



Research Paper

A Pragmatic Study of Language Use in the Context of Bereavement among the Yoruba

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Received 22 May, 2022; Revised 02 June, 2022; Accepted 04 June, 2022 © The author(s) 2022.

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I. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Language and culture are so intrinsically related that it is hardly possible to study one to the exclusion of the other. Language is at once an outcome of the culture as a whole and also a vehicle by which the other facts of the culture are shaped and communicated (Gladstone, 1965). Hudson (1980) also notes that since language and culture are inter-related, many of the properties of language are also properties of culture in general; and that meaning is best studied in relation to culture.

The culture of a people funds reflection in the language they employ. This is because value certain things and do them in certain way, and they come to use their language in ways that reflect what they value and what they do. In other words, most of the cultural attitudes which a native speaker has built into himself are reflected in his speech patterns (Gladstone, 1965; Saville-Troike, 1982).

The Yoruba language without exemption, also best expresses the cultural norms of its people (Adetugbo, 1984). On a general note, the Yoruba people have a rich cultural heritage that is equally matched by a metaphoric and colorful language use that permeates all the socio-cultural, religious and political facets of life of the people.

An explicit example that shows that there is a circulation between the form and content of Yoruba language and the beliefs, values and needs present in the culture of the Yoruba people is the premium placed on greeting as a signifier of a collective bond and mutual co-existence (Adegbija, 1992). Yoruba has a plethora of imaginable greetings for a multitude of mishaps and different types of situations, for which greetings would, perhaps, be unnecessary in many western cultures (Osundare, 1995).

Particularly, Yoruba greetings and other language use in the salutation of condoling bereaved are replete with proverbs, metaphors, aphorisms and witty sayings which all have roots in the socio-cultural and cosmological beliefs of the people. Not that alone, each type of death calls for different sets of greetings and other non-verbal behaviors. These make the language use in this context to have pragmatic implications. Effective communication here demands that speakers and hearers alike share the necessary background knowledge.

It is against the above that this research intends to carry out a pragmatic study of inter-personal language use in the context of condoling a bereaved person among the Yoruba. Analyses are expected to be made of the types of pragmatic contexts and competences that participants need to master and use here. Such study is aimed at revealing the intrinsic relationship between Yoruba cultural beliefs, norms and practices in relation to death and condoling the bereaved, and language in such socio-cultural context.

This field of study is a subfield of sociolinguistics which Hymes (1962) first referred to as ethnography of speaking and later as ethnography of communication (Saville Troike, 1982). Ethnography of communication focuses on the patterning of communication as it constitutes one of the details of language use and the radical linking of the verbal and the socio-cultural in the conduct of speaking. In ethnographic studies, recognition is given to the fact that language does not occur in isolated sentences, but in natural units of speaking (Hymes, 1982).

The English language in Nigeria has become an albatross. It is more than just a second language. In use, it has towered above all the indigenous languages; and has permeated all the facets of life in Nigeria. It is the language of politics, commerce, mass media, internal cohesion, and a link to the international world (Adetugbo 1984).

Despite the ubiquitous nature of the English language in Nigeria, it has proved inadequate in expressing the nuances of Nigerian culture in some respects. Bamigbose (1971) states that Nigerian bilinguals in English and one of the indigenous languages still resorts the exclusive use of the indigenous languages in expressing certain topics. Adetugbo (1979) who, is a natural speaker of Yoruba, asserts that:

“There are certain topics and in certain environment and with other certain participant that this present writer would rather discuss in his native language than in English.”

We may suggest that one of the topics and environment is the situation of consoling a bereaved person; when the participants are all Yoruba speakers. The reason(s) for the likely choice of Yoruba in a situation like this would be made apparent from the foregoing discussions.

Nida and Wunderly (1971) have identified three communication roles languages within a multi-lingual society. The first is the ‘in-group language’, which is the one used in any society for the basic face-to-face relationship with other speakers with whom the individual in question fully identified. The second is the ‘out-group language’, which is used by people in speech community in contacting people of groups outside their own community. Thirdly, we have the language of specialized information, which is a language used for higher education and for specialized special training.

In the multilingual society of Nigeria, the Yoruba language, like all indigenous languages variously fills approximately into the first group above. It is a language used by its speakers to describe what Gumperz (1982) describes as ‘a we-type solidarity among participants’. It is deemed suitable for in-group and inter-personal relationships among the speakers within the local society at an informed or casual level.

More often than not, the particular situation of inter-personal relationship under consideration is more appropriately expressed in Yoruba when participants speak the language. This is because it has been noted that certain codes are deemed more appropriate for certain messages than other codes (Fowler, 1974; Wardlaugh, 1986; Khubchaudani, 1983) observes that since language is a form of dyadic behavior, the choice of using a particular language by a bilingual is determined by two factors. The first is the pragmatic demands of the situation, depending on the listener’s capacity and the speaker’s ability as well as their cultururation of the language. The second factor he identifies the institutional factors of identification; that is, language is made to serve as a label for status, prestige, and fashion. The first identified reason appears to be relevant one in the ready choice of the Yoruba language by a speaker to condole a fellow a fellow Yoruba speaker who is bereaved.

The array of Yoruba greetings, proverbs, aphorisms and witty sayings often employed in this context exert a great pragmatic constraint on language users. This is because, they are unique to Yoruba and are therefore, culture specific. Explaining this Robins (1980: 297) stresses that:

“...each speech community lives in s somewhat different world that of others, and that these differences are both realized in parts of their cultures and revealed and maintained in parts of their languages.”

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The abundance of proverbs, metaphors and witty sayings in the language use in the context of bereavement among the Yoruba constitute a pragmatic obstacle to effective among interlocutors, especially learners of the language. Participants need a lot of shared background knowledge in order to communicate effectively and approximately in this context. This call for a systematic investigation as to types of pragmatic context and competencies which listeners in such environment have to master for effective discerning and understanding of the illocutionary forces of these utterances.

Again, the complexity of the speech foundation in this situation among the Yoruba is an interesting socio-cultural phenomenon that demands more than a cursory attention. Any slight ‘misfire’ noted in the utterances of consequences ranging from the exchange of embarrassing ‘knowing glances’ (Scheglott, 1986) by observers, to a permanent or temporary damage to inter-personal relationship built over the years.

It is in the light of these intricacies that this research is directed towards shedding more light on the nuances of language use of the Yoruba in this context with the aim of arriving at a better understanding of what constitutes communicative competencies and appropriateness of speech.

JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

Ferguson (1977) asserts that direct and careful observation of the manner in which people use language in its social context is capable of yielding many interesting and surprising results. This would be so when recognition is given to the fact that language is not just some kind of abstract object of study, but a thing that people use. Labor(1972) also affirms that language is a form of social behavior used by human being in a social context, to communicate their needs, ideas and emotions to one another; stressing further that ‘there is something trivial’ in the proceeding of any language that does take note of these (p. 187).

Malinowski, Firth and Hymes at different points in the history of study, stress that each piece of a language is an integral component in the ongoing social and physical texture of life (1974). Firth tags that such language study ‘context of situation’ while Hymes calls it ‘communicative event’. This research study is in

conformity with such trend in linguistics. This study is intended to be a modest contribution to this popular tendency in language study to the account of physical of utterances, personal attributes of speakers, and appropriateness of use.

Writing about appropriateness of use, (Shopan, 1979) concludes that a good speaker of a particular language needs not to know its grammar, but also the principle that determine the appropriate use of the language in various cultural contexts. This study is investigating one of such cultural contexts among the Yoruba people where appropriateness of speech is not only desirable but obligatory.

In a book titled Celebration of Death, Hunting and Metcalf (1979) observe that death is one of the most universal phenomenon, the variety of responses evokes among people of the world is incredible. Though this study is not a contrastive one, the robustness of language use in the environment is commiseration among the Yoruba is expected contrast sharply to the dryness and reticence in the same situation in the Western culture. Among the Yoruba, in the communicative event of consoling a bereaved person, the sympathizer is not usually bereft of age long and apt expressions which are meant to assignee the pains and sorrows of the bereaved. For a competent adult native speaker of Yoruba operating with the language, to utter the expression “oh, I don’t know what to say” to a bereaved person is not satisfactory (to say the least). Such empty expression cannot be interpreted as the most sincere expression of deep emotion, as might be regarded in the western culture, for example (Saville-Troike, 1982).

SCOPE AND DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The data for the subject matter is expected to be elicited from a cross-section of adult native speakers of Yoruba in identified towns and villages within Yoruba land. This researcher considers that the most knowledgeable custodians of culture and language of Yoruba are the older native speakers. The predominantly Yoruba speaking people inhabit the south-western states of Nigeria (Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Oyo and parts of Edo, Kwara, and Kogi states). For the purpose of this study, the Yoruba people in Nigeria are regarded as a single speech community. According to Montgomery (1986 :175), the term ‘speech community’ is an idealized nation which refers to a group of people who share :

1. A language in common
2. Common ways of using language
3. Common reactions and attitude to language ; and
4. Common social binds (i.e. they tend to interact with each other or tend to be linked at least by some form of social organization. The Yoruba people in Nigeria appear to fulfill most of the above conditions.)

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The findings of this research could be of immense importance in the following dimensions, among others.

- (a) The systematic analyses and *raison dieter* of language use among the Yoruba in the context of bereavement could go a long way in promoting intellectual understanding; sine comparison could be easily made by people of different cultural backgrounds.
- (b) This study could also pedagogical implications since its subject matter address one of the greatest obstacles to the effective learning and teaching of Yoruba, either as first language
- (c) It could also be useful for both Yoruba textbooks writers, translators and publishers of books on Yoruba language, literature custom.
- (d) This study will also be invaluable to researchers in sociology, especially those who specialize on ethnological studies
- (e) It could also be of immense benefit to researchers and scholars in the relatively new sociolinguistics researched termed ‘ethnography of communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This section is focused on the review the theoretical background underscores this research study. Attention is given to the review of literature on the concepts that revolve around the theory of gradually leads to the illustration of pragmatic model that would be used in this in this study for the analysis of the collected data.

The Study of Language in its socio-cultural context

Lavandera (1988) notes that it is paradoxical to hold Chomsky indirectly responsible for the accelerated development of sociolinguistics and ethno-linguistics at the end of the 1960s and for the emphasis laid on pragmatic and discourse analysis in the mid 1970s. it was Chomsky assertion of the autonomy of syntax, and his position that the system of language is confined to competence that actually sparked renewed interest in the study of language in its socio-cultural context. The much quoted Chomsky’s (1965) stance on language – cited in Widowson (1979): is as follows:

“Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completed homogenous speech community, who knows its language perfectly, and is unaffected by some grammatically irrelevant conditions of memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest and errors (random and characteristics) in applying this knowledge of the language in actual performance.”

Some languages investigates like Hymes and Labor are united in the conviction Chomskyan postulation above was too narrow to accommodate most of the interesting questions about language. Hymes, for example, extends Chomsky’s notion of competence to cover most of the aspects that Chomsky ascribed to performance. Hymes’ own notion of communication competence is the knowledge of the abstract rules of language required to produce sound, meaning and form in socially and culturally appropriate ways, (Lavandera, 1988).

Major Views on Pragmatics

The term pragmatics has been variously defined to capture the different orientations of scholars in this fertile area of language study. Only few of such, will suffice for the purpose of this study. Leach and Michael (1981) view pragmatic analysis as involving investigation into that aspect of meaning which is derived not only from the ways which utterances are used but how they... to the context in which they are uttered. Meulen (1988) points that pragmatics, though less so than syntax and semantics, is characterized by a set of research issues forming a coherent scientific program of linguistic inquiry. She states that further that pragmatics covers those ‘theories of meaning and interpretation which appeals to speaker/listener, their knowledge of the world, context of use and to linguistic acts performances and their effects’ (P. 440).

The main pivot around which this research revolves is the following postulation of Kempson (1977) on pragmatics:

“The main aim of a theory of pragmatics is that it is expected to be explanation of how it is that speakers of any language can use the sentences of that language to convey messages which do not bear any necessary relation to the content of the sentences used (P. 68).”

Language use among the Yoruba in the speech situation of condoling a bereaved is replete with utterances that convey meanings that do not bear any necessary relation to their linguistics content. A glaring example is the consoling utterance: ‘the life that the horse not enjoy, may it be the portion of its horsetail (aye ti esin ko je, iru re yio je o)’ could be offered to a man whose wife died during childbirth. The linguistic content of this metaphoric utterance appears to the poles apart from the actual meaning or message it is meant to convey. The actual meaning can be easily recovered via pragmatic analysis. Utterances like the above, collected in this situation, are to be studied in relation to the above enumerated goals of pragmatics. The ultimate aim is to plot pragmatic mappings which are necessarily deployed by competent users of Yoruba language in this situation to unravel the hidden messages of such utterances.

ANALYSIS OF SOME OF THE UTTERANCES IN THE CONTEXT OF BEAREAVEMENT AMONG THE YORUBA.

To get at the meanings of some of these utterances, the Yoruba speakers and listeners must share the same contexts, competencies and background information as to arrive at the intended meanings. The context include socio-cultural, situational, cosmological and linguistic while the competences include socio-cultural, cosmological, situational as linguistic at that level. The background information to be shared includes necessary presuppositions and implications via inference. The meaning of the utterance will then come to the open via the intended speech acts on the nature of perlocutionary and illocutionary forces (direct and indirect). It is this complex processes that make some utterances to be difficult to understand by a non adult native speaker of the Yoruba’s especially those who are not familiar with this context.

UTTERANCE 1:

Yoruba—Aye ti esin ko je, omo re ni yio je

Translation: The (good) life that the horse do not enjoy, its tail will enjoy

CONTEXTS: This type of utterance/greeting is rendered in a situation where a pregnant woman died while delivering a new-born baby. Socio-culturally, it is a well known fact that horsetails are ceremonial instruments used by kings and chiefs. This therefore is a prayerful greeting that solicits long life and prosperity for the infant in the future despite the tragic loss of the mother.

UTTERANCE 2:

Yoruba: Omi lo danu, Olorun oni je ki agbe fo

Translation: It is the water that has spilled; may the lord protect the gourd.

CONTEXTS: This is rendered in a a context where a pregnant woman died while delivering a baby. The new born baby is now compared to water in a receptacle. If the water spills, the prayer is that the receptacle will be spared from breaking; so that it can still continue to carry more water.

UTTERANCE 3:

Yoruba: Eyin kan, ile erin wo.

Translation: The teeth has broken, the shelter of laughter is exposed.

CONTEXTS: The parts of the body are naturally arranged so as the lips cover the teeth where human produce the act of laughter. When this order and arrangement is distorted, there result disorder and disparity.

So when death has snatched away a well to do man in a society, the order and natural arrangement is thought to be distorted and disarranged; so comes this type of greeting/utterance of bereavement.

UTTERANCE 4:

Yoruba: ki olorun ma se iku baba/mama ni akufa

Translation: May father's/mother's death not cause succession of deaths

CONTEXTS: Among the Yoruba, it is believed that because of one odd reason or another single death of a man/woman in a family can trigger successive deaths of other healthy looking individuals in the family, hence the above utterance/wish in such contexts.

UTTERANCE 5:

Yoruba: Baba/iya tete pada(wa) yamo

Translation: Father/mother should reincarnate quickly as newborn babies.

CONTEXTS: The cosmological belief of the Yoruba is that the world of the death, the world of the living and the world of the living are inter-related. It is believed that those (good) people that died can still be re-incarnated as baby girls and baby boys. It is therefore a prayer that the dead man/woman should quickly come back to the family as boys and girls. This explains the name 'Babatunde'(father has come(back)), Yetunde(mother has come(back)), Yegide usually given to newborns among the Yoruba.

II. CONCLUSION:

It is been noted that some functions of language can be very complex, and may not be acquired as part of communicative competence until relatively late in life (Stubbs, 1983). Attempt has been given in this study to reveal the factors that underline the intricacy and complexity of this particular speech situation. Again, there is the assumption that the successful management of inter-personal relationships is central for achieving individual and communal goals in the context of social living, and that the employment of appropriate linguistic forms can further enhance such relationships. A condolence visit, which is usually a dyadic interaction, serves as one of the avenues for lubricating the wheel of inter-personal, and by extension, intra communal relationships.

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