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Deconstructing the Menace: Use of Fake Accent on Private Radio Stations in Nigeria

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Abstract:

Media scholars, veteran broadcasters and the public have been expressing divergent concerns over the proliferation of fake accent on the Nigerian media waves, particularly on private radio stations. This phenomenon has been tagged a menace, creating false assimilations and strains on the semantic inclines of listeners particularly middle aged Nigerians and the older generation. This paper adopts the Uses and Gratification Theory to discuss the use of fake accent by analysing the presentation styles of On Air Personalities on Cool FM and Soundcity Radio Stations in the country. These Radio stations record very high number of listenership and findings revealed that many radio presenters equate the radio format of their stations to the reason they adopt the use of fake accent and that the ability to speak with a foreign accent is seen as a major criterion for getting a media job in Nigeria. The paper stresses the importance of speaking right through the adoption of features of connected speech as presented by notable media organizations and certified institutions saddled with the responsibility of teaching and training non-native speakers of the English Language. It concludes by encouraging media professionals to appreciate the uniqueness of the Nigerian media and cultural terrain.

Keywords: *Broadcasting, radio presentation, fake accent, on-air personality, menace, uses and gratification, speaking right*

1. Introduction

The basis for the liberalization of the broadcast industry in Nigeria was established in the country's 1979 constitution (Oketunmbi, 2007). Alluding to Section 39 of the Document, Momoh (2002) reiterated the provision of the constitution which affords every citizen the right to own any medium for the dissemination of information. Twenty three years later, "the constitutional provision was made manifest in the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission NBC Decree 38 of 1992" (Oketunmbi, 2007, p.53). The Decree established the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission and empowered it to accept and screen applications for the issuance of licenses for private participation in broadcasting in the country. Section 2 Sub-section (1) (f) of the Act which established the commission makes it clear that the commission can "receive, consider and investigate complaints from individual and bodies corporate, regarding the contents of a broadcasting station and the conduct of a broadcasting station" (National Broadcasting Commission, 1992). Even though the commission granted the first set of licenses to some firms and individuals in 1994, private radio broadcast operations started two years later in 1996 with the emergence of Ray Power, the first private radio station on 100.5 Mega hearts on the frequency modulation band (Oketunmbi, 2007).

Since the emergence of the first private radio station in 1996, the number of radio stations all over Nigeria has risen to over 300. The Director-General of the National Broadcasting Commission, Ishaq Madibbo Kawu, revealed at the 71st General Assembly of Broadcasting Organization of Nigeria in November 2018 that, Nigeria's President, Muhammadu Buhari had approved the issuance of operating licenses to two hundred and thirteen (213) new public and private broadcasting outfits in the country (Kawu, 2018). Of the 213 new operating licenses approved, 147 licenses were for FM radio stations. With the upsurge in the rate of establishment of radio stations in the country comes an array of programme formats, breaking the monopoly of government owned stations. Even though scholars and members of the public are beginning to discuss the reasons for stereotypic contents on private FM stations as being witnessed in recent times, a salient yet often overlooked issue, is the use of fake accent by many radio presenters, which according to Kperogi (2018) "are just abominably inaudible babbles that mindlessly grate on the hearer's auditory sensibilities with their exaggerated but spectacularly incongruous nasalization of every sound". The central question is what could be the reason(s) behind the use and favouring of fake accents by On Air Personalities in Nigeria? This paper examines the uniqueness of radio broadcasting and discusses the use of fake accent on air which many Nigerians see as a menace that is eroding the culture and speaking standard of the people.

2. The Uniqueness of Radio Broadcasting

Radio has evolved dramatically since it began in the 1920s (BBC, n.d.). In Nigeria, the radio industry has expanded in leaps and bounds. The following table gives an estimated distribution of radio stations in Nigeria, based on available online list of radio stations in operation in the country (Information cradle, 2019):

No	Ownership	Estimated Number	Percentage %
1	Federal Government Owned	37	9.04
2	States Owned	61	14.91
3	Private Owned (including community radio)	265	64.79
4	Campus Radio	46	11.24%

Table 1: Estimated number of Radio Stations in Nigeria as at 2019

Source: Analysis of Radio Stations in Nigeria, 2019

This estimation does not include online radio stations and the external broadcasting service of the country, the Voice of Nigeria. From the table above, it is obvious that private radio stations now hold the largest chunk of radio service in Nigeria i.e. an estimated percentage of 64.79% (with a major concentration of these radio stations in the Southwest Geopolitical Zone of the country), an attestation to the fact that the enabling environment given to private radio stations to thrive had paved the way for commercial radio to establish itself and allow the industry to grow (BBC, n.d.). Radio is one of the most accessible, most flexible and cheapest forms of mass communication, which provides entertainment and news to millions of people all over the world, primarily through the broadcast voice (Fitzgerald, 2006). Radio presenters are the voice of the station, who create the tone and style of the station and establish a relationship for listeners. One of the most interesting things about radio is that although produced for a remote mass overhearing audience, the language is oriented towards creating a sense of intimacy between the presenter and listener (Fitzgerald, 2006). Fitzgerald (2006, p.349) further notes that:

Because of the dominance of the voice and the wide variety of users for which the medium is employed, radio provides an important area for language analysis, particularly in those areas that give primacy to the social and political context of language use and its discursive organization i.e. sociolinguistics, pragmatics, critical discourse analysis, and conversation analysis.

Radio is an aural medium (unlike the television and the internet where images both still and moving, accompany spoken words) and it relies on the voice or sounds to convey all intended information to the audience. Alfred (2013, p.8) noted that a good radio presenter is expected to "possess a good microphone voice and good command of the language of broadcast". No doubt a good, clear and pleasant voice can be cultured, polished and made amiable for broadcast purposes, it behoves the presenter to learn the techniques involved in ensuring balanced pitch, assimilation, catenation, diction, pauses, stresses, modulation, rhythm, word grouping and other features of connected speech.

3. Menace of Fake Accent

The proliferation of radio stations in Nigeria has no doubt given rise to a variety of programmes and styles on the air waves. However, media scholars, veteran broadcasters and a wide range of the public have been expressing displeasure over the pervasiveness of forced American accent employed by radio presenters, particularly on many private radio stations in the country. According to a September 18, 2014 poll on sexiest accents published by CNN, Nigerian accent was ranked 6th sexiest, picking the speech patterns of the 1984 Grammy Award Nominee and 2016 Hard Rock Cafe Hall of Fame Inductee, King Sunny Ade and multi-award winning actor, Omotola Jalade Ekeinde. The Nigerian accent was described as dignified, with just a hint of wilful naiveté, the deep, rich, "ohs" and "ehs" of "Naija" bend the English Language without breaking it, arousing tremors in places other languages can't reach (CNN, 2014). With Ethnologue putting the number of Nigerians who speak English at a minimum of 60,000,000 million people (Eberhard, Gary and Fennig, 2019), it is not surprising that Nigerians would raise an eye brow on the funny style and accent of English Language being perpetuated on air as opposed to the Received Pronunciation, which older and middle-aged Nigerians grew up with. Okoka (2015) stated that:

I am an instructor in speech. As soon as I hear any funny pronunciation, I call the presenter to order. I can't allow anybody to say "ah, llemi, in your station somebody is pronouncing this way?" Some people fake. You know Nigerians like to fake. By the time you're faking American English with your local accent, everything will go awry. I hear all sorts of things on air nowadays and it depresses me.

One of the famous presenters of the news feature programme "Newslines" on the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) Kehinde Young-Harry expressed her dissatisfaction over the quality of broadcast presentation experienced on new radio and television stations in the country. According to Young-Harry (2015), People are not specifically trained in what they are doing. Everybody thinks they have an idea of what they want to do or they think they have a flair for it. But even when you have an idea and you have flair, you still need the basic things like how to sit in front of a camera and how to speak. You are not supposed to sound like an Englishman. You have to sound Nigerian so that your audiences that are Nigerians can understand and relate to you. You don't have to put up an accent

before you are seen as a professional. In our days, that wasn't the case. You are proud to be who you are. Now, you hear all kinds of accents and because it is not their real accents, the underlining accent is still there; because the person cannot pronounce the word correctly.

Also, Okwoche (2017) bemoaned the low quality of broadcast service in Nigeria stating that: Proprietors want to have people with foreign accents on their stations. Good English doesn't have an accent, it is just good English. The fact that you speak with an American accent, which most of them learned off TV, doesn't make you a good journalist. It's a big shame, really. There is so much inexperience on Nigerian airwaves these days and that's scary. Once you have a pretentious accent, stations want to snap you up.

Adenuga (2018) condemned the use of fake accent which has become a menace on the Nigerian airwave stating that: I get irritated and disgusted when I hear some female presenters who sound fake, as they force a British or American accent. In my days, the Daniel Jones Pronunciation Dictionary was the presenter's bible and if you didn't attend the weekly presenter's training, forget about going on air for that week.

The public cannot rule out the fact that some private radio stations have on their list of employees, staff members who were born either in the US or the UK and have acquired authentic American or British Accents. However, apart from this category of radio presenters (who could be easily identified), the Nigerian media waves have been inundated with fake accent, with lots of concerns raised not only by the masses but by professionals and media scholars.

4. Methodology

In discussing this issue, the paper examined the use of fake accent and the gratification that comes with it. In-depth Interview, a method in Qualitative Research Approach was adopted in examining the reasons On Air Personalities on private radio stations in Nigeria use fake accent. Respondents were purposively selected from Cool FM and Soundcity Radio Stations. The radio stations were chosen based on their presence in Lagos, Port Harcourt, Federal Capital Territory Abuja and Kano cities of Nigeria.

Lagos, Port Harcourt, FCT Abuja and Kano ranked 1st, 2nd, 4th and 6th respectively among states with the highest Internally Generated Revenue (IGR) as at the end of year 2018 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2018). This directly or indirectly impacts on the growth, maintenance and sustenance of the stations. Also, the two stations deploy Contemporary Hit Radio Format, a radio format that focuses on playing current and recurrent popular music. The research is framed on the Uses and Gratification Theory, which is a theoretical approach to understanding "why and how people actively seek out specific media to satisfy specific needs" (Severin and Tankard, 1997, p.335).

According to Baran and Davis (2009, p.112), Uses and Gratification Theory has a heuristic value because it gives communication scholars a "perspective through which a number of ideas and theories about media choice, consumption, and even impact can be viewed". Using this theory, four On Air Personalities who were willing, ready and available to take part in the study were purposively selected to be interviewed on the use of fake accent and the supposed gratification that comes with this awkward speech pattern.

5. Discussion of Findings

According to McQuail (2010), goals for media use are aimed at informing or educating, identifying with characters of a situation in the media environment, enhancing social interaction and other objectives. The medium of communication for radio presenters is the oral medium i.e. spoken words and the users being radio presenters themselves. General findings from media personalities reveal that radio presenters whom many audience members find to be guilty of being "fake" on air with their awkward accent are always in denial of such. However, specific findings from this paper are categorized into:

- Radio Identity
- Assumed criterion for media job
- Off-air favours

5.1. Radio Identity

Each radio station has its own identity i.e. the formats radio stations are known for. According to the New York Radio Guide (2009), a radio format or programming format gives an overall description of the broadcast content of a radio station. Radio formats are frequently employed as a marketing tool and are subject to frequent change. National Institute of Open Scholarly NIOS (2013) made it known that radio formats are determined by the requirements of listeners of radio stations and these requirements are not the same. A few of these requirements include but not limited to the total population of the area, the number of men and women i.e. sex ratio, the language(s) spoken in the area, schools/colleges, health facilities, nearest radio/television stations and other requirements. Radio format can be Music Oriented formats, Spoken Word or Human Voice format (New York Radio Guide 2009, NIOS 2013) and the inclusion of Sound Effects as a radio format (NIOS, 2013), with radio stations featuring a mix of the three identified radio formats.

Cool FM and Soundcity Radio Stations operate the Contemporary Hit Radio (CHR) format, (a sub-category of the Pop/Adult Contemporary category of music-oriented format) and a mix of both spoken word format (News/Talk, Sports) and Sound Effects. This is a common feature among many private radio stations in Nigeria, with few exceptions that feature more of Spoken Word Format and Sound Effects (for example, Lagos Talks 91.3 FM, Nigeria Info 99.3 FM and so on). According to Respondent1, the Contemporary Hit Radio format requires presenters to sound "groovy", energetic and modern but not fake. Because the CHR usually features current and recurrent music, the style of speech presentation tends to be a little fast with lots of energy and vocal action (a slight variation to news casting style). However, this should have

nothing to do with the fake accent many radio presenters on a number of private radio stations use which according to Respondent2, is "yippy/pop star way of talking on air, which they think helps to create a stylish impression".

5.2. Assumed Criterion for Getting a Media Job

5.2.1. According to Respondent4

Some well known stations give preference to recruiting those who have lived abroad for some time and have acquired either British or American accent. I won't want to mention names of such radio stations but as a media person yourself; you know what I am talking about.

This assumption might be presumably true of certain private radio stations in Nigeria, who favour British/American trained broadcasters. However, because many would be radio presenters have been exposed to lots of Western radio and television entertainment programmes, coupled with radio station proprietors willing to "snap you up once you have a pretentious accent"(Okwoche, 2017), it is believed that one major criterion for getting a radio job is by imitating or forcing a foreign accent. Looking at the ownership structure of Cool FM radio station, the afore stated assumption might not be unconnected to the station featuring a number of foreign trained personalities to work on the station and its sister station – Nigeria Info FM. The reason might not be far from the careful consideration of the station's format and programming style, primarily intended at the young and energetic population of the country. Also, since the Nigerian Pop culture grew largely from contact with Western media, adoption and assimilation of Western media and entertainment styles, including use of language and mannerisms will be relatively high.

As one of Nigeria's prominent music oriented radio station with large listenership, it would not come as a surprise that youths and a great number of middle-aged adults would want to tune in to the station. Likewise, since the station runs the CHR which is a major attraction to the category of listeners mentioned, it is highly expected that presentation style would be groovy and more energetic, with advertisers having their messages placed on the station, due to the listenership rate.

Soundcity Radio is one of the radio stations owned by Consolidated Media Associates. Just like Cool FM, Soundcity Radio features the CHR and enjoys wide listenership by youths and middle-aged adults. According to Adepetu (2016), Today's broadcasting is targeted broadcasting. If you want to speak to the man of the house, there are certain things that interest him. You cannot be speaking to the man of the house and at the same time talking to the woman of the house. You need to meet people at the point of their needs. We try to meet our viewers and listeners at the points of their needs. Here, it is evident that targeting, which is a potent aspect of marketing, is key in the establishment of CMA's channels. A target audience according to Ang (2014, p.14) "is a particular group of consumers within the predetermined target market, identified as the targets or recipients for a particular advertisement or message". Businesses that have a wide target market (like the Consolidated Media Associates and AIM Group, owners of Cool FM) will focus on a specific target audience for certain messages to be sent (Ang, 2014).

With a defined target audience, the business exercises some economic power and one way Soundcity (and the other media channels of the mother company) has achieved this is through content creation aimed at youths. Soundcity Radio also features personalities with dual nationalities (just as Cool FM does) and with the stiff competition amongst radio stations to cling the top position in media ranking, a generalized assumption that being able to speak in foreign accent would attract more listenership and fan base for programmes, is inevitable. One of the respondents also stated that "you hear people sound in a different way when they are on radio and they sound completely different when they are talking to you face to face".

It is obvious that to a large extent, media ownership, media structure, media format and constructed forms of media ideals are interrelated in discussing reasons On Air Personalities use fake accents on radio stations, particularly on private radio stations in the country. The third reason to this postulation has to do with the gratifications radio presenters enjoy when they seem to sound phony.

5.3. Off-air Favours

Findings from respondents reveal that there had been numerous cases of media production agencies, selecting voice over artistes based on the way they speak. In fact, a respondent who was not a major part of the research but offered to lend a voice in this regard while trying to probe into the authentication of this point, cited personal instances where she had been invited for "voice-overs" based on her ability to speak in a phony way on air. Also, the major respondents alluded to the fact that some media production agencies require scripts to be voiced in "groovy, yippy styles" and this to a large extent, leads to a lot of voice over artists faking their accent, both to suit the primary purpose and to garner more audio productions.

6. Conclusion

With the criticisms that surround the use of fake accent by many Nigerian private radio presenters, findings of this paper have been able to deconstruct the menace, revealing three reasons radio presenters on many private radio stations in the country prefer to fake their accent. The first reason has to do with radio presenters equating the radio format of their stations (majority being the Contemporary Hit Music Format) to the reason they have to sound foreign, especially since the country's popular culture stems from wide contact and high dependence on Western media. The second reason which is highly related to the first reason has to do with ownership structure of these private stations, coupled with the desire for acquisition and assimilation of Western media and entertainment values which have over the years been seen as

the standard upon which media and entertainment advancement is framed. The third reason has to do with the gratification radio presenters get when they sound phony on air, as attested to by respondents who revealed the magnitude of compliments they get from listeners because of their "angelic" voices.

Even though the art of radio presentation has to do with creativity, there is no doubt that correct pronunciation of words differentiates a trained broadcaster from the average man in the society. This contributes a great deal to the vocal appeal presenters think they could achieve through "faking". According to Efetie (2012, P.31), When we talk meaningfully, we hardly talk by using single words. We speak or interact by the use of a combination of words spoken continuously without unnecessary breaks. The break when it occurs (after a group of words) portrays an idea.

It should be noted that good English is good English. Also, proper pronunciation of words is not synonymous to awkward or fake accent, as presentation style shouldn't be an impediment to vocal clarity and understanding of spoken words on air.

Therefore, it is important for radio presenters (whether private radio station presenters or presenters on government owned radio stations who to an extent try to stick to the rules of speaking logically without faking or pretence) to adopt the features of connected speech which have been presented by notable organizations such as the British Council, the British Broadcasting Corporation, English Language Training Resource Centres, the National Broadcast Academy and a host of recognized agencies for studying English as second language. Some of these features include: assimilation, catenation, clarity, delayed plosion, diction, elision, emphasis, intonation, intrusion and linking, pace, pause, pitch, rhythm, stress, weak forms and word grouping.

Also, media proprietors should understand the difference between the need for presenters to have a foreign accent in order to sell their programmes and presentation styles that come with radio formats. Nigerian born radio presenters should appreciate their Nigerian accent, be proud of who they are and have a clear understanding of the nuances of their audience, the cultural calibration of the people and the uniqueness of the country's multiculturalism. Furthermore, the National Broadcasting Commission should ensure that radio stations organize periodic staff training and that all media training schools in the country are subject to regular quality control. Lastly, radio presenters in Nigeria should cultivate the habit of using the English pronouncing dictionary for proper word articulation and listening to international media organizations that prioritize quality over quantity.

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