption long, difficult and expensive, and impoverishes local cultures.”

From the foregoing, it is clear that the general sway of opinions is that internet access improvement can be enhanced via (among other means) the provision of content and other elements in

languages that are not currently represented on the Internet, as the case is with Nigerian languages. It must be stated at this point that Nigerian languages are not completely absent from the Net. However, their presence does not generally go beyond some scanty content, as well as some corpus resources.

Internet access and use in Nigeria

According to Internet World Stats, as at 30th June 2019, the number of internet users in Nigeria was 123,486,615 representing 61.4% of the population. This is the result of the phenomenal growth in internet use since 2000 when only 0.1 % of the population had access to the Internet. This growth in internet penetration, which has been driven largely by mobile telephony, does not however give a perfect picture of the intensity of internet use or the extent to which the population is immersed in online activities such as commerce, education, information sourcing, emailing or even entertainment. It must be noted that the figures above simply aggregate the number of persons who access the Internet, including those who only visit once in a blue moon. This becomes clearer if one takes a look into some details. For example, Internet World Stats figures reveal that out of the 123,486,615 Nigerians (61.4% of population) who have access to the Internet, 17,000,000 have Facebook account while in Egypt with just 49,231,493 persons with internet access (48.7% of the population) there are 35,000,000 people with Facebook accounts. Also, it is interesting to note that Nigeria does not appear on the list of the top ten African countries with the highest number of online shoppers in spite of the relatively high percent of internet penetration (UNCTAD B2C E-commerce index, 2018). These figures prove that in terms of 'real time' penetration, the situation in Nigeria is still far from the ideal, considering all the immense benefit attendant to having a country's commerce, education, information service and so on immersed in the Internet.

The increase in internet penetration from 0.1% to 61.4% in nineteen years is a result of improvement in device ownership (in terms of quantity and quality, particularly in regard to smartphones) and general infrastructure improvement in the area of broadband availability (Umezuruike, Oludele, Kuyoro & Izang, 2015) and the advancement from 2G to 3G and now 4G technology. It is instructive to note that this exponential increase in internet penetration occurred

despite the fact that not much has been achieved towards linguistically domesticating the Internet. There remains a pitifully low volume of indigenous language content, little internet terminology development, and little indigenisation of loan words. Indeed, there is hardly any significant linguistic diversification development beyond the fact that the Google search page now comes with optional prompts in three major Nigerian languages and Nigerian Pidgin. Also, some Nigerian languages feature on Google translate, while some Nigerian languages corpus resources are also being added.

The question that arises naturally therefore is: will there be even greater spread of internet access and more robust engagement with internet resources in Nigeria if content is massively available in Nigerian Languages? It seems obvious that such a move will surely offer some gains. However, a better understanding of the issues can be achieved by discussing some of the underlying presumptions behind internet linguistic inclusion advocacy.

Internet in more languages as a panacea for greater access: the underlying assumptions

Apart from instances of arguments hinged on language rights, most arguments for the provision of internet in indigenous languages which are centered on the aim of increasing internet penetration have been based (whether overtly stated or implied) on a number of assumptions, which are discussed in this article. These assumptions are itemised below:

- a) There is a significant number of people who would be able and willing to read online content in their own languages if it was available. They are currently unable to use the Net because they cannot read in European languages.
- b) People would generally prefer to access the Internet in their own languages than in European languages.
- c) Several people would relate better with internet technology and the content if such are delivered in their mother tongue and not in European languages.

An assessment of the assumptions in the Nigerian context

It is doubtful if the first assumption is true of Nigeria, as it could only possibly hinge on the naïve premise that since many Nigerians cannot

speak or read English well, they would be more comfortable reading in their own languages. The reality is that those who cannot read in English are almost certainly not educated enough to have any propensity to use the Internet in any language whatsoever. Some significant education is required for a person to have a need, desire or capacity to interact with online information resources, regardless of the language in which it is delivered. In Nigeria, whoever does not have the capacity to read the English of online content is almost certainly not likely to desire online resources or have the ability to interact with the system, except in the most unlikely case such a person that had received adequate education via an indigenous language and not English. The hard reality is that there are no opportunities to get really educated via indigenous languages in Nigeria, even at primary school level, because English has unfortunately almost become the sole language of instruction in most of the primary school years, and all of the educational levels beyond primary school. The implication of this is that many of those who are thought to be currently linguistically excluded from the Internet because of low indigenous language content are actually excluded due to lack of education. This perhaps is a stronger factor of exclusion. It is doubtful if any citizen without junior secondary school education would have any need to search the Net for information, or attempt to carry out any intricate online based activity without assistance. Such minds may, in the first place, not be educated enough to cope with the minimal complexity associated with navigating any site, no matter how user friendly.

In the Northern parts of Nigeria, vast sections of the population are stark illiterates, whom mediocre governance has excluded from modern life via poverty and social deprivation. The Internet and whatever is available on it are the farthest things from such minds. They are often bogged down with survival issues. As far as the Internet is concerned, millions are still on the outside of things due to lack of education and also due to attendant social limitations. They may have no reason to bother about looking in.

Beyond these, there is the problematic situation of inadequate literacy skills in Nigerian languages, a situation that forces one to skeptically ponder and wonder about the level of readership online content in indigenous languages would have if/when such is made massively available. Low literacy capacities in indigenous languages has been a source of concern among scholars, particularly as it affects

young people who invariably are the most ardent consumers of online content. In this regard, it is instructive to note that the population of Nigeria is made up predominantly of youths (close to 65% of Nigeria's population is below age 25, NBS, 2018) Many of these young ones are increasingly becoming more incompetent in reading and writing indigenous languages. As Amao (2014) observe:

It has even been reported that a good percentage of Nigerian children cannot read and write comprehensibly-well in their respective mother tongues, and that the statistics of yearly performance in O'Level language-subjects Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo do not in any way correlate with the true practical competence and performance of the learners in those languages (pp 166).

This corresponds with findings in Are (2018) which clearly reveal that a strong factor in lack of engagement with indigenous language literary texts among Nigerian youths is the inability to read well in those languages. In fact, if/when there are sites with local language content, such sites may (ironically) actually linguistically exclude many Nigerian youths. This clearly call to question, all arguments and propositions that have claimed that the provision of local language content is panacea for deeper internet penetration.

One must point out at this point that, going by the national literacy survey report of the National Bureau of Statistics, literacy rates in both English and other languages are quite high. However, the statistics in the said report relate principally to basic literacy, which may not reflect the depth of reading capacity and educational sophistication required to engage meaningfully with online contents. Insights into holistic literacy like studies conducted by Amao (2014) and Are (2018) show that indigenous language literacy is in a dismal state, particularly among the youth. Who then would consume local language internet content?

This challenge is more daunting because of the fact that many languages spoken in Nigeria are either not written, not standardised or not taught in school. In addition to this, it is doubtful if young speakers of languages that are written and even taught in schools would give

materials written in Nigerian languages a second look, in view of some well documented language attitude issues. These have to do with prestige related preference for functioning in English, even where indigenous language options are available (Are 1989). More recent research, such as Adedun and Shodipe (2011) and Ayenbi (2014), clearly paint the picture of an unfavourable disposition of Nigerian youth toward their mother tongues. It is doubtful if this trend can be sidestepped by simply providing internet in Nigerian languages. Rather, it seems more likely that more fundamental measures toward language revalorisation must first be prioritised (as will be discussed in a subsequent section of this article).

Finally, one must note that in principle, the presupposition that users' own language on the Internet would enhance better intellectual engagement with online content is valid. There is little doubt about the fact that for many Nigerians who use their mother tongues for daily activities, having to make the switch to English for the purpose of information sourcing or commercial and administrative transaction is a source of significant perceptive dysfunctions. As Amao (2014: 165) posits, people are often "expected to re-invent their Nigerian and African society in a colonial English which, unfortunately, conflicts with the essence and entities of their instinctive mother tongues: a language quite foreign to the possible breadth and scope of their creative capacities." However, the provision of online content in Nigerian languages would only address the challenge of perceptive dysfunction when all things are equal in respect of all the issues previously raised about literacy and provision of education in Nigerian languages.

Conclusions and recommendations

Having examined some presumptions and background rationale behind consistent advocacy toward the provision of internet content in Nigerian languages as a panacea for increased internet penetration, one may conclude that practically, the presumptions are somewhat erroneous. This conclusion stems from the reality of the dearth of virile, prevalent or widespread literacy tradition in Nigerian indigenous languages, and the existence of language attitudes characterised by preference for English. Also, one cannot ignore the well documented fact that there is some measure of regression of indigenous languages.

In light of these, it is hereby recommended that the provision of internet services and content in Nigerian languages should be viewed as one of the objectives and projected attainments for which holistic indigenous language literacy development, and language revalorisation should be given attention by government and non-governmental entities with the relevant interest and capacity. In this regard, the teaching and learning of Nigerian languages must be enhanced via appropriate educational policy initiatives, while role allocation to indigenous languages targeted at prestige improvement are pursued in education, administration and conventional electronic media. As a corollary of these, metalanguage development and loan word indigenisation (towards infusing Nigerian languages with appropriate Information and communication technology [ICT] terminology) must be vigorously pursued. These are background measures without which the lofty dream of internet in indigenous languages will produce wasted efforts.

In view of the levels of illiteracy, poverty and the attendant extreme social deprivation and exclusion that pervade some parts of Nigeria particularly the North Eastern parts, one must observe that no measure of linguistic diversification would bring the affected people into the modern world. Until these more fundamental challenges are decisively addressed, the potential of exponential economic growth and development offered by internet-driven activities will continue to elude the country.

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