ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL DIMENSION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION

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Abstract
Language is central to man and stands as the foundation for social action. The dynamic nature of language accounts for the change it undergoes at various levels. It is believed to preserve and transmit culture. Language is indeed a way of life. There is no denying the fact that communication is an integral part of language and culture as one concept finds expression through the other and vice versa. This paper, however, x-rays the interrelatedness of the trinity - language, culture and communication and argues that the trio work hand in glove for effective and efficient communication. Any attempt to separate them or treat them in isolation will amount to misalignment of meaning. This paper sheds light on the impact of cultural dimension in English language communication, suggesting that thorough learning of any language begets communicative competence. In conclusion, culture has been found to inform communication and brings understanding to communication through a common background of shared experiences which find expression in language. The paper therefore suggests that learning a language well usually involves knowledge about the culture of that language. Thus, consciousness of the fundamentals of the language in view is of utmost importance.

Keywords: Impact, Language, Culture, English language, Communication.

Introduction
Language phenomena have been studied from multidimensional perspectives. It may be defined as a means of conveying thoughts by words, or articulate use of the tongue. In fact, “language” and “tongue” are homonyms in the idiom of many nations. However, by extension of meaning, “language” can also signify any means of conveying ideas. This secondary role is reflected, in such metaphors as “language of eyes, gestures, or deeds”. The origin of language as a vehicle of ideas is lost in prehistoric darkness. It can only be surmised that man’s ancestors used sounds as most evolved animals do, to express rudimentary emotions. At some stage of evolution, a refinement of this basic communication resulted in the birth of speech; sounds of definite pattern were standardized into primeval vocabulary (Berlitz, 1976 p.349). It is also believed that language is the key to the heart of a culture. So related are language and culture that language holds the power to maintain National or cultural identity. Language is important in ethnic and nationalist sentiment because of its powerful and visible symbolism; it becomes a core symbol or rallying point (Samovar and Porter, 2001).

A fact of basic importance still remains that language has social importance and stands as the foundation for social action. It facilitates interpersonal and inter ethnic cooperation in different setting. Njemanze (2008, p.23) observes that “most languages operate in association with their own recurrent pattern which is meaningful to native speakers. These speakers have similar syntax, semantics, phonetics and phonology; they also “do not operate in isolation but within a cultural setting”: This assertion affirms that language and culture are inextricably interwoven. Lull (2000) argues that language cannot be separated from culture and it is through language that we construct and deconstruct our culture learning who “we” are and who “they” are. This paper therefore examines language and culture as constructs that are indispensable in communicativeness and carries out an appraisal of the relatedness of language, culture and communication. It discusses communication as a product of excellent use of language. Other things being equal.

The Concept of Culture
According to Bennett (1976, p.359), the distinctive characteristics of human behavior include the ability
to think symbolically – that is, to imagine things that do not exist or that are not present in the field of immediate perception. This facility permits humans to make tools (working from a conception to some future need which the tool meets); to organize themselves into complex groups that have divided and special functions; to create imaginative works of art; or to conceive the supernatural. Culture, thus, implies man’s behavioural ability to “bind time” to his purposes and to reflect upon the meaning of life and nature. These abilities take time to develop; hence the human infant has a long period of helplessness, and the child’s education or “enculturation” is prolonged far beyond that characteristics for other animals, whose behaviour is in large part genetically determined or “instinctive”. Gray (2008) asserts that culture is not genetically transmitted rather it takes place by a process of absorption from the social environment or through deliberate instruction. The author maintains that man learns culture through the process of socialization, enumeration, personal experience and through deliberate indoctrination or teaching. These complex experiences of learning often tend to create fixed ideas which can be difficult to change, once they are established in the adult individual. Hence cultural change takes place at varying rates, depending upon how efficiently the adults can be taught to unlearn previous habits and ideas. Yet at all times it must be remembered that humans do not always absorb culture blindly and automatically. Because of the symbolic and reactive nature of human behavior, humans can respond to the cultural elements presented to them, which means that they can reject them or change them at will. In the description of Goertz (1975), culture is network (transmitted historically) of meanings embedded in symbols, a system of ideas inherited and expressed in the form of symbols which people communicate, perpetuate and stretch their knowledge concerning their attitude towards life. The author further expresses that culture is learned, acquired, transmitted or diffused through contract from one generation to another. The implication is that, imbibing a culture is a continuous albeit lifelong process which stems from birth and ends in death. It therefore involves a learning process which may evolve with time. Bennett (1976) reiterates that Culture is known to be ever present when there is evidence of human thought and activity consciously attempting to control or react to the natural environment.

Language and Culture: Explicitly Defined
It is strongly believed that language and culture are very closely related. In fact, the consensus is that language is culture and culture is language. The importance of language in our daily dealings cannot be overemphasized. One of the major tasks of every young human being is to learn the language of a society in which he or she is born. Taylor (1985) considers language as “a pattern of activity, by which we express/realize a certain way of being in the world, that of reflective awareness, but a pattern which can only be deployed against a background which we can never fully dominate, and yet a background that we are never fully dominated by, because we are constantly reshaping it”. This goes to show that language is a key to all human community. It typically revolves around the regulation of every society, the training of the younger generation holding tenaciously unto already existing norms, routine interaction of its members, the promulgation of law, development and preservation of its culture and very significantly, for group identification.

Culture on the other hand, according to Hofstede (1997) is a cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of objects in the course of generations through individual and group striving. It is indeed through language that culture finds expression. This is so because, language has the multi function of interpreting ideas, constituting terminologies, expressing thought patterns, and communicating knowledge etc. Okeke (2007, p.79) describes culture as the totality of values, habits and social behaviors, mode of life and the belief system of a group of people, and the language used by this people must possess these values.

There is therefore a binding string between language and culture. This belief is encapsulated in Frederick’s (2002, p.58) assertion that “language encodes the values and norms in a given society and as culture changes, so does the language: therefore, through language, the people’s culture is known”.

The Concept of Communication
In language study, the term communication may be used interchangeably with such terms as conversation, dialogue or discourse. It is a fundamental aspect of language use. Communication essentially involves the use of verbal means to exchange information, or for information transfer. Communication is an integral part of human existence and emphasizes how spoken interaction is structured and how speaker’s
conversational contributions in discourse situations are connected. Much as conversation seems very seamless, effortless, and fluid, it is important to say that it has underlying structures. These structures underscore among other things: what speakers hope to achieve in interaction and how they set about achieving it. However, we as interactants have very high expectations about what should occur in interaction: as questions would naturally elicit answers, requests anticipate reactions either positive or negative, while remarks and comments evoke at least some acknowledgment from other interactants. All these speech activities are expected to be delivered in a hitch-free manner and in a bid to achieve all of that, speakers tend to adopt strategies that will help in the free flow of their conversation or at least cushion the supposed negative effect of any breakdown (Sacks et al. 1974). Some of these discourse strategies may include: code mixing, code switching, politeness, turn-taking etc.

Code mixing may describe the alternate use of constituents from two languages within a sentence. e.g. I was at the market early enough mana azutachaghim all I wanted.

Code switching may describe the alternate use of sentences from two languages in a single discourse. e.g. Agara m i gb a mmanu n'ututu. Ha eme m e b a.

Politeness: entails the use of strategies for keeping social interaction friction free. Politeness strategy emphasizes that interactants have images (face) which they hope to save and as such do not make utterances intended to hurt the other. It is all about grace in speech.

Turn-taking is a strategy which suggests that in speech situation speakers take turns to speak and in which case, the end of one turn signals the beginning of another. They may come in such forms as adjacency pairs, solidarity routines or converging pairs. All these strategies are geared toward effective and efficient communication.

The concept of communication according to Otuburuagu (2009, p.1) is a “give and take” process — the transmission of information from one person to another using symbol or codes which are meaningful to both the information transmitter and the receiver”. Similarly, Dozie and Madu (2012, p.99) described communication as a two-way process involving a sender and a receiver and in which case, the symbols sent only make meaning because the other person shares our symbolic system. Mouli (2014) sums up by asserting that the concept of communication refers to the psychological, cultural and social rules which condition the use of speech.

Culture and Communication: The Nexus between
When we say that culture informs communication, the implication is that culture brings understanding to communication through a common background of shared experiences and histories. People of a particular culture usually share a geographic location. It is not out of place therefore that this common geography equally affects the togetherness of the group in that they will all share the same experience of weather and topography. The existence of diverse types of cultures has also meant difficulties of communication and understanding across cultural boundaries; hence, acculturation, or the process of exchange of cultural elements between two people in contact, becomes a very complex process. However, shared experiences over time create culture that contributes to understanding and communication (linguistic-online.com). Spencer-Oatey (2008) explores the interactive aspects of cross-cultural communication and notes that the shared assumptions of a group of people help to interpret the behavior and words of those in and outside the group. Also, when people have experiences in common, this contributes to understanding on a deeper level than what can be interpreted by an outsider. In relation to the bond between communication and culture, Martin and Nakayama (2005, p.32) say that there is always a symbolic process whereby meaning is shared and negotiated in communication. This is to say that meaning is always attributable to and derived from shared experience and culture. Spencer-Oatey (2008) further implies that gestures and idiomatic expressions are often misunderstood by those outside the culture. Although, people can communicate effectively with other cultures, they must make an effort to understand the culture as well as the language of the people they communicate with. Similarly, Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002) stress that culture enhances communication and that is why people usually understand those of similar background best. However, as the world shrinks, culture understanding becomes more important. It can be inferred from the foregoing that the Trinity work hand in hand. It is almost impossible to mention one without recourse to the other. The synthesis therefore is that since language is culture and culture language, both find expression through
communication which is hinged on the other two - languages and culture.

The Place of English Language
Nigeria is a multicultural country with many ethno-linguistic backgrounds bound together economically and politically by the British colonial administration. According to Kari (2002, p.2) out of the more than 400 languages spoken in the country, only three so-called major languages are accorded recognition as indigenous national languages while the rest of the others are labeled minor languages. The three indigenous national languages are Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba. English, which is also one of the languages spoken in the country, an inheritance from Britain, its colonizer, is accorded the status of official language. The three national languages, which give an unfortunate superficial impression to the one who is unfamiliar with the linguistic terrain of Nigeria, tend to suggest that the country is geolinguistically divided into three areas with Hausa, spoken in the North, Yoruba in the West and Southwest and Igbo in the East and South-East. Kari notes that this will be a total misrepresentation of what obtains in reality as the country is dotted with languages. However, English language enjoys a pride of place in Nigeria today.

English has remained one of the Nigerian languages used in administration, education, commerce, international relations and routine interactions. It has become a pre-requisite for admission into institutions of higher learning. Use of English in Nigeria is incontrovertibly a British legacy. The place of English language in Nigeria today is such that other languages spoken within the nation may clamour for some degree of relevance. Several policies have been made primarily to check that the indigenous languages do not fizzle out. Some of these policies would include the Education policies made to ensure that Nigerian languages remain the languages of instruction in schools up to a certain level as medium of instruction has its own typical role in shaping the linguistic competence of learners. (Federal Republic of Nigeria 1998). Most Nigerians speak at least two languages, L1 mother tongue and the L2 English language. Without prejudice, the ability to communicate with members of other speech communities within Nigeria is made possible through English, though Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba are termed national languages. The function of the English language in fostering and promoting understanding across millions of people of diverse cultural, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds is immeasurable.

Mouli (2014) reports thus “whether colonial hangover is there or not, ability to communicate with members of other speech communities within India is made possible through English”. The author further states that pragmatic selection of tools, transforming teaching methods, and creatively framing syllabi with foresight have ensured emergence of a new breed of English language users, who demonstrate delightfully the art and science of survival in a rapidly changing scenario.

Thus the place of English language may be outlined as follows to reecho Adekunle’s (1972) thoughts as:

- Language of integration
- Language acceptable to all
- Language of nationalism
- Language of nationalism
- Language of wider communication

Conclusion
This review has detailed how cultural factors impact the language of communication. In this regard, the work by Hanusch (2008, p.51) was found to be very useful in accounting for the interconnectedness of the trio: language, culture and communication. This author noted that language cannot be separated from culture and that while it is one thing to learn another language, it is something different altogether to be able to apply that language within its cultural surrounding. As Stevenson (1994) has pointed out, dictionaries can tell us the literal translations of words, but they cannot tell us what those words mean within their cultural surroundings. For all words have at least two meanings, their denotative meaning, which is the word itself, as well as their connotative meaning, or cultural meaning (Hall, 1997). Thus cultural meaning cannot be simply translated, as its meaning is specific to the culture it operates within (Stevenson, 1994). This may imply that for an outsider, it is impossible to understand a culture without first knowing the language, but the appropriate use of the language will also depend on the level of cultural knowledge. Haarmann (1999, p.64) has noted that language is “a major marker for many local groups around the world, and there have been historical periods when language was assigned an ideological role as the marker par excellence of ethnic identity”. Hanusch (2008, p.52) argues that “if language is a marker of culture, it should be possible for us to trace certain uses of language back to cultural conditions”.

Language use with recourse to cultural dimension continues to help language users and learners acquire linguistic competence needed to
communicate in speaking or writing, to formulate what they want to say/write in correct and appropriate ways (Byram, Gribkova and Starkey 2002, p.10). Similarly, according to Mouli (2014, p.5), exposure to different varieties of expression strengthens one’s interpersonal relationship, respect for cultural concerns, concepts etc hence, appropriateness of use of the English language. In other words, learning a language is by extension acquiring the culture of that language as thorough learning of any language bolsters communicative competence. As a language of global reckoning, English weaves dissimilar countries, societies and people to one another. Therefore consciousness of the nitty-gritty, fundamentals or basics of the English language usage is of utmost importance in communication. Understandably, learning a language well usually involves knowledge about the culture of that language because communication that does not have appropriate cultural content often results in humorous incidents due to miscommunication and misunderstanding (Mara Lorena 2012, p.325).

REFERENCES


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