



Language Use and Language Attitudes in a Bi/Multilingual Community: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines language use and overt behaviour towards language and language users in a bi/multilingual community. This study also examines the domain of language use as it varies with situational, social and stylistic contents. This brings about the necessity for specific varieties of the language and the functions that each variety can perform depending on the communicative need of the speaker. It is essential for every language user to be exposed to all the functional varieties of the language. Communicative proficiency in language use is mostly determined by the extent to which the language users are able to put those functional varieties into use. It is also noted in this study that some of the factors that affect peoples' attitude towards language are the domain of use, the population of speakers, the level of linguistic analysis and also the extent of use. These factors usually determine the prestige and status accorded the language within the speech community.

Keywords: Language, sociolect, diglossia, multilingual, communication, language attitude

INTRODUCTION

Language is not only a means of interpersonal communication and influence but also a vehicle for identification. In the words of Fishman (1976:219)

It is not merely a carrier of content, language itself is content, referent for loyalties and animosities, an indicator of social statuses and personal relationships, a maker of situations and topics as well as societal goal and the large-scale value-laden arenas of interaction that typify every speech community.

Language is a social phenomenon, and the appropriate domain for the study of any social behaviour is the society or the content in which that behaviour is regularly or generally practised. The social organization of language behaviour include not only language use per se but also language attitude, overt behaviour towards language users. According to Akere (1982:3), language plays considerable role in our day-to-day functional and social relationships. The various conflicts which often occur among users of language derive mostly from the mismanagement of communicative cues which are used in social interactions. The use of a form in a wrong context, most often than not, does not give desired communicative result hence, it does not communicate.

Language attitude has to do with the overt behaviour towards language and its users. Every society has its own attitude to dialects and other forms of language being used. In a multilingual speech community, certain languages are categorized on the basis of the population of speakers, the domain of use, level of linguistic analysis and so on (Oyetade 2002:51). Thus, certain languages are specifically referred to and described as local or national, major or minor, national or official while some are regarded as lingua franca or regional. The attitude of the society to each of these languages determines the functions assigned to it.

Thus, in Nigeria, for instance, English is considered as a national language of some sort while Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo are considered as other forms of national languages. Language attitude also determines whether language is a second or foreign one and which is the language of politics, trade, commerce, medium of instruction in schools and of course, science and technology.

Language Use

Language use is all about applying rules that guide production of utterances in a given language such that it is appropriate to a given context. The use of appropriate code helps communication, thus, ensuring understanding between interlocutors. Using correct acceptable forms not only holds the society but makes us acknowledge the fact that language belongs to no one and so must be respected. Communication is affected adversely when the interlocutors are less concerned about how they pass on messages but are only bothered about getting the ideas through. It is important to note that being careful about what we say really enhances communication. In the words of Simon (1989:80),

... we think in words, we conceptualize in words, we work in out our problems inwardly with words and using them correctly is comparable to a craftsman treating his tools with care and keeping, his materials in good shape.

He goes further to stress the fact that a person who does not have respect for language would not have much respect for ideas and cannot have ideas at all. Language use mostly depends on the communicative context or situation, be it official or purely social, casual or polite, formal or informal and so on. Each of these contexts or situations has appropriate variety for it, a variety or the language that is marked by distinct phonological features, choice of vocabulary items, or syntactic or sentence patterns, in addition to other extra – linguistic factors present in the socio-cultural environment. Wrong usages of forms in given social contexts could result in conflicts that can make the society fall apart.

It is held that speakers interact in a speech community of varying degrees of linguistic diversity and social complexity. Whether monolingual or bilingual/dialectal, such a community is characterized by distinguishable speech varieties such that their distribution of usage is determined or signalled by various factors in the social communicative systems of the community. For instance, there are considerable varieties of linguistic indicators of politeness in language which interlocutors could use reciprocally to ensure some measure of understanding in verbal encounters. When such linguistic varieties are not properly employed, the result is usually a break-down in communication and this often ends up in verbal conflicts or abuses. It also results in waste of time by both speakers. Thus, there is a great deal of misinformation or no information at all, is given.

Bello (2001:65) relates good use of language to having correct context and form. Passing a message using the correct and appropriate variety in specific social context only suggests speaker's ability to manage content and form simultaneously. In a situation where grammar is bad and content only has to be inferred by hearers, there may be wrong output.

Language uses are mostly instrumental for human communication. Akmajian et al, (2001:362) identify the most persuasive characteristics of human social interaction as talking. As effortless as it is to talk, using language successfully is a very complex enterprise. Much goes into using a language besides knowing it and being able to produce and recognize sentences in it. It involves communication. Communication is social affair, usually taking place within the context of a fairly well defined social situation. There are various possible uses of language. Language is used in doing something. It is used in much of our thoughts. If language is not at our disposal, it would have been difficult to think some of the thoughts we think. Language is also used to do something. This relates to the pragmatic notion of language and the focus is on what a person is doing with words in particular situations, that is, the intention, purposes, beliefs, and desires that a speaker has in speaking.

Communicative Use of Language

Language usage varies with a, social and stylistic contexts. It is important to note that, for any meaningful communication to take place, users of language should know that certain phonological, lexical or syntactic characteristics are identifiable with specific varieties of the language and that each variety can perform one or more function depending on the communicative need of the speaker. This explains what is called functional varieties. It is essential for the users of language to be exposed to all the functional varieties of the language which they need in all communicative interactions. This, in turn, would improve the communicative proficiency of the users of the language (especially non-native speakers). In the view of Savignon (1982:225-6), language users should be evaluated on their ability to perform several language functions simply but appropriately rather than on their ability to manipulate limited number of structural features perfectly. To him, proficiency is best determined not by how much language one knows but how well one can communicate. In other words, for correct usage of grammar in a language to be meaningful and important, it must be used appropriately in social discourse.

Proficiency in language use is achieved when one's competence (that is one's intuitive knowledge of the different linguistic forms of a language) and performance (that is one's ability to use language in appropriate social contexts) work hand in hand. Akere (1982:6) explains that native speakers of a language are presumed to have internalized the systems of rules which govern the choice of appropriate varieties and their use in the same way in which they have internalized the rules of grammar. Second language users on the other hand, may be able to acquire the system of rules of grammar (grammatical competence) but the acquisition of rules for use in terms of the choice of the appropriate variety (communicative competence) is constrained by the fact that appropriateness is situation-bound. Thus, communicative language use is determined by contexts or situations in the user's environment.

It has been observed that among people who share the same language and often understand one another, no two individuals speak alike. There are some differences which may arise as a result individual's age, gender, emotional status or personal idiosyncrasies. The idiosyncrasies in language use, which tend to set an individual apart from others, constitute that individual's "dialect" which is referred to as idiolect. In other words, idiolect is a language variety which is defined as the characteristic language behaviour of an individual. However, when the individual in conjunction with many other individuals constitute a given social group (class, status, age – grade, gender and so on), they share in common certain language behaviour (phonetic, phonology, syntactic and lexical) which set them apart from other groups in the same speech community, we talk of sociolect and social dialect. For instance, speech characteristics of the British upper middle class constitute a sociolect. The sociolect is different from regional dialect. Regional dialect is defined by the area/location of the speaker. It is a dialect that is made up of features which marks its geographical location off from others. The characteristic features may be lexical, phonetic or phonological (Ekundayo et al., 2002:167).

Functional variation can be identified along the dimension of register, that is, the use of language according to the subject matter, as well as other dimension of functions in social, literary and official usages. Registers are language varieties defined in terms of occupational use. They are usually sets of vocabulary items associated with occupation or social groups. Thus, there exist medical register, football register, computer register, legal register and so on. For example, a layman may say, "the house has been bought" while a legal practitioner may say, "the house has been purchased".

Variation in language use also involves the distinction between formal and informal styles, and familiar styles, casual and impersonal styles. In other words, language can be used according to the situations or circumstances in which the language is spoken. All users of language tend to a range of stylistic varieties of their language. Thus, styles are usually arrived at according to the situation or circumstance in which the language is used. For instance, public lectures would be formal while conversation with friends would be informal. As a result of this, speakers tend to style-shift as the situation demands. This is why it is said that there is no single-style speaker. Moreover, in the use of language, communicative encounter often demands constant shifts in the level of usage depending on the degree of formality or informality of the situation and the ultimate functions of the communicative acts.

Diglossia and the Domains of Language Use

In language communities, there are situations where some codes or varieties of some particular languages are used for particular purposes and on particular occasions rather than others. In such communities, the codes tend to have distinct functions and they rarely overlap. In such situations, there is diglossia. Diglossia occurs where two or more codes exist side by side in a speech community and each has a defined role to play. Each of these codes could be a language or dialect (Akindele and Adegbite, 1992:19). Thus, it is a situation where roles are assigned to different varieties of language which exist side by side in a bi/multilingual community. One of the varieties may be assigned high status while the other is considered low. The status assignment comes from the value attached to each of the varieties by the community of users. A variety may be considered high because it is thought to be more prestigious than the other. It is assigned the role of education, administration, politics, judiciary, the media and so on. A low variety is not considered as appropriate where high variety is appropriate. For instance, Standard Nigerian English (SNE) or Educated Nigerian English (ENE) has been assigned the role of education, administrative, politics, the media, while pidgin variety or interference variety has been assigned the role of interaction. Diglossia is not prominent in Nigeria as regards the indigenous languages. Unlike any of the Nigerian language, Arabic has high and low varieties to which different roles have been assigned. Such situation of diglossia is also found in modern Greece, Haiti, Germany, Switzerland and in the most of South India (Ferguson, 1973).

Language Attitude

The extent of language use usually determines the prestige and status accorded such language within a speech community. Languages restricted only to local aspects of internal communication are generally evaluated poorly while those used as Lingua Franca are most conspicuous in internal communication and tend to be ranked high. Several other factors (such as population of the speakers, the domain of use, level of linguistic analysis, and so on) affect people's attitude towards languages. Thus, the survival or decay, the prominence or marginalization of languages is usually determined by attitude towards them.

As explained by Adegbija (1994:100-101). If the native speakers of a language have prestige and status within a country, this will most likely be reflected on their language and such language is most likely to be accorded high regard. It is also important to note that one of the factors that affect a people's attitude about a language is the literary background possessed by the language. Languages that are rich in literary resources, especially written ones, tend to be more recognized in the domain of language use such as education, than languages without written literary resources. In Nigeria, for example, English has been assigned the role of education. Although, recognition is accorded the use of the major indigenous languages (Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo) as mediums of education, this has not been beyond primary education in this country.

One of the best known societal attitudes towards language is standardization. This in the words of Stewart, 1968 is "the codification and acceptance within a community of users, of a formal set of norms defining 'correct' usage". Codification, typically, is the concern of users of language whose use of language is professional and conscious, that is, the storytellers, grammarians, teachers and writers. Such language is presented to all or part of the speech community via such means as grammar, dictionaries, style manual and exemplar texts whether written or oral. The acceptance of the formally codified variety of language is advanced via agencies and authority as the government, the educational system, the mass media, the religious institutions and the cultural establishments (Fishman, 1976:229). Fishman explains further that the standard variety then becomes associated with them, and the values of goals they represent. Consequently, a language that has undergone the processes of codification tends to enjoy greater prestige all round than the one that has not.

It is important to note that standardization is not a property of any language per se, but a characteristic societal treatment of language. Thus, where a standard variety exists, it does not displace the non-standard variety from the linguistic repertoire of the speech community for functions that are distinct from, but complementary to those of the standard variety. It is quite possible that non-standard varieties may

undergo standardization whereas standardized varieties may undergo de-standardization as their speakers/users no longer view them as worthy of codification and cultivation.

As earlier mentioned language attitude is affected by the extent of its use in internal communication and needs felt for it as a Lingua Franca. Any language whose range of use does not go beyond its local government area is referred to as minority language and generally evaluated poorly and ranked low. In northern Nigeria, for example, Hausa has already been seen as a language of internal communication such that most other Northern states whose original languages are not related to Hausa have started using Hausa as a lingua Franca. As rightly observed by Adegbija, its influence is gradually spreading to many other regions in Nigeria.

The prestige and status of a language usually determines how willing people are to learn or use it. A low image about the languages of some people generally tends to discourage the desire for their use. Such people usually prefer to learn languages that have been evaluated high and used in such domains as education, politics, administration, the media offices and so on. This partly explains the reason why smaller or low-ranked languages are largely limited to their speakers alone and are not developed. In Nigeria, for instance, English is regarded as most vital as it is used as the official language, language of education, language of wider communication or international language as well as language of inter-ethnic communication. Thus, its knowledge or learning is considered most 'valuable'.

Adekunle (1995:59) has this to say:

Because of the role that English and the other languages have been playing in the various sectors of life in Nigerian speech community, people have developed different attitudes to each category of languages. Distinctive among these attitudes are those expressed about the role of English and those of the indigenous languages.

CONCLUSION

Language is embedded in the contexts of its use and a full understanding of language can only be achieved by paying attention to those contexts. This applies equally to attitude and judgement concerning the language use as to the rise of language choice made within a speech community. Several factors may affect the prestige and status of a language and thus, the attitude of people towards it. The use of language usually reflects how important or prestigious it is to the users. And language that lends itself readily for use and is appropriate virtually in all domains of use is highly evaluated and will continue to be.

Studies in language use and of behaviour and attitude towards language are necessary for particular social networks and communities, both large and small.

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