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Cultural and linguistic barriers to information retrieval and dissemination

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Abstract

The paper takes a look at culture and language as barriers to information retrieval from libraries and information providers on the one hand, and dissemination of information to library users by these information providers on the other hand.

These tend to pose biases in interpretation, analysis and final decision to organize library materials in specific ways. This does occur in cataloguing and classification, sometimes even in the indexing of the materials.

Culture has a lot to do in these biases as well, since different cultures provide different language and semantic (semiotic) derivations. The problem is then that of the information user, as research and in turn education of the information user is affected when information retrieval is made difficult. Information dissemination also becomes unsatisfactory when the chips are down.

A study of some of the cataloguing practices in academic and public libraries in Nigeria was done. Ten (10) libraries were randomly selected and questionnaires used to elicit information from the cataloguers and indexers. Twenty (20) library users in each of the libraries were also questioned.

The results showed that culture and language have effect on both the information providers (cataloguers, indexers) and the information users. Both exhibit biases in their search, provision of information, and eventually dissemination of the gathered information.

Recommendations are made on how knowledge organisation can remain a helping rather than hindering factor in information retrieval and dissemination. It is advocated that culture and language be used as enabling factors in this regard and concerted efforts at this are put in educational and research institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Information retrieval and dissemination as concepts presuppose information collection or storage of information stored, and which should be made easily retrievable and available to its users. Thus libraries as repositories of knowledge have the prerogative to make information storage, retrieval and dissemination as problem-free as possible for information users.

Culture and language are factors that come into play in the Information Storage → Information Dissemination → Information Use Cycle. Information providers (e.g. libraries and librarians) unfortunately, tend to exhibit biases in the way they organize the information at their disposal, because the language in which the information is presented, and the cultural milieu from which the information emanates, often interfere, and become barriers to proper information flow and transfer. Information retrieval thus becomes difficult and information dissemination is made unsatisfactory. The cultural and linguistic barriers to information retrieval and dissemination in Academic and Public libraries in Nigeria is the focus of the study. The cataloging and indexing practices in the libraries are examined to find out what cultural barriers exist and how these can be overcome so that the research and education potentials of the library users are not hampered.

The study is necessary considering the vital role that proper understanding of culture plays in instruction. Libraries are social organizations and like all organizations call for adequate study of its language and the people's general way of life especially their information-seeking behavior. Information seeking behavior is key to knowledge acquisition and skill development. Shoki (2001) identifies the need to have a mastery of a peoples' job culture as prelude to a job seeking habit of a people as well as their attitude to work. He recognizes the cultural and linguistic implication of information provision and interpretation.

The problem of the users in their bid to retrieve information is also critically examined and attempt is made to find solutions to these problems. Catalogues in the libraries are studied; especially the subject catalogue and the users questioned on their information retrieval patterns.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the pattern of information provision and retrieval in the libraries?
2. What are the linguistic and cultural barriers to information dissemination and retrieval?

What is the perception of respondents to provision and use of information dissemination and retrieval tools in libraries?

LITERATURE REVIEW

INFORMATION RETRIEVAL AND INFORMATION USE PATTERNS

Information Retrieval System is the selection of documenting information from a store in response to searching questions in statements, in words or other symbols. It involves both automatic and manual systems, and implies tools or devices that organize a body of literature in such a way that it can be searched conveniently. Information retrieval tools such as bibliographies, indexes and library catalogues are good, and their importance cannot be overlooked. The information retrieval process is also fast being governed by developments in information technology (Chowdhury, 1999).

The catalogue in any library is the heart of library operations and without it, location or retrieval of materials is difficult. As a matter of fact, as affirmed by Osiki (2001), researchers often get nonplussed due to some generalized ignorance on how to access library holdings, and also that the mastery of library cataloging system can be effectively utilized to enhance scholarship among them. Much research has been conducted on information needs and use and on information retrieval but less on usability. Use of language, and the vocabulary of information organized for retrieval is important, as more research on evaluation of indexes is required to ensure that all efforts at information provision contributes to actual usability of the final product - the information received. (Milstead, 1994).

Amoako (2003) also advocates for the availability and accessibility of information. He sees the need to make information services available to everybody not just decision-makers but to everybody - when they need it, where they need it, and in the form they can understand and use to make decisions or participate in decisions”.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN INFORMATION SEARCH

Language is the means by which skilled and educated professionals are trained so that they can participate in national development. (Chumbow, 1998). Language is also a means of communication, a vehicle of culture and a documentary of folk wisdom and therefore may facilitate or become a barrier to development (Egbokhare, 2003). It is the most dependent instrument of culture and an instrument of development. Much as language and culture are interwoven, access to information can determine whether useful decisions are made or not. Only when information has been searched for and is used can this happen. According to Egbokhare (ibid.), access to information is restricted and exclusive in many instances due to poor infrastructure and high level of illiteracy in spite of development in ICT and nanotechnology.

CATALOGING AND INDEXING PRACTICES IN INFORMATION ORGANISATION

Every library material is an entity that has its own integrity, usefulness and occupies its own position. The item therefore, should have its identifier (s). The process of allotting identifiers to the items in a library collection is known as subject indexing which eventually leads to classification. (Ola, 2001). The language of subject indexing as such becomes of concern to the information specialist. Are the cataloging and subject indexing practices meeting the information retrieval needs of users? How can feedback on

information stored get to the information providers (e.g. libraries) and how do these practices affect information dissemination to users?

METHODOLOGY

Descriptive survey research method was adopted for the study. The population is made up of cataloging librarians and indexers of Academic and Public libraries in Nigeria generally and those of libraries in the South-South zone of the country in particular. The area covered in the study is largely what was normally called the Southern Belt of Nigeria. It is customary nowadays to talk of zones, thus we have South –South, South – West and South – East as used in the study as shown below:

TABLE 1. LIBRARIES USED IN THE STUDY

1. SOUTH – SOUTH

S/N	NAME OF LIBRARY	TYPE	LOCATION
i.	John Harris Library, University of Benin	Academic	Benin City
ii.	Edo State Library Board	Public	Asaba
iii.	Delta State University Library	Academic	Abraka

2. SOUTH – WEST

i.	Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan	Academic	Ibadan
ii.	Oyo State Library Board	Public	Ibadan
iii.	International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) Library	Academic	Ibadan
iv.	Simeon Adebo Library	Public	Abeokuta
v.	Lagos State Library Board	Public	Lagos
vi.	National library (Ondo State Branch)	Public	Ondo

1. SOUTH – EAST

i.	University of Port Harcourt Library	Academic	Port Harcourt
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The sampling is purposively done choosing from the areas listed since the researchers both reside in and come from the Southern part of Nigeria.

The sample is made up of cataloging/indexing librarians from 5 (five) academic and 5 (five) public libraries as well as 20 patrons each of the libraries. The library patrons used were those who visited the library

between 10am and 5pm each day. The first twenty of such in each library were used.

The questionnaire is used as the main instrument of the study. There were two questionnaires, one for cataloguers/indexers, and the other for library patrons. Both questionnaires were designed by the researchers and validated for content and construct validity. Reliability co-efficient of 0.85 was also recorded when tested for reliability.

Data collection was done aided by two research assistants who had been trained on how to do the administering. The administration of the questionnaire was carried out between February and March 2006. Data analysis was done with simple frequency counts.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The Public libraries all use the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) scheme with the exception of the National Library of Nigeria, which uses the Library of Congress (LC) Classification Scheme, and they serve the general public. The academic libraries use the Library of Congress Scheme and the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH). The IITA library indexes its journal articles and produces current content page services to its researchers. Though the IITA is a bit restricted in its users, the other academic libraries serve University students, lecturers and staff.

The academic staff and students of the Universities come from different cultural backgrounds. For the University of Benin, the different cultural backgrounds include Bini, Ijaw, Itsekiri, and Yoruba. They speak a wide spectrum of languages. For the University of Lagos and the University of PortHarcourt, the environment is highly cosmopolitan. Mixed cultures of users, drawn from different parts of the country use the library.

The Public libraries serve all kinds of people from diverse cultural backgrounds. However, depending on where the libraries are, the majority of users vary. For instance, more people from Bini, Itsekiri and Ijaw cultures visit the Delta State Library Board than in the Oyo State Library Board, where majority is from the Yoruba culture.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Pattern of Information Dissemination and Retrieval

Data provided from the libraries under study show that there is no significant difference in the pattern of information provision and utilisation. The shelf labels and cards catalogues, which make provision for author title and subject, are commonplace in the libraries.

The following tools are common in the libraries:

- The LC Subject Headings and LC Classification Schemes for cataloguing and classifying library materials.
- Selection tools, publisher's catalogues and recommendation lists from heads of departments and other principal staff of the Universities.

Of all five academic libraries only the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) is fully automated. By that, library users have access to e-

mail, CD-ROM and other Information Technology facilities. The IITA library has a long track record of information provision using modern technologies. Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan has in recent times made daring efforts to be automated. With that, information users search the CD-ROM, have access to e-mail facilities, and an Online Public Access Catalogue still in trial stage. The adopted library scheme is mostly the Library of Congress (LC) for the Academic libraries and the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) Scheme for the Public libraries. The John Harris Library, University of Benin uses both the LC and the DDC Schemes. The LC scheme is popular in the academic libraries because the staff respondents claim it is ‘ the most suitable for an academic library since it covers all aspects of knowledge.’

It is only ironical that the broad coverage accorded to the LC Scheme is again seen as one not covering local subject matters and languages. See Table V. It could be said that the information dissemination pattern does not have much variation as most of the libraries have just the catalogue, shelf cards and classification tools as media of information dissemination. The DDC is reported to be simple to use by all the Public libraries. But it could also be a case of cultural bias. Once a particular idea is adopted it may not easily be changed. It does seem as if cataloguers generation after generation keep on to the same scheme as adopted by their predecessors.

In like manner, it can be said that user’s patterns have little variation. See Table IV.

Linguistic and Cultural Barriers

As briefly described in the early part of the paper, the different locations of the libraries have cultural characteristics of the immediate environment. Culture in the study takes similar definition as given by McGarry (1993) as “a shorthand term for the way of life of particular human groups as all the activities that this way of life entails. Thus, culture would include the various agencies and institutions devised to put the foregoing into effect”.

What this simply means is that the way and manner by which we interpret and organise knowledge is strongly guided by our cultural believes. Culture therefore “provides the matrix for those rules by which we use language, non-verbal signs and symbols” (McGarry, *ibid.*).

The two categories of libraries are well known except that it must be noted that the universities, which bear academic libraries, are federal and state universities sharing common features. The public libraries are established in their different locations to cater for the general public.

Language remains a major culture indicator even as is adopted in this study. As could be seen, different Nigerian languages are spoken in the study’s locations. It is even notable that languages, which reflect cultural data in the result of the study, mostly reflect the language of the libraries immediate environment. Although, federal universities draw their intakes from all over the country, there is clear evidence that the language that is largely spoken, remains that of the immediate environment. Thus, the University of Ibadan, although a federal university, apart from English, has Yoruba as the language mostly spoken by both staff and students. The results show that more than 50% of the study’s subjects speak the immediate language of the environment as evidenced in Tables II and III. Generally, Yoruba is the major language of communication as 60% of the respondents come from the Yoruba culture, Benin (20%), Urhobo (10%) and Ijaw (10%) as shown below:

TABLE II: Language Background of Library Users

S/N	NAME OF LIBRARY	LIBRARY TYPE	NO.	LANG. USED IN THE LOCATION	LANG. OF HIGHEST FREQ.	OTHER LANGS. USED
1.	Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan, Ibadan.	Academic	20	Yoruba	Yoruba	Igbo, Hausa, French, Edo, Russian, Japanese & Isoko
2.	Oyo State Library Board, Ibadan.	Public	20	Yoruba	Yoruba	Igbo, Hausa & Igbira
3.	International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) Library	Academic	20	Yoruba	Yoruba	Igbo, Hausa & French

4.	John Harris Library, University of Benin	Academic	20	Benin	Benin	French, German, Isoko, Yoruba & Hausa
5.	Simeon Adebo Library, Abeokuta	Public	20	Yoruba	Yoruba	Igbo & Hausa
6.	Lagos State Library Board	Public	20	Yoruba	Yoruba	Igbo, Hausa, French, Edo & Ijaw
7.	University of Port Harcourt	Academic	20	No prominent language	Ijaw	Ijaw, Ikwere, Yoruba, Hausa & Igbo
8.	National Library (Ondo State Branch)	Public	20	Yoruba	Yoruba	Igbo, Hausa, Igbira & Ijaw
9.	Edo State Library Board	Public	20	Benin	Benin	Yoruba, Urhobo, Ijaw, Itshekiri & Igbo
10.	Delta State University Library	Academic	20	Urhobo	Urhobo	Yoruba, Igbo, Ijaw & Itshekiri

In all the 5 Public libraries, not too many of the staff work in the cataloging section. As such, 18 respondents returned the questionnaire. In the academic libraries, almost all the professional librarians work at classification, except for those in top management positions that do not have the time anymore. However, 25 of them returned the questionnaire, making 43 staff questionnaire returned.

TABLE III: Language Background of Library Staff

S/N	NAME OF LIBRARY	LIBRARY TYPE	NO.	LANG. USED IN THE LOCATION	LANG. OF HIGHEST FREQ.	OTHER LANGS. USED
1.	Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan	Academic	5	Yoruba	Yoruba	Igbo, Hausa, French, Edo, Isoko, Russia, Japanese
2.	Oyo State Library Board	Public	4	Yoruba	Yoruba	Igbo, Hausa & Igbira
3.	IITA Library	Academic	4	Yoruba	English	Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, German & French
4.	John Harris Library,	Academic	5	Benin	Benin	French,

	University of Benin					German, Isoko, Yoruba & Hausa
5.	Simeon Adebo Library, Abeokuta	Public	4	Yoruba	Yoruba	Igbo & Hausa
6.	Lagos State Library Board	Public	3	Yoruba	Yoruba	Igbo, Hausa, French, Edo & Ijaw
7.	University of Port Harcourt	Academic	5	No prominent language	English	Ijaw, Ikwere, Yoruba, Hausa & Igbo
8.	National Library of Nigeria	Public	6	Yoruba	Yoruba	Igbo, Hausa, Igbira & Ijaw
9.	Edo State Library Board	Public	5	Benin	Benin	Yoruba, Urhobo, Ijaw, Itshekiri & Igbo
10.	Delta State University Library	Academic	4	Urhobo	Urhobo	Yoruba, Igbo, Ijaw & Itshekiri

For the National Library of Nigeria, the cataloguers at the headquarters usually do the cataloging centrally and then send to branches, hence the users at the Ondo State branch were used as the sample from the South. In all, the 200 user questionnaires were analyzed. The library users indicated that they had difficulties using the library catalogues and other search tools. Their response are tabled below:

TABLE IV: LINGUISTIC & OTHER CULTURAL BARRIERS (User's Difficulties in Information Retrieval)

S/N	NAME OF LIBRARY	NO.	COMMONEST BARRIER
1.	Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan	20	Some titles are ambiguous, catalogues inadequate in subject descriptions, authors too foreign, preference to local authors
2.	Oyo State Library Board	20	Shelves misleading, library materials lacking local colour, Ambiguity of some titles.
3.	IITA Library	20	Scheme monopolised by English. Does not sufficiently suit other languages and culture.
4.	John Harris Library, University of Benin	20	Some titles have misleading titles, preference for local authors, misleading titles
5.	Simeon Adebo Library, Abeokuta	20	Some titles are ambiguous, shelves not directional

6.	Lagos State Library Board	20	Catalogues inadequate in subject description, preference for local authors, titles in subject catalogue inadequate
7.	University of Port Harcourt	20	Some titles are ambiguous, catalogues inadequate in subject descriptions, authors too foreign, preference for local authors
8.	National Library (Ondo State Branch)	20	Some titles are ambiguous, Shelves misleading, library materials lacking local colour
9.	Edo State Library Board	20	Shelves sometimes misleading, library materials lacking local colour
10.	Delta State University Library	20	Some titles are ambiguous, preference for local authors, and sometimes misleading titles.

The staff also revealed the difficulties they faced. These are tabled below:

TABLE V: LINGUISTIC & OTHER CULTURAL BARRIERS (Staff's Difficulties in Information Dissemination)

S/N	NAME OF LIBRARY	NO.	COMMONEST BARRIER
1.	Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan	5	Classification schemes not covering local publications, Discretion of librarians to modify scheme to their advantage during cataloguing and classification creates biases. Schemes need broadening.
2.	Oyo State Library Board	4	Classification schemes not covering local publications
3.	IITA Library	4	Classification schemes not covering other languages. French and German suggested.
4.	John Harris Library, University of Benin	5	LC not covering many African subject areas.
5.	Simeon Adebo Library, Abeokuta	4	Subject spine titles do not yield to easy interpretation.
6.	Lagos State Library Board	3	The schemes do not always give appropriate subject headings.
7.	University of Port Harcourt	5	Library schemes not covering local publications
8.	National Library of Nigeria	6	LCSH, AACR2 not broad enough. Schemes need improvement to cater for different subject areas.
9.	Edo State Library Board	5	Library schemes do not cover local publications
10.	Delta State University Library	4	Nigerian languages are not adequately catered for in the schemes.

Library Staff and User Perceptions

The study sought to know the perception of library staff on library practise with a request for suggestions on possible areas of improvement. A reasonable number of respondents perceive that some measures need to be taken by library administrators if the institution is to remain steadfast to its calling of being an adequate information provider. Comments resulting from their perceptions are tabled below:

TABLE VI: LIBRARY STAFFS' PERCEPTION OF INFORMATION DISSEMINATION TOOLS

S/N	SUGGESTED WAYS TO ERADICATE LANGUAGE & CULTURAL BARRIERS	NO.	%
1.	Introduction of language studies into school library curriculum; libraries to liase with the language department of higher institution for translation of information materials for users.	14	32.6
2.	The fact that the library schemes do not cover all subject areas and the freedom of the librarian to use his discretion itself could create further biases.	6	14
3.	Schemes and thesaurus should be written in other languages, the languages of materials being used in library should be taught users.	8	18.6
4.	Information should be based on the language and culture of the information retrieval	36	83.7
5.	Library schemes do not cover all subject areas. Information should be based on the language and culture of the users.	7	16.3
6.	Training in indexing is required to use appropriate indexing language for information dissemination.	13	30.2
7.	Adequate training in indexing languages and its use is necessary.	18	41.9
8.	There is need for research in Cataloguing and classification where adequate understanding of language is mastered.	14	32.6
9.	Training and re-training of information professionals. They should meet regularly to discuss pressing issues.	38	88.4
10.	Cataloguing & indexes should be more practice to expand more subject area.	9	20.9
11.	Ethnicity should be discouraged and media & information writers encouraged.	6	14
12.	Education & training to guide against language & cultural barriers.	12	28
13.	Nigeria major languages should be taught in library school.	8	18.6
14.	Re-orientation of our youths about cultural values.	36	83.7
	Total Number of Staff	43	100

Staffs of the libraries have diverse subject areas before their training in librarianship. Although this connotes good evidence for specialization, especially for cataloguing and classification, it poses some linguistic disparity for interpretation and analysis of documents. Semantics is a strong case in point here just as headings of books on religion, sociology, etc. meet different reception. This bias is created for cataloguing and classification. In like manner, library users' comment resulting from perception of day to day library operations and what they think could be done for improvement are also tabled:

TABLE VII: LIBRARY USERS' PERCEPTION OF INFORMATION RETRIEVAL TOOLS

S/N	SUGGESTED WAYS TO ERADICATE LANGUAGE & CULTURAL BARRIERS	NO.	%
1.	Students should be compelled to offer two or three languages in West African Examination Council if all languages could not be compulsory.	120	60
2.	People are different and so library staff should endeavour to be patient with others while communicating	56	28
3.	Library staff should give simple direction and guidance needed to library users.	33	16.5
4.	Education & training to guard against language & cultural barriers.	12	6
8.	Have another language friend to get more information about the particular language.	44	22
9.	No suggestions given	80	40
	Total Number of Users	200	100

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Knowledge organization in form of classification and indexing is meant to facilitate rather than militate against user information seeking behaviour. As such, the language used in effecting information provision and dissemination should be treated with care. Indexing languages, search terms and keywords in information retrieval should be chosen, bearing in mind that information users come from various cultural backgrounds and, often do not fully understand the various 'technical terms' proffered.

Librarians, especially cataloguers, indexers and circulation staff in libraries should make conscious effort to communicate properly with their clientele, whatever the language used. Indigenous language cannot be overlooked in this regard; therefore proficiency in at least one language apart from the official language of communication should be a prerequisite for library work.

Reference services in libraries should be geared toward provision of information in as many formats and languages as possible. This will aid information retrieval greatly, therefore, information repackaging is necessary especially in Public libraries as their clientele are more varied, and some indeed may be illiterate, neo-literate or semi – literate.

Cataloguers, Classifiers, Indexers and others involved in organizing knowledge should meet regularly probably on a regional basis to discuss how issues such as culture and language affect their work.

Strengthening of the associations is necessary and resource sharing should be encouraged. Oyelude (2005) posits that by cooperating rather than competing, Nigerian University libraries can develop a package of services, which will be made available to their students to support new and existing education programmes.

Indexing of books and journals should be taken seriously so that library users can get as much as they need without so much stress.

In the knowledge and information society where libraries are expected to take the lead, all barriers that will make education and research difficult will have to be pulled down. Biases resulting from culture, language, semantics and semiotics of these language and cultures have to be reduced to the barest minimum if not totally eradicated, so that information and information users meet on safe ground beneficial to all stakeholders.

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