



Language appropriateness during the COVID-19 epidemic in an inclusive society focusing on persons with visual impairments, case of Masvingo, Zimbabwe.

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Abstract

The vibe to create an inclusive society where no man is left behind has spread in most societies worldwide. However, COVID-19 pandemic is a novel phenomenon that has put the world on reboot. Most social technological advances were rendered less useful whilst in some cases people would be innovative and find a way to survive the world reboot. An inclusive society is such one social advancement where all men would live and share without discrimination or marginalization based on disabilities. Application of digitalization during the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a digital divide especially in the inclusive society where the most binding substance has been the language of conveying information on COVID-19. Having to rely on mostly English language has proved inappropriate especially in societies where English language is a third or fourth language and especially in areas that are remote like rural areas. Though, English as a language maybe translated into local vernacular languages, in such inclusive societies, there are also those with disabilities such as persons with visual impairments. This study seeks to explore the tenets of language appropriateness during COVID-19 pandemic and the ways of disseminating information in appropriate language forms in an inclusive society especially for the visually impaired.

Keywords: *Language, Appropriateness, COVID-19, Inclusive Society, Visual Impairment*

1. Introduction

In an inclusive world before the COVID-19 pandemic, people have come to realize that disability is not inability. There have been mechanisms that have been adopted in order to make the life of those with disabilities much independent on those with abilities. People with disabilities like the persons with visual impairment were being incorporated into the mainstream society without marginalizing and institutionalizations. English language has been adopted as a common language for communication for most people across the world. It also follows that during the COVID-19 pandemic, information dissemination was done under the English language platform despite the fact that other parts of the world do not recognize English as their first language. This research paper seeks to interrogate the inappropriateness of language during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.2 Orientation

According to Aswathapa (2017) communication is the crux of human existence. It needs to be understood and practiced in the right perspective to realise the objectives of survival on this planet. Human beings can only achieve better existing conditions if they can communicate better. Thus, domestic issues, international and worldwide issues like pandemics could be better communicated to reduce catastrophes that would be impending. On the same level, emerging trends of technologies and markets can also be easily realized once effective communication takes place.

Mamoria (2018) states that there is no other crucial time than when there is a pandemic when global effective communication can be put to test. During the COVID-19 global pandemic, the effectiveness of communication

became apparent. The language that was used and the forms of communication became the centre stage for a successful campaign against the spread of COVID-19 pandemic.

Kamesh (2019) states that communication is one of the most basic skills that a human is endowed with the instant of his/her creation in the womb. Thus, all human beings understand communication as the basic survival aspect of life. When COVID-19 was discovered and scientists realized that it was a threat to humanity, the first important thing was to communicate to all humans the impending threat.

Moorhead and Rocky (2019) say that the biggest barrier to communication amongst the global human beings is their scattering all over the global habitable places. Moorhead and Rocky (2019) argue that wherever human beings settled, they found ways of communicating. This included use of physical things like drums or fire. Most important of all they would use a language to communicate amongst themselves and with communities outside of themselves.

According to Stephen (2018) there are roughly 6 500 languages that are spoken across the world today reflecting the diversity of world languages. For example, in Nigeria, there are more than a thousand languages spoken by different tribes. Despite this diversity of languages, Ethnologue (2021) argues that there are twelve most spoken languages worldwide of which the most prevalent are Mandarin Chinese with 918 million speakers, Spanish with 480 million speakers and English with 379 million speakers.

During COVID-19, the most prevalent mode of communication used was the Internet, whereby information was posted on websites of scientists and medical practitioners. According to the Centre for Diseases Control (CDC-England) (2019), COVID-19 was first discovered in Wuhan City of China. Obviously, the mode of communication and language used was Chinese Mandarin and this was posted on one scientist website. Due to modern technology of computer in-built translations, it was easy to find out that there was danger impending. However, it is important to note that Chinese Mandarin was used first to disseminate COVID-19 news. As it follows, the Asian region of China became awash with news of COVID-19 and the other regions in the world could not properly understand the gravity of the pandemic in 2019.

1.3 Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate the appropriateness of the language that was used during the COVID-19 in an inclusive society with special emphasis on people with visual impairments.

1.4 Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study would be;

- To establish forms of communication used during COVID-19
- To find out the age appropriateness of the languages used,
- To explore the social status of the recipients in the inclusive society

2. Literature review

Literature review for this study is based on themes formulated from the research objectives stated earlier as follows.

2.1 The Concept of language and communication

According to the Language Doctors (2021), language and communication are considered as different and distinct aspects which are closely related. Language is considered a tool that helps expressing and carrying out thoughts and feelings of individuals. It is a medium that is used to send thoughts and feeling from one individual to the other. Thus, it allows people to express out their feelings as well as what they are thinking at any given time. This can be in form of sounds, symbols, written or spoken words, posture, gestures or signs.

The Language Doctors (2021) further stressed that communication on the other hand is a process of exchanging messages and information either verbally or non-verbally. It is averred by Language Doctors (2021) that a language is the prime medium of communication. Effective communication is only possible when appropriate language is use. Without a language there is no communication at all and without appropriate language there is ineffective communication. In the case of the presence of a pandemic, communication becomes ineffective due to use of inappropriate language.

Carey (2021) avers that there are over 4000 languages worldwide including minor languages. Language became an apparent tool of use when COVID-19 broke out. Each region in the world has a different language from the other. It becomes effective communication if a message is relayed and comprehended. Without having been received properly, it means there is ineffective communication.

COVID-19 broke out in Wuhan City, China in December 2019. The major language of communication in Wuhan City is Chinese Mandarin. The major modes of relaying messages in this city are televisions, the internet, the radio and mostly the cellphones. These were the major modes of communication used to disseminate information pertaining to COVID-19 as the impending danger to the whole world. The assumption was that the society was composed of homogenous human beings with access to televisions, the internet and cellphones. However, the world is not confined to Wuhan City alone. There are cities in as far places as Africa, with people with need to be communicated the impending pandemic.

2.2 The Concept of Language Appropriateness

According to Bartleby (2021) language appropriateness relates to tailoring the language you use so that it is suitable for the age, perceived social status, form of communication and the context of the occasion. Speck (2014) states that in order to achieve effective communication the language to be used should be tailored along the lines of age appropriateness, the social status of the recipient should be considered, the form of communication is important and finally the reason or context of communication needs to be factorized.

Hardman (2017) states that there are many eventualities of language failure, for example a war. Lots of casualties may result in the case of failure of a language or when an inappropriate language is used especially in a pandemic like the COVID-19 pandemic. Obviously, the Chinese Mandarin was to some extent appropriate for some regions in China but for the world audience, it was inappropriate. This accounts for the time it took for most Centres for Diseases Control to decipher the message about the COVID-19 pandemic until early months of 2020 (CDC-England, 2020).

3. Materials and Methods

This research was a mixed methods research whereby both the qualitative and quantitative research methods were applied. This research was more inclined to the qualitative research methods than the quantitative methods making it a qual-quant. Creswell (2018) posits that a mixed research study draws strengths from both methods making it a much stronger and reliable type of research method. Thus, the study employed interviews as well as distribution of a questionnaire. The population of this study was infinite comprising all the residents in Masvingo urban communities especially inclusive communities with Visually Impaired people.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to come up with a sample of 10 Senior Citizens and 10 persons with visual impairment and 10 community members. All research ethics were observed in order to undertake this research.

4. Results

The research findings were presented under themes formed from research objectives stated earlier as follows;

4.1 Forms of communication used during COVID-19

Responding to this research item, the majority of respondents highlighted that the main forms of communication used during the COVID-19 were the Televisions (Especially Cable News Networks like the BBC, CNN and France 24), Local Radio Stations, Newspapers and Cellphones (Social Media like WhatsApp and Facebook). The respondents also highlighted that in Masvingo these forms of communication has a base language of English. One Citizen stated that;

During the lockdowns, we would stay glued on to the Television and rely a lot on social media news on our cellphones.

These sentiments were in line with WHO (2020) report which stressed that people should get their information on televisions and internet. However, some participants from the interviews who were Senior Citizens and Persons with Visual Impairment stated that the form of communication familiar to them were the hear-say stories from their relatives especially the younger generations with access to the other forms of communication like the cellphones and internet. One Senior Citizen stated that;

We do not have access to such Satellite based television and internet and we cannot navigate the gadgets and also English being spoken is not easy to understand since it is not our language.

The majority of the respondents also highlighted the importance of effective communication as important during the pandemic. Most of them impressed that during the pandemic, COVID-19 became a language on its own where people were required to speak COVID-19 which was not conversant with many people especially those in Masvingo.

4.2 The age appropriateness of the languages used

In response to this research item most of the respondents stated that English Language as the main language used to relay information during the COVID-19 pandemic was highly generic to younger generations and the younger generations became aware more of this pandemic. The respondents also stressed that COVID-19 pandemic had more effects on Older generations than younger generations and deaths toll was prevalent on

older generations. The respondents highlighted that English Language as the main language of dissemination of COVID-19 news became irrelevant especially to the ages and generations it was meant to address.

The participants stated that COVID-19 language introduced new vocabularies that the older generations were not familiar with. The respondents highlighted terms like sanitization, social distancing, vaccination, the jab etc. This COVID-19 languages were not familiar especially to the older generation. Respondents also stated that COVID-19 language is not appropriate for the people it is intended for.

4.3 The social status of the recipients in the inclusive society

Responding to this research item, the respondents stated that the society in Masvingo is inclusive in that it has all ages being active in the social production. It also includes vulnerable and marginalized groups like orphans and those with disabilities. The respondents also stated that as far as COVID-19 is concerned, the most vulnerable groups are the senior citizens as well as those with visual impairments.

The respondents stated that the COVID-19 language was highly inappropriate especially to the senior citizens who required constant interpretation of the new vocabulary ushered in by COVID-19. The new COVID-19 language was relatively in English language and not only simple English language but the most unfamiliar English language carrying English words that are not simple even to interpret. The respondents stressed that words like “novel virus”, vaccination, lockdown, social distance, sanitization etc were very difficult to interpret to senior citizens let alone the visually impaired persons.

The respondents also stated that for those who are visually impaired, when they hear of social distance, it does not occur to them that it is accompanied by markings on the ground or protective boundaries in shops that keeps other people at a two-meter distance. These social distance markings are also difficult for senior citizens to see especially when accompanied by someone, maintaining social distance is very inappropriate. Those with Visual Impairment stated that most of the concepts used are abstract concepts for a person with visual impairment. The use of pictures, gestures, markings and television motion pictures were meaningless to the Visually impaired person in an inclusive society. It became a double challenge for someone who is a senior citizen with visual impairment which is most of the cases in Masvingo, that the English language being used with the abstract presentations becomes completely inappropriate to the individual.

5. Discussion

5.1 Forms of communication used during COVID-19

It was found out that the forms of communication used during the COVID-19 were the Televisions (Especially Cable News Networks like the BBC, CNN and France 24), Local Radio Stations, Newspapers and Cellphones (Social Media like WhatsApp and Facebook). This was in line with Carey (2021) who avers that during pandemics, the modes of communication are the contemporary modes of communication that are being used at that time.

5.2 The age appropriateness of the languages used

It was also found out that the COVID-19 pandemic was highly generic to younger generations in Masvingo and the younger generations became aware more of this pandemic at a faster pace than the older generation. This was in line with Bartleby (2021) who stressed that due to the language of communication and the modes of communications available, younger generations are likely to communicate faster using a common language than the elderly relying on vernacular languages.

5.3 The social status of the recipients in the inclusive society

It was found out that the society in Masvingo is inclusive in that it has all ages being active in the social production. They are also vulnerable and marginalized groups like orphans and those with disabilities. According to Speck (2014) not all societies are homogenous, therefore Masvingo society was typically heterogenous comprising members of different age groups and composition.

5.4 Forms of communication used during COVID-19

The results found on this research item implies that the forms of communication were most appropriate because during lockdowns people would spend most of their time glued on televisions and where possible listening to the radio. However, it also implies that the younger generations were spending most of their time on their cellphones communicating with others outside the city or outside the country.

5.5 The age appropriateness of the languages used

The results found implies that the language that was being used was most appropriate to the younger generation. The COVID-19 language was not suitable for the elderly who would easily understand information if disseminated in local languages rather than English language as an international language.

5.6 The social status of the recipients in the inclusive society

The results found out implies that the society in Masvingo comprise different types of people from different linguistic backgrounds and some have visual impairment. COVID-19 information dissemination should have considered a common base language that could be understood even by those with visual impairment especially since Masvingo has an inclusive society with diverse people.

6. Conclusions

Following the findings above, the researcher concluded that since COVID-19 is most effective on those at advanced stages of their lives (Senior citizens), and the language being used (English) is inappropriate for these senior citizens. The researcher also concluded that in such societies that are inclusive, COVID-19 language is not appropriate to persons living with disabilities like the visually impaired people who cannot see the social distancing marking on floors of shops and organizations. The researcher also concluded that the COVID-19 language is not appropriate to the social status of some citizens like the disabled persons and senior citizens.

7. Limitations and recommendations

Following the conclusions made, the researcher recommends that the COVID-19 language should be diluted to be suitable for these senior citizens and especially should be decoded to their easy to understand vernacular language. The researcher also recommends that the COVID-19 language should be appropriate to societies which are inclusive for the sake of those with disabilities like the persons with visual impairments. The researcher also recommends that COVID-19 language should be entrenched in the younger generations so that they grow up knowing about how to curb corona virus in the future. The researcher also recommends that participatory demonstrations for the Visually Impaired persons should be done. The researcher also recommends that programmes should be designed to involve senior citizens and visually impaired persons in the information dissemination sessions.

Funding: This research received no external funding

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest

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