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Language and Culture: Nigerian Perspective

Obiegbo, Ifeyinwa

Department of English and Literary Studies,

University of Nigeria, Nsukka

E-mail: ifeyinwaobiegbo@gmail.com

Phone: +2348037250013

Abstract

The power of language to reflect culture and influence thinking was first proposed by an American linguist and anthropologist, Edward Sapir (1884-1939) and his student, Benjamin Whorf (1897-1941). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis stated that the way we think and view the world is determined by our language. This theory also stated that some languages have specific words or concepts where other languages use several words to represent a specific concept. Culture is the totality of ways and manners people live their lives and be able to make sense of their existence. Every group and society has cultures that constitute the framework for their lives and behavioural patterns. Hence the linguistic, social and economic performance of nations can only be best appreciated and explained against the backdrop of the prevailing cultural domains. This paper opined that culture is a very dynamic and lethal force which should be driven to achieve human growth and language development. It explores how the development of language could lead to cultural enhancement in Nigeria.

Key Words- language, culture, communication, linguistics, perception

Introduction

The importance of language in our everyday lives cannot be undermined. Chomsky argues that there is a language faculty in the human brain that enables a human child to learn any language in about four years. Contrary views argue that there is no such faculty, since language derives from general purpose mechanisms of the brain. Recent experiments with brain imaging, especially Positron Emission Tomography (PET) and Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) reveal that both arguments are not entirely unfounded. Whatever the argument, both camps acknowledge the centrality of language in human cognitive development.

Culture is a product of the human mind and it is defined, propagated and sustained through language. The relationship between language and culture is indisputably symbiotic. Language serves as an expression of culture without being entirely synonymous with it. In most cases, a language forms the bases for ethnic, regional, national or international identity. The concept of nationhood finds resonance in the adoption of a national language around which the diverse ethnic groups can rally. The English language in Nigeria started with the advent of British explorers. Then we had the era of ‘Coast English’ this was followed by colonization, characterized by full entrenchment of British cultural values, education and of course the English language. This era culminated in the passage of Education Ordinance of 1926, which, according to Omolewa (2000) “gave prominence to the need for a proper use of English and made certification a prerequisite for employment in most professions” Since then, the English language has come to stay and holds sway as the only language which can unite the over five hundred and thirty languages we have in Nigeria. (Bamgbose 1999)

In this article, the interplay between language and culture and how these two constructs evolve with time is discussed. The vital role of language in creating mental representations is equally highlighted.

English Language and Nigerian Culture

Culture refers to the way of life of a people. This includes their customs, traditions, ideas, art, values their language. Invariably, language can be described as the repository of culture, since a language cannot express or name an entity that is not part of that culture. In the history of any civilization,

language mixes up in contact with another culture. The history of the English language started with the contact of the Anglo-Saxons with the Romans and the French. Today, eighty percent of the culinary expressions in the English language have French origin, and most of English language lexicon have Latin origin. The relationship between the English language and Nigerian cultures are similar to the above since many English loan words have been integrated into many Nigerian languages. Some of Nigeria's major languages are replete with such expressions, though with some morphological modifications as shown below:

English	Yoruba	Igbo	Hausa
Table	Tabulu	Tebulu	-----
Bread	Buredi	Bredi	Brodi
Radio	Radio	Rediyo	Radiyo
Photo	Foto	Foto	Hoto
Church	Sosi	Chochi	----
Window	Windo	Windo	Hundo
Television	Telifisan	Televishon	Talabijin

One sees that the extent and number of English loan words in Nigerian languages differ from one language to the other. Some of these integrated loan words actually have their cultural equivalents, but people would prefer their usage because they are simpler than their native equivalents. Whether they are artifactual or psycho-cultural, the full existence of English loan words in our culturally bound Nigerian languages is a measure of the impact of the English language on Nigerian culture. The National Policy on Education adopted the English language as the standard for educational success and social advancement and this is also a function of the impact of the language as an exoglossic national language used for all official and educational purposes. It is also the major language of legislation whether in the National or State Assembly.

Perhaps a really disquieting impact of the language on culture is the prevalent contemporary Anglocentric inclination of Nigerian families. Nowadays, every family, including semi-literate ones, wants to expose their children to English language right from the early stages of their lives. This is with a view to giving such children some head-start in school as a result of the

quest for “social belongingness”. Some end up speaking pidgin or even nonstandard variety to the children in the name of English. This is an indictable factor in the falling standard of English in Nigeria. Adebayo Faleti stressed on this view recently when he said that ‘Even parents who cannot speak English properly force their children to speak English’. (*The Punch*, 3rd March, 20016)

The issue of the concept of “Nigerian English” cannot be discussed without reference to the Nigerian cultural influence on the English language. Ayo Banjo (2004, 2005) establishes four varieties of Nigerian English. He recommends Variety 111 which, according to him, is close to standard British English in syntax and semantics, similar in phonology. Banjo recognizes that it is a home grown variety whose lexical peculiarities are a reflection of Nigeria’s cultural impact on the English language. Several evidence of this can be found in the works of Chinua Achebe, T.M. Aluko, Flora Nwapa, Niyi Osundare, Wole Soyinka and others. Most of these works contain African proverbs which makes them to translate these local proverbs to the English language, thus transferring on such works some authentic cultural flavor and tone. There is also the invasion of Americanisms into the English used by Nigerian students both at secondary and tertiary levels. This development has been facilitated by globalization which thrives on voluminous technological and electronic communications across cultures. A huge fraction of these communications is done in English especially from the very economically and technologically powerful country like America. Also our students freely mix up American and British spellings, slangs, pronunciation and diction. This issue has become the fashion of writing that the WAEC or NECO examiners can only insist on the correct usage for a student not to fail in English.

From the foregoing, it becomes obvious that the Nigerian culture and the English language have had mutual impact on each other. The relationship between language and culture is so strong that a change in one ultimately affects the other. Every language directly mirrors the culture it serves. That is to say that a language either enriches or impoverishes the culture it serves. Fortunately for us in Nigeria, the cultural impact to the English language has necessitated the birth of “Nigerian English”

How Does Culture Affect Our Language?

The way in which a language is learned varies between cultures, for example, in certain cultures prelinguistic children are spoken about rather than

spoken to. Children will grow up learning only to speak when an adult addresses them directly and never to jump in on an adult conversation or speak up in a public setting. For this reason, many children have difficulties in the classroom when asked to orally give their opinion or demonstrate dialogue with other students. The eagerness of many students to speak in class and develop verbal language skills is less common among students of different cultures and from different backgrounds.

Speaking Nigerian languages is part of the Nigerian culture. A citizen of Nigeria that cannot speak his own local language is not regarded as a thorough bred son of the soil. Language is a very fascinating subject in any community. It is a way of communicating between people of different backgrounds and social status. The language a person speaks gives him an instant definition of his origin. Nigeria is a multilingual group of states consisting of over five hundred spoken languages, from Hausa to Igbo, Yoruba, Ibibio, Fulani, Edo, Kaniru, Efik, Fulfulde and several others in hundreds. While these are all living languages, it is believed that about seven to nine other languages formally spoken in the country had gone extinct. As much as many of these ethnic groups have to communicate in their respective local dialects, other activities involving different groups are carried out in English language. In the early nineties, the British colonial masters stormed the country and when they left, they left behind the English language which is now the general language used in schools and public events.

The Relationship between Culture and Language

Language, as it is generally known (Aliyu 1999, Obot 2002), performs several functions. It allows the individual to a full membership of his community and equips him with the power of self-expression, which makes him a complete human being, since its absence, even in part, renders the individual incomplete. It also provides a medium for inter-personal communication for the different members of the society. But beyond all these functions, language acts as a vehicle whereby the culture of the society finds verbal expression. It is this strong bond between culture and language that has prompted analysis to compare their co-existence to that of the body and soul. Indeed, Ifemesia (2001) conceived of this relationship in terms of a symbiosis: "Culture can hardly be fully developed and applied outside language and conversely language and culture are coeval, and are meaningful and

comprehensible only in the context of each other”. Hudson (1989) provided an interesting diagram which clarified the relationship between culture and language.

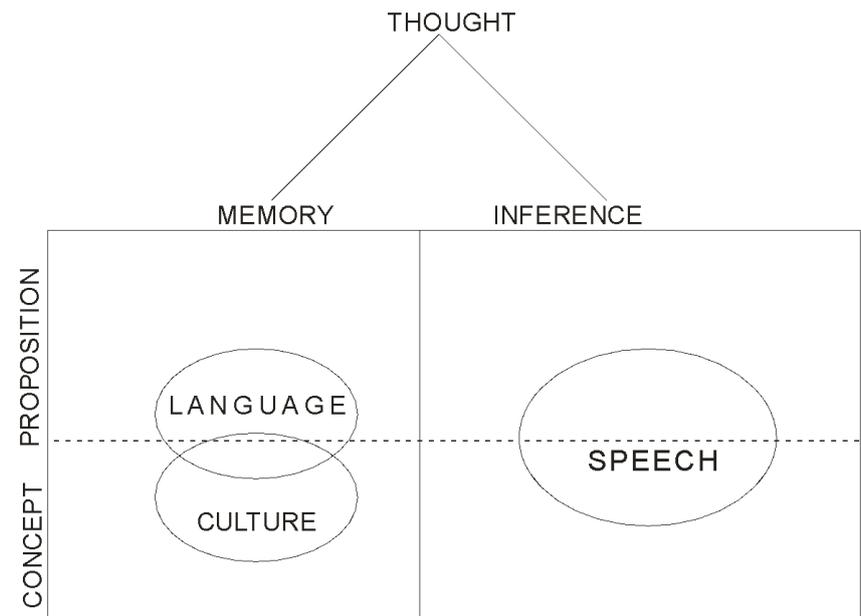


Diagram showing the relationship between Culture and Language

Source Hudson (1999)

As the diagram shows, language, though not fully contained within culture, since aspects of it are not learnt from other people (for instance, concepts like 'noun' and 'verb' which a child does not need to learn), is an important component of culture. It is through language that cultural information is stored in the memory for subsequent retrieval. In the words, again, of Ifemesia (2001), language “... has always been, down the millennia, at once an integral part, a repository and a vehicle of expression and transmission of its culture”. Hudson's diagram, as modified, also, more significantly, illustrates the joint action of culture and language in generating the thinking process and thought

expression. Culture manifests itself through concepts, while language does the same through propositions in the form of statements. The concepts are stored in the memory through the medium of language, and thinking proceeds from remembered concepts and propositions which are converted into speech.

There are serious implications for the combined roles of culture and language in activating the thought process. One implication is that it is the type of culture the society has that determines its mode of transmission. Oral cultures are transmitted orally and written cultures are transmitted both orally and in the written form.

Another is that cultures which express themselves in their own languages are uniquely placed to do so effectively, certainly more effectively than cultures that depend on an alien language with its alien cultural baggage to do the job. The native speakers naturally acquire the ability to manipulate their language for use in effective thinking. Therefore, a Nigerian culture that finds expression in its own language has the best chance of survival and development if this language has both oral and written forms of transmission. But a Nigerian culture that finds expression in its own language but which is solely transmitted orally has a relatively diminished chance of survival. Indeed, it is an endangered species whose rescue can only be achieved through graphemization of the language.

Finally, a Nigerian culture that finds expression in an alien language, oral or written, or both, is also an endangered species in that any culture without its own language is subject to problems of interpretation and meaning. This is because of the interference of the alien culture embedded in the alien language. Therefore, such a culture stands in double jeopardy of disappearing.

What is clear is that language policies and language development in Nigeria have some cultural implications that decision-makers in this sphere should not ignore at the peril of our cultures. This is because the death of a language is a death knell for the culture. It is true that survivors of a dead culture and language eventually acquire a new culture and a new corresponding language. But this change cannot be an easy process, psychologically and emotionally, and it is highly probable that something of the past, some knowledge or some expression or item of the lost culture is also lost to the world in the process. The message is unmistakable. Culture and language are but a mirror of each other. The death of the one means the death of the other. In view

of the perilous state in which the majority of Nigerian cultures and languages find themselves, it is certainly food for serious thought for this association.

Implications for Language Teaching and Language Policy in Nigeria

The implications of language being completely entwined in culture with regards to language teaching and language policy are far reaching. Language teachers must instruct their students on the cultural background of language usage, choose culturally appropriate teaching styles and explore culturally based linguistic differences to promote understanding. Language policy must be used to create awareness and understanding of cultural differences and written to incorporate the cultural values of those being taught. The National Policy on Education in Nigeria stipulates that within the first three years of a child's life in the Primary School, she should be taught in the local language and English should be taught as a subject. It goes on to say that from Primary Four, the English Language should be the medium of instruction for all subjects and the indigenous language (Igbo, Hausa or Yoruba) should be taught as a subject. The Government is solely informed that the language of the child is the basis for the culture that the child has to imbibe.

Indigenisation of English in Nigeria could be seen as an act of adapting and taming the English language to fit or suit the Nigerian environment. It is also known as "nativisation" or "domestication". According to Adegbija (2009), "the English language in Nigeria has been adapted for home use and made applicable to our numerous conveniences, experiences, nuances and sensibilities". Indigenisation implies that English has become Nigerian property. Various authors have long maintained this position. Tamuno (1999) opines that the English language "is no longer foreign to Nigeria for we have effectively appropriated it". Ubahakwe (2006) establishes the status of Nigerian English as "a dialect subset comparable to the American, Australian, British, Canadian and Rhodesian subset", and Awonusi (2002) concludes that the English language in Nigeria 'has come of age'.

The indigenisation process brings about the development of an internal norm, which is evident from the fact that numerous structures that would be totally unintelligible to native speakers of English are used in Nigeria. The outcome of the norm thus brings about Nigerian English. Some scholars in the past had denied the evidence of Nigerian English and attributed its features to deviations from standard British English. However, many notable scholars such

as Adetugbo (1998), Adegbija (2009), Banjo (2004), assert that Nigerian English exists and indeed has numerous sociological subtypes with the standard sub-variety being the most prestigious. Kujore (2004), Egbe (2010). Awonusi (2002) are among several studies that have attempted to describe the nature and character of Nigeria English. Igboanusi (2008) went a little further in the characterization of Nigerian English by coming out with a dictionary of Nigerian English usage. "Such studies demonstrate beyond doubt that the domestication of English in Nigeria has gone a long way" (Adegbija, 2009).

Language Change

Skillfully speaking, a language is made up of several parts of speech. These include grammatical words such as prepositions, articles, tenses, moods, plural and also involves lexical words, involving nouns, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives. The latter category is also termed by pragmatics as constituting conceptual terms, as we learn new ideas or concepts, we need to have words to describe them.

In the domain of generating and harness economic wealth, new economic system demands a change in the language. Words like marxims, socialism, communism and many others needed to be coined to describe new concepts and ideas, upon contact with socialism, the Tanzanian president coined the term 'Ujamaa' The leaps in technology have driven the creative genius of language to propose new words to describe the new ideas of technology. These include jet, helicopter, computer, laptop, CD-Rom, Anti-virus and many others.

In politics, concepts like democracy, voting, capitalism, nationhood, citizens and many others create language change. The politicians of 2nd Republic in Nigeria were credited with changes such as "accord Concordia", "man of Timber and Caliber", "Juggernaut", "political heavy weight" etc. Sociolinguistically, a word such as 'Allah', the Arabic language word for 'God' is traceable to the Arabic nations and Northern Nigeria. It is a borrowing into the Nigerian language and it has remained a popular usage, especially among Muslims, when they refer to God. The compound word "Over-joyed" had never been an English word, "Quick-Quick" is a direct translation of the Yoruba word "Kia Kia". Both the words "Kia Kia and "Mai guard" originated from Hausa language and are comfortably used in the English language in Nigeria.

New social arrangements can also demand of language to change. In Nigeria for instance, the situation of a man living with a woman without any form of matrimony and altogether producing children has resulted in the new word 'Baby Mama'. It has become an acceptable new word in Nigeria.

Language and Mental Representations

Values and norms are represented in our minds and that is as a result of the use of language. Language gives us the ability to express ourselves and helps in formulating values and norms. It expresses what should and should not be done. Taboos are involved in language. Our minds and behaviours are highly influenced by language. Whorf, a renowned anthropologist, explains in *Linguistique et anthropologie* that a petrol tank that is Labelled EMPTY, although potentially explosive due to fumes, may make a smoker light up a cigarette next to it. This is because the word EMPTY has sent a signal to the smoker that there is nothing inside the tank. Our emotions too are expressed metaphorically in Language. George Lakoff in "Metaphors We Live By", noted that we talk of boiling rage, emotions were physically rising up in a tube through language. Therefore, we create mental pictures of these emotions and react accordingly. We ask people who are angry to cool down as if they are hot metallic entity.

The link between words and mental representations is very close. When translating from one language to another, one has to make sure that the mental representation is retained in the translation. A word for word translation may violate the idea of the translation, since the mental representations created by the translation may differ from the original text. Good translations are geared towards creating the same effect in the translation as in the original text. For instance, the term bread evokes a different mental image depending on whether the listener is French or African. For the Frenchmen, bread has different shapes (flute, baguette) and accompanies every meal, from breakfast to supper. To an African, with special reference to Nigeria, bread has one shape. It is either sliced or made whole, and it is taken with tea in the morning. It may also be taken with a soft drink or milk. The illustration here shows that we do not have the same mental representation of the term 'bread' hence the challenge we may have in translation. Taboo words are easier to express in a foreign tongue than in one's mother tongue. Due to cultural sanctions, a speaker feels the starkness of taboo words and insults when expressed in the mother tongue. Put more

succinctly, the vulgarity of a term is somewhat diminished if it is expressed in a language other than one's own. Insults and love words are a case in point here. Translating them into one's mother tongue does not have the same effect. Part of the reason for the uneasiness in the mother tongue is that our language is a repository of our ethics, and these words are, strictly speaking, no-go-areas. They should not be uttered in Public. Each language mirrors the values of its speakers, hence the censor we imbibe when we speak them.

Conclusion

Language and Cultural are so intertwined that one cannot survive without the other. Both of them are sensitive and adapt to prevailing circumstances. Language gives full expressions to people's values and norms. They are dynamic in nature. Language has to be fully associated with cultural transformations. It is impossible for one to teach language without teaching culture. The importance of the indigenous language in the educational system of Nigeria is very important. Although our revised nine year UBE curricula may have substantial cultural contents, although the English Language has become irreplaceable both in our National history and development, our culture must be vigorously preserved and promoted by giving due and appropriate attention to our indigenous languages in our educational curriculum and planning. The indigenization of English in Nigeria is a major process of bringing the relationship between language and culture to the fore. Since the English language is our national language, Nigerian English has been adapted to home use and made applicable to our numerous conveniences, experiences, nuances and sensibilities.

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