

Ethnographic Application in Igbo Communication: A Study of Selected Communities

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Abstract

The major difference between linguistic competence and communicative competence is clearly shown in ethnography of speaking. A native speaker of a language who has communicative competence observes the social, cultural and other non-linguistic elements that govern effective communication. This principle is highly maintained in most parts of Igbo speaking areas. This research work is therefore geared towards unveiling the application of some of the cultural, social and contextual norms to some Igbo linguistic communities, with particular reference to Agulu Satellite dialect of Oka Inland West Igbo, Owere Inland East Igbo and Waawa Igbo. The researcher discovered that ethnography of communication is well observed by competent native speakers of Igbo language. This is so because sex, and age of the addresser and addressee, societal value, religious belief, etc. go a long way in determining the choice of words. The research was concluded with an emphasis that speakers of the language should adhere strictly to the ethnology of speaking so as to achieve communicative competence. This exercise would be very useful to Igbo language speakers and learners.

Introduction

Ethnography of communication studies language in connection with some non-linguistic factors such as the environmental factors, and socio-cultural factors. It does not study language in isolation. Ethnology of speech considers some other elements in addition to words that contribute to effective communication. In line with this, Trauth and Kerstin (2006:154) say,

This approach introduced in 1950s and early 1960s by D. Hymes and J.J.Gumperz, is concerned with the analysis of language-use in its socio cultural setting. In contrast to the then popular linguistic theories of structuralism and transformational grammar, this approach is based on the premise that the meaning of an utterance can be understood only in relation to the 'speech event' or 'communicative event' in which it is embedded. The character of such speech events (eg. a sermon, a trial, or a telephone call) is culturally determined.

The earliest proponents of ethnography of communication studied this analysis in order to throw more light to language-in-use. They focussed on such elements like 'who' said 'what' to 'who' on 'what' occasion? For this Paltridge (2006:5) asserts

Hymes work was a reaction to views of language which took little or no account of the social and cultural context in which language occurs. In particular, he considered aspects of 'speech events' such as who is speaking to whom, about what, for what purpose, where and when, and how these impact on how we say or do things in culture-specific settings.

Primary sources which invoked observation methodology and analysis of content, bearing in mind their place in ethnology, were most appropriate. The native speakers of the selected communities were observed during speech events. Added to that unstructured interviews were conducted spontaneously in order to authenticate the reasons behind the peculiarities of choice of the vocabularies within a particular speech community.

The concept of ethnography

Ethnography is the ability to apply the social and cultural rules of a language. Malmkjær (2002:485) states that ethnography, "Involves more than grammatical knowledge, it includes knowing the social and cultural rules for using a language." In the same vein, Crystal (1987:420) avers that

ethnography is, “The study of language in relation to the social and cultural variables that influence human interaction.”

“The study of the role of cultural or common-sense knowledge is an important focus of investigation in the field of the study known as the ethnography of communication” so says Saeed (2003:217). Quoting Hymes (1964), Paltridge (2006:5) is of the opinion that, “One useful way of looking at the ways in which language is used by particular cultural groups is through the notion of the ethnography of communication.”

From the above ideas one can conveniently attest that ethnography of communication is the application of all the necessary non-linguistic variables/ rules (such as societal norms and cultural rules) to speech environment for effective communication.

Speech is used in different ways among different groups of people. Each group has its own norms of linguistic behaviour.

Factors that influence linguistics behaviour

There are so many factors that influence effective communication. Some of the factors include the purpose, the context, the addresser, the addressee, the norms and values of the people concerned, etc. All these were embedded in the ethnographic framework proposed by Hymes (1974).

According to Wardhaugh (1998:242) “Hymes (1974) has proposed an ethnographic framework which takes into account the various factors that are involved in speaking. An ethnography of a communicative event is a description of all the factors that are relevant in understanding how that particular communicative event achieves its objectives. For convenience, Hymes used the word ‘SPEAKING’ as an acronym for the various factors he deems to be relevant.

The ‘*Setting* and *Scene* (S)of speech are very important in speech event. *Setting* refers to the time and place, that is the concrete physical circumstances in which speech takes place. *Scene* refers to the abstract psychological setting, or the cultural definition of the occasion.

The *Participants* (P) include various combinations of speaker-listener, addressor-addressee, or sender- receiver.

Ends (E) refers to the conventionally recognised and expected outcomes of an exchange as well as to accomplish on particular occasions. A trial in a

courtroom has a recognisable social end in view, but the various participants, that is, the judge, jury, prosecution, defence, accused, and witnesses, have different personal goals. Likewise, a marriage ceremony serves a certain social end, but each of the various participants may have his or her own unique goals in getting married.

Act sequence (A) refers to the actual form and content of what is said: the precise words used, how they are used, and the relationship of what is said to the actual topic at hand.

Key (K) refers to the tone, manner, or spirit in which a particular message is conveyed: light-hearted, serious, precise, pedantic, mocking, sarcastic, pompous and so on. The key may also be marked non-verbally by certain kinds of behaviour, gesture, posture, or even deportment.

Instrumentalities (I) refers to the choice of channel, eg. oral, written, or telegraphic, and to the actual forms of speech employed, such as the language, dialect, code, or register that is chosen.

Norms of interaction and interpretation (N) refers to the specific behaviours and properties that attach to speaking and also to how these may be viewed by someone who does not share them, eg. loudness, silence, gaze return and so on. For example, there are certain norms of interaction with regard to church services and conversing with strangers. However, these norms vary between social groups, so the kind of behaviour expected in congregations that practice 'talking in tongues' or the group encouragement of a preacher in others would be deemed abnormal and unacceptable in a 'high' Anglican setting.

Genre (G), the final term, refers to clearly demarcated types of utterance; such things as poems, proverbs, riddles, sermons, prayers, lectures and editorials. These are all marked in specific ways in contrast to casual speech. While particular genres seem more appropriate on certain occasions than on others, eg. sermons inserted into church services, they can be independent: we can ask someone to stop 'sermonising', that is, we can recognise a genre of sermons when an instance of it, or something closely resembling an instance, occurs outside its usual setting.

Malmkjær (2002:485) summarised Hymes framework when he adds, “Hymes developed a checklist of dimensions of sociolinguistic awareness that are involved when speakers communicate in particular speaking situation. One version of this list is genre, topic, purpose or function, setting, key, participant, message form, message content, act sequence, rules of interaction and norms of interaction (cultural expectations about how talk should proceed and what its significance is).

Crystal also re-echoes with the above by saying that “Many features of language correlate directly with the characteristics of the content, or situation in which a communicative event takes place. Classifications vary, but most approaches recognise the central role played by the following factors:

Setting – The time and place in which a communicative act occurs, eg. in church, during a meeting, at a distant, and upon leave-taking.

Participants- The number of people who take part in an interaction, and the relationship between them, eg. addressee(s), bystander(s)

Activity- The type of activity in which a participant is engaged, e.g. cross-examining, debate, having a conversation.

The interaction between these factors produces a set of constraints on several features of language, notably:

Channel. The medium chosen for the communication (e.g. speaking, writing, drumming) and the way it is used.

Code. The formal systems of communication shared by the participants (eg. spoken English, Russian, etc., deaf sign languages).

Message form. The structural patterns that identify the communication both small scale (the choice of specific sounds, words, or grammatical constructions) and large scale (the choice of specific genres).

Subject matter. The content of the communication, both explicit and implicit.

Each of these plays a crucial part in the identification of a communicative event. For example, a sermon (activity) is normally given in a church (setting), by a preacher addressing a congregation (participants), primarily

using speech (medium), in a monologue in a single language (code) involving religious forms and genres (message form) and about a spiritual topic (subject matter). Or in a phone-in radio programme (activity) is anchored in a studio (setting) by a presenter interviewing a resource person, with the listener asking questions or contributing (the presenter, resource person and the listener are the participants) through a telephone (medium) in a discussion programme (code) concerning marital issues (subject matter).

Application to Igbo language

This ethnographic principle strongly upholds in most Igbo speech communities because their culture, norms and situational context go a long way in influencing their choice of speech pattern. For instance, in Ezeagu council area of Enugu state, it is prohibited for women to mention the Igbo translation of masquerade which is ‘mmo nwu’. In the place of ‘mmo nwu’ they say ‘oyeweana’. According to Qgwxd[le (2009) ‘Mmo nwu’ is highly exclusive for the males while females use ‘oyeweana’ due to their traditional religious belief.

Any native speaker of that linguistic community or any person who knows the ethnography of that dialect would never dare to mention ‘mmo nwu’ if she is from the female folk.

This means that sex determines one's choice of vocabulary.

Fromkin et al (2003:490) for this state,

Just as the use of some words may reflect society's views toward sex or natural bodily functions or religious beliefs, so also some words may reflect racist, chauvinist, and sexist attitude. Language itself is not racist or sexist but reflects the views of various sectors of a society. Such terms, however, may perpetuate and reinforce biased views, and be demeaning and insulting to those addressed.

Around Owerri area of Imo state, there is always the prefix ‘da/de’ to any older person's name for female/male older persons respectively. For instance, da Ngozi, da Nneka, da Ada etc.; de Ogbonna, de Kalu, de Obinna etc. (Ezechi, 2009). Here age influences the communicative mood.

For meaningful communication in that dialectal area, every competent speaker must adhere to that norms and principles, otherwise his speech/utterance would be deemed derogatory or insulting.

For Nnewi satellite dialect, they greet elderly women., ‘Oo mu’while they greet elderly men ‘O□□o□□ m’ (Onyekaqnwx, 2009).

In Aro□ndi□zuo□gu□, elderly males are greeted ‘Maazi□’, while their female counterparts are greeted ‘Doo nnoo’, (Okoli, 2009). According to Fromkin et al(2003:482), “ Language reflects sexism in society. Language itself is not sexist, just as it is not obscene; but it can connote sexist attitude as well as attitude about social taboo or racism.”

Speakers around that linguistic community are very mindful of these principles. Even the youngest person from that area cannot violate the norm, if not he is regarded as a non-indigene.

Certain sacred creatures like snake, python etc. are better described than mentioned around Agulu speech community especially at night due to their cultural belief that once mentioned, they (snake, python) would visit the person at night because they believe that those creatures have listening ears. (Obiora, Obiqzq,2009)

For them, snake in the night is ‘anu□ elili’. People with who understand the ethnography of the community adhere strictly to that tradition. This might be why Fromkin et at (2003:489) assert,

In all societies certain acts or behaviour are frowned on, forbidden, or considered taboo. The words or expressions referring to these taboo acts are then also avoided, or considered ‘dirty’. ...The views toward specific words or linguistic expressions reflect the attitude of a culture or society toward the behaviours and actions of the language users.

In the same vein, the outcasts (osus) in the area are not boldly called ‘osus’ instead they refer to them as ‘Ndi□ agu□, may be because of their geographical residential area.

For people from Owerri side they call the ‘osus’ ‘ndi□ aka ekpe’ (Njqkx, 2009)

It is important to mention here that in most parts of Agulu town, the so called outcasts have their residential areas located outskirts of the heart of the town. This might be why the 'osus' are euphemistically referred to as 'nd[agx' meaning people who live near the wilderness.

Some parts of Igbo land use euphemism for words they consider as taboo words. This might be due to their moral inclinations or because they consider those words as obscene, in other words it is their societal value. Igbo names for human private parts (like penis, vaginal) and words relating to sexual relationship are hardly heard from ethnographic observers. Fromkin et al (2003:482) ascertain that, "The discussion of obscenities, blasphemies, taboo words, and euphemisms showed that words of a language are not intrinsically good or bad but reflect individual or societal values."

Ethnography of communication also manifests in selection of verbs. Some Igbo verbs are restrictively selected due some cultural reasons. Fromkin et al (2003:178) say, "In some languages, the fact that certain verbs can occur appropriately with certain nouns is reflected in the verb morphology... There are different verb forms for objects with different semantic properties"

This is applicable to Igbo verbs because most of the verbs strictly select their noun. For instance, for verb of cooking, different foods are cooked in different ways, hence each method of cooking has a particular verb associated with it., for instant a competent a speaker of Igbo language cannot say, *'Ada na-esi ofe'. Applying the ethnography of communication, the speaker says, 'Ada na-ete ofe'. For verbs of buying, it is better to say, 'O kpu tara ehi' instead of *'O zu tara ehi', 'Nna ya gbatara ala' instead of *'Nna ya zxtara ala' as most incompetent speakers would speak. It is true that 'zu ta' means buying, but different items have different verbs associated with them due to some cultural reasons. (Anqka, 1983)

Findings

From the analysis above it is discovered that ethnography of communication is very paramount for effective and meaningful communication in Igbo land. Depending on the speech community, sex, age, societal values, religious belief, cultural background etc must be seriously considered during speech events. A native speaker from Oweroid Inland West Igbo dialect who forgets to prefix 'da/de' to his elder sister/brother's name respectively is considered to be very stubborn or arrogant. This might be the reason why people from

that area sometimes regard Anambrians as disrespecting their elders. In the vein, an Agulu person who mentions the name of any sacred animal in the night (instead of describing the animal) is seen as violating the law of the land. This is also applicable to a female from Ezeagu area mentioning ‘mmqnwx’ instead of ‘oyeweana’

It is also discovered that vocabulary one uses at any point in time tells how a person should be classified or regarded. In some cases the victims are referred to as a ‘nataad man’ meaning a person who just came back or a person who does not know the culture of his people.

Conclusion

Ethnography of communication means having mastery of both the linguistics and non-linguistics variables that affect effective and successful communication. Mastery of a language does not only mean grasping the grammatical components of the language, but it includes recognising the environmental factors of the language like the social norms, situational context and the cultural values of the speech community. The principles of a linguistic behaviour should be strictly adhere to show communicative competence. Therefore, speakers of any language should look inward to discover those linguistic and non linguistic elements that make a language unique. People should comply to those principles in order to adequately fit-in in that society otherwise they would be social misfit, or would be addressed with certain derogatory names. Adhering to ethnography of speech distinguishes a native speaker from a non- native speaker.

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Interviews

Adike, Patrick, aged 72 years, a retired Principal

Ajoku, Nnenna, aged 61 years, a trader

Njoku, Kalu, aged 49 years, a secondary school teacher

Obiora, Godfrey, aged 78 years, a retired driver

Ogwudile, Christian, aged 46 years, a Ph.D. candidate, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Okoli, Nkiru, aged 32 years, a Ph.D. candidate, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Onyekaonwu, Goddy, aged 60 years, a Professor and the Head of the Department, I Igbo, African and Chinese Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

The Unstructured Interview

Researcher: Is there any difference between ‘mmqnwx’ and ‘oyeweana’ in your dialect?

Mr. Qgwx [le: Of course yes, women from Ezeagx do not call the name ‘mmqnwx’. ‘Mmqnwx’ is highly exclusive for the males while females use ‘oyeweana’ due to our traditional religious belief.

Researcher: Must one prefix da/de in somebody’s name?

Mr. Njqkx: In our place you dare not address your elders by direct name, you must prefix ‘da’ to a female elder’s name, and ‘de’ to a male elder’s name. Example, we can say ‘da Ngozi’, ‘da Kalx’. Otherwise, you sound disrespectful. We are not like Anambra people who do not show respect to their elders.

Researcher: In your locality is there any distinction between the language of the males and that of the females?

Miss Okoli: The only one I can remember now is that we greet the elderly males as ‘Maaz[’ while their female counterparts are greeted ‘Doo nnoo’

Researcher: What is the reason for that?

Miss Okoli: Since I was born that is how our people greet their elders. In fact it is our custom. Anyone who deviates from that is not a true son or daughter of Arqnd[zuqgx

Researcher: Why do Agxlx people always use the word ‘anx elili’?

Mr. Obiqra : According to our religious belief, sacred animals like snake and python are addressed as ‘anx elili’ in the night.

Researcher: Why now?

Mr. Obiqra: We believe that snakes and pythons have ears. When one calls them in the night they will visit the person.

Researcher: What about outcasts you people do not call them ‘osus’

Mr. Obiqra: Yes, we call them 'nd[agx' because they mainly live at the outskirts of the town. They live near the forest.

Researcher: I always hear your people say 'Oo mu' and 'Qq m' What do they mean?

Prof. Onyekaqnwx: We greet 'Oo mu' to elderly women and 'Qq m' to elderly men

Researcher: Prof., why?

Prof. Onyekaqnwx: It is our way of life. It is generally done so in our place