

The Place of Sociolinguistics in the Society: Evidence From Nigeria

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This paper which investigates the place of sociolinguistics in the society with particular reference to Nigeria draws its data from primary sources like personal and public speeches as well as secondary sources like textbooks, journals, internet materials, etc. The researcher uses a combination of descriptive approach and the theoretical framework of linguistic and communicative competence to analyze the data. The study reveals that sociolinguistics as an area of language study has been a tool without which it will be too difficult if not impossible for human beings to inhabit in the society. From the study, it is observed that in a society with particular reference to Nigeria, sociolinguistics is relevant in all aspects of human life such as communication, education, politics, administration/government, theatre arts, mass communication (advertisements), creation of new words to accommodate the new concepts in the society, criminology/forensic, oratory, etc.

Keywords: sociolinguistics, linguistic competence, communicative competence, linguistic structures, sociological factors

Introduction

Different studies concerning language abound, each with its own purpose(s), approach(es), and procedure(s) but the purposes of sociolinguistics, its approach and procedures in the study of language, are significant since they consider society where languages exist in its study of language as it is evident in its definition as the study of language in relation to the society. This means that sociolinguists adopt social approach in their studies about languages with the view that the study about languages is not complete if the society where languages exist is excluded (that is asocial approach). It is in view of this that sociolinguists are of the opinion that a language user should not only be linguistically competent but communicatively competent and that is what gives sociolinguistics its real value and place in any society. This paper was necessitated by the fact that despite the major roles that sociolinguistics plays in the society, it is still not regarded as a major area of linguistic study. Apart from this point, what makes speeches successful in any given society is the ability to choose the most appropriate morphological and syntactic structures during speeches as is the main tenet of sociolinguistics. The researcher uses this paper to show that the importance of sociolinguistics cannot be over emphasized in the society.

Theoretical Background

In this section, the researcher reviews literatures that will help the readers to have insight into the topic of research.

Sociolinguistics as a Concept

Sociolinguistics as a branch of linguistics has attracted many opinions from different authors. Among them is the view of Oloruntoba-Oju (1999, p. 139) as cited in Babatunde and Shobomehin (2007, p. 148) that sociolinguistics concerns itself with, “the constraints that societal phenomena place on language use...the various domains of human activity and how these affect linguistic behavior”. In his own contribution, Adeyanju (1998, p. 28) postulates that the socio-cultural values of a society can have influence on its language. Considering the above opinions, one can see that it is improper to study language excluding the society where language is used since knowing how to use language is as important as the knowledge of the language structure. In view of the social model of language study, Holmes (1992, p. 16) as cited in Wardaugh (2006, p. 11) asserts that sociolinguists’ aim is to move towards a theory which provides a motivated account of the way language is used in a community and of choices people make when they use language. For Olaoye (2007, p. 111), sociolinguists aim to discover regular correspondence between linguistics and social structure. The implication of Holmes and Olaoye’s claim is that a sociolinguist who excludes the society in his/her study of language is bound to fail. This is because language exists in the society and the use of language in the society is highly determined by the social structures.

Fishman’s (1972, p. 40) own postulation is that the content of sociolinguistics should encompass everything from considering who speaks (or writes) what language (or what language variety) to whom and when and to what end (Yul-Ifode, 2001, p. 22). From the above views by Holmes (1992), Fishman (1972), and Yul-Ifode (2001), one will see the need to study languages by considering the society where languages exist and even the habit of human beings that use languages. Following these authors’ views, Llamas and Stockwell (2010, p. 143) observe, “the majority of sociolinguistic studies are primarily descriptive and aim towards a scientific objectivity...” The scientific objectivity as observed by Llamas and Stockwell is possible through observation of the linguistic behaviours of language users as they are evident in the society where language is used. They further note that most studies focus on giving an account of social aspects of language in the real world that is as precise and systematic an account as possible within the current state of knowledge. From the opinions of these authors, one can see that sociolinguistics is the answer to anything that concerns languages as they occur in the society (i.e., real world). By this, the researcher means that the description of language and its appropriacy in use are based on the sociological factors (age, sex, occupation, educational qualification, social status, etc.). Concerning the role of sociolinguistics, Llamas and Stockwell (2010, p. 157) further argue that sociolinguistics reveals the complexity of context when language is studied in its real, applied setting, and it also suggests ways of understanding this context and the richness of language uses.

Foreseeing the importance of social and grammatical meanings in language, Hymes (1979, p. 12) notes, “in meaning, there is social as well as referential import”. The author further observes that in between the social and referential layers of meaning, there are other relationships, which, though present in social life, are not evident in ordinary grammar. Based on Hymes’ observation, there is an evidence of the need for the social model of linguistic studies as against the asocial model. In support of the social model of language studies, Cameron (1997) opines that human behaviour requires explanation in terms of the existence of social meaning.

Both the grammatical and social meanings are joined together to make communication successful hence the proposal of both the linguistic and communicative competence by sociolinguists for communication to be effective.

Linguistic Competence and Communicative Competence

Hymes (1971, p. 28) sees competence as the most general term for the capabilities of a person... For him, competence is dependent upon both (tacit) knowledge and (ability for) use. He identifies four parameters of communicative competence which include the formally possible (grammatical), feasible (psycholinguistic), appropriate (sociolinguistic), and formally done (de facto) (see also Longe, 1995). In support of Hymes' view, Longe also posits that a language speaker produces utterances that are not only grammatically correct but also appropriate for the settings in which he speaks and the social relationship and interactions in which he participates. In his own contribution, Holmes (1997, p. 370) opines thus, competence involves knowing the rules of speaking (grammar) in a speech community. The idea of competence is more than Holmes' view because the knowledge of the rules of speaking does not guarantee effective speaking in the practical sense. So, competence involves not only knowing the rules of grammar but also the ability to use the rules in practical situations. Obuasi (2010, p. 317) tries to distinguish between competence and performance in the following statement, "competence comprises the potentiality of the speaker (total mastery of an ideal speech situation) while performance (acting out of competing) refers to the forms actually realized". For sociolinguists, competence can cover both the intuitive knowledge of the speaker concerning a language and the actual performance hence the sociolinguistic terms: linguistic competence and communicative competence which entail knowledge about the grammar of a language and the ability to use the language appropriately in practical language situations.

Foreseeing the need for both linguistic competence and communicative competence by language users, Hymes (1971) opines that a student of language should not only acquire knowledge of sentences but also as appropriate: as to when to speak, when not and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, and in what manner. The author further notes that communicative competence is integral with attitudes, values, and motivations concerning language. According to Anozie (2007, p. 210), communicative competence aims to help the learner turn his considerable dormant grammatical competence into a real practical mastery of his own view; Anozie's view is similar to Habermas' (1970) opinion as cited in Longe (1995, p. 11) that communicative competence is to an ideal speech situation, what linguistic competence is to an abstract system of linguistic rules. Based on Anozie and Habermas' views, it is clear that what makes a language is the actual performance since somebody's knowledge of something can only be assessed through his/her performance. Linguistic competence can be tested through communicative competence. This implies that both linguistic competence and communicative competence complement each other. Nwabadi (2004) supports the issues of linguistic competence and communicative competence by saying that a good command of any language ...means knowing all the components of that language and at the same time using them appropriately. To uphold the idea of linguistic and communicative competence, Essien (2006, p. 10) equally asserts, if authors and implementers of development programmes and strategies are deficient in their expressive power of language, the programmes and strategies themselves would be poorly expressed and poorly understood. Essien's view shows that for authors and implementers of development programmes and strategies to be successful, they need to be both linguistically and communicatively competent. From the foregoing, one can see why the researcher is of the opinion that sociolinguistics holds a pivotal role in the society. One can imagine a society where development

programmes are hampered because of poor expression on the part of the authors and implementers of development programmes. Apart from poor expression, there is power in the use of language. A language user can cause war by the way he uses language, he can equally make peace by his use of language. Appropriate choice of words and constructions is the main key to success in communication. It is in view of this idea that made Hickey (2010, p. 8) to state clearly that communicative competence of the bilingual includes making the appropriate choices of structures for communication in given contexts.

The Place of Sociolinguistics in the Society

Sociolinguistics has remarkable and indispensable roles to play in any given society since in all aspects of human life, effective communication is the target and this can only be achieved through the use of appropriate linguistic structures and norms of interaction in the society. So, from this study, sociolinguistics has been found to equip human beings in the society with particular reference to Nigeria with the skills and knowledge that are required to be successful in communication, education, politics, administration/government, religion, mass communication (advertisements), theatre arts, creation of new words to accommodate new concepts in the society, criminology/forensic, oratory, etc., as discussed hereunder.

The Relevance of Sociolinguistics in the Area of Communication

The knowledge of sociolinguistics helps to equip language users with the required linguistic and communicative skills that they need to be able to communicate intelligibly and appropriately in the society where they find themselves. This function of sociolinguistics is evident in the claim of Holmes (1992, p. 16) as quoted in Wardaugh (2006, p. 11) that sociolinguist's aim is to move towards a theory which provides a motivated account of the way language is used in a community and the choices people make when they use language. In addition to being competent in the linguistic repertoire of a given language, the idea from sociolinguistics helps a language user to be able to consider all that it takes to be able to communicate effectively such as the listener(s) (in terms of his/her (their) age, educational qualification, sex, occupation, etc.), setting (formal and informal), time of (the day, war, crises, politics, etc.), and so on in order to choose the appropriate linguistic structures that will be able to perform the role of effective communication each time the need arises. For instance, although the linguistic structures, "get out!" "keep quiet!" "shut up your mouth!" are grammatically correct, there is no time it will be appropriate for a child to use any of them for adults (his/her parents, uncles, teachers, etc.), rather politer variants of the structures are required in that situation in order to be able to achieve the purpose of language which is for effective communication. It is the idea of communicative competence from sociolinguistics that will make the speaker to choose among all the variants since he is linguistically competent, the politer structure like mummy or daddy, "could you please excuse us" instead of the ones above. This most appropriate structure which is chosen based on the sociological factors like participant and age will help the speaker to achieve his purpose of communication.

The Role of Sociolinguistics in Education

In the teaching and learning in the formal, informal, and semi-formal educational systems, a teacher/an instructor is supposed to be linguistically and communicatively competent which is the ideology in sociolinguistics in order to be able to teach the learners (pupils/students, apprentices, etc.) in such a way that it will bring about the desired change in the behaviour of the learner(s). Ideas from sociolinguistics will help the teachers at different levels of education and even the informal education to know that such sociological factors

like age, setting, class, educational qualification, discipline, occupation, sex, etc., should be considered in order to be able to make the right linguistic choice(s) in terms of the appropriate language, vocabularies (registers), linguistic structures that will best impart the desired knowledge on the learners. From the research carried out by the researcher in selected primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions in Nigeria, the researcher observed that learners learn better when the appropriate language, registers, linguistic structures are used considering the sociological factors already identified above. So, with the knowledge of language in relation to the society, teaching and learning in Nigeria will be easier and the teaching objectives will be easy to achieve.

The Relevance of Sociolinguistics in Politics

The role of language in politics is captured in the words of James et al. (1995) as cited in Obobolo (2007, p. 13), "it is a means by which power is acquired, exercised and sustained". The researcher upholds the same view with James et al. (1995) but adds that these roles of acquiring, exercising, and sustaining power in politics can be achieved only when the language user uses language appropriately in the society. This means that the linguistic competence and the communicative competence of the speaker have to come into place. Someone can see the evidence of that in 1 Kings (12, verses 1-16) where king Rehoboam not only failed to use the appropriate words while he was addressing the Israelites but also failed to address them politely and that led to the division of the kingdom of Israel. In Verses 13-14, it is written, "And the king answered the people harshly ...saying, my father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions". This kind of wrong choice of words and impoliteness on the part of the king could not sustain his kingship in the whole Israel as evident in the reply by the people of Israel in Verse 16, "...what portion have we in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse. To your tents, O Israel! Look now to your own house, David".

In the society, politics is one thing that needs the appropriate use of language to be able to persuade the people to vote for a candidate or candidates so as to acquire power, exercise, and sustain it. Sociolinguistics comes into play in this aspect since a political candidate is required not only to use the linguistic competence of his language but should equally use his communicative competence to be able to choose the most appropriate words, phrases, and sentences that will be able to convince the people he/she is addressing to vote for him/her or his/her desired candidate(s). Example is seen in the APC (All Progressive Congress) 2019 political campaign in Nigeria which has its major campaign theme as taking Nigeria to the next level in every aspect of the national development. From this political campaign theme, one can see that there is nobody that likes stagnation in life, so, the right choice of the phrase, "taking Nigeria to the next level", tries to persuade people who like to move to the next level to vote for politicians in that party. Apart from this, Akintayo (2015) notes that when members of the Akwa Ibom state chapter of the All Progressive Congress (APC) paid Muhammed Buhari a courtesy visit in Abuja when he was elected the president of Nigeria in 2015, he made the visitors to understand that the first three on his agenda were: tackling the problem of insecurity, unemployment, and corruption respectively. Another aspect of sociolinguistics which helps politicians a lot to achieve the purpose of their speech is politeness. Knowing the right politeness strategy to adopt will go a long way to help the politicians to be able to convince the masses to support them by voting for them and even to sustain the power. The choice of positive politeness strategy as against the negative politeness strategy makes the masses to see a political candidate who is campaigning as humble and trust worthy and in that case people can be persuaded to vote for such political candidate.

The Use of Sociolinguistics in Government/Administration

With the ideas of language in relation to the society (i.e., sociolinguistics), a leader or an administrator will be able to always make appropriate linguistic choices and use the most suitable variants that will be able to make the subjects/followers to act wisely and support the administration. For instance, the speeches of President Muhammed Buhari most times prevent corruption in Nigeria as evident in this, “we will kill corruption before it kills Nigeria”. From the statement above, Nigerians know that the president is out to fight corruption squarely until it exists no more and because of that many people desist from acts of corruption. This is as a result of the right choice of words by the president because the phrase, “kill corruption” really means that the speaker is confident not only to fight corruption but to put an end to its existence in Nigeria. From the speech, anybody that does not want to die with corruption usually stays away from corruption.

The Significance of Sociolinguistics in the Area of Religion

The ideas of sociolinguistics equip the worshippers with the most appropriate linguistic structures for different aspects of communication during religious activities. For instance, the lexical items, phrases, and sentences for prayers, confession and atonement of sins, preaching, thanksgiving, etc., are different. When a worshipper is talking directly to God, the linguistic choice is different from when he/she is addressing his/her fellow human beings. So, based on the worshipper’s linguistic and communicative competence, he/she will be able to make the right linguistic choice(s) based on setting, addressee(s) and purpose so as to be able to achieve the desired communicative goal(s). Example is taken from the speeches of a pastor in Latter Rain Baptist Church, Akenfa 111 in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, Nigeria during a sermon while addressing the congregation, “...as Christians, our target is heaven, therefore, we should desist from any attitude that will make us to miss heaven, any rotten attitude will not give us a warrant to heaven, so, brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus avoid sins so that when the trumpet sounds, we will all meet in the kingdom of heaven”. From this minister’s speech, one can see that she was addressing the congregation whom she believes to have a common family of Christ with her as shown in the words, “...brothers and sisters” and apart from that, she was telling them what they should do to prepare themselves for the kingdom of heaven. Another example is a speech from a prayer session by the same pastor, “Oh God, our father!, the king of kings, the lord of lords, the lion of the tribe of Judah, we worship you, we adore you...” In this example, the choice of words and sentences shows that she was addressing their God she believes to be their father and is higher than them as evident in the speech, “Oh God, our father, the king of kings, the lord of lords..., we worship you...”

Sociolinguistics and Its Relevance in Mass Communication

Whether print or electronic media, the success in mass communication relies on the ability to make the right linguistic choices from the host of linguistic repertoires that a mass communicator is in possession of. The linguistic knowledge and communicative ability required to be successful in communication are covered in the area of sociolinguistics. This is because, before a mass communicator makes the right choice of the linguistic structures to be used in his/her mass communication, he/she has to be guided by some sociological factors like target audience, setting, purpose of the speech, etc., and in that way he/she shows how well he/she can exhibit his linguistic and communicative competence in his language of communication.

The Role of Sociolinguistics in Theatre Arts

In theatre arts, the ability to choose and use the appropriate words, phrases, sentences, and even accent that will be able to portray the exact meaning or create the right impression that the play(s) is(are) meant to portray

to the audience or create in the audience lies within the area of sociolinguistics. Not only that the authors, playwrights, etc., should be linguistically and communicatively competent in order to be able to make the right choices in their use of language, but the actors and actresses should be able to use the language as intended by the authors, playwrights, etc., so that the purpose of the dramatic texts will be achieved. It is in view of this role of sociolinguistics that prompted Llamas and Stockwell (2010, p. 157) to claim that film actors imitating accents will have been trained using insights from sociolinguistics.

The Role of Sociolinguistics in the Creation of New Words in the Society

When concepts enter into a society, with the ideas from language in relation to the society (sociolinguistics), language users will be able to create names for the new concepts and in that way enrich the languages of the society as well as help the language users to have lexical items at their disposal to account for those new concepts. Prezi (2011, p. 29) identifies such strategies as sounds, function, shape, process, semantic expression, and mispronunciation.

Sociolinguistics and Its Relevance in Criminology/Forensic

The ideas from sociolinguistics equip the language users with the abilities to identify individuals' idiolects. Through somebody's idiolect which is an aspect of sociolinguistics, criminals in the society are identified and dealt with appropriately. Through the vocabularies and unique way of using language, criminals' voices are identified and treated accordingly and in that way, criminals are reduced maximally in the society.

The Usefulness of Sociolinguistics in the Area of Oratory

The knowledge of language in relation to the society not only helps the orators to make the right choices of words (i.e., words that will be appropriate based on his/her topic, audience, setting, situation), but equally aids him/her to modulate his/her voice in such a way that his/her message will be passed to the audience as intended during public speaking. The linguistic competence and communicative competence are the basic tenet of sociolinguistics.

The Relevance of Sociolinguistics in the National Economy

In order to boost the economy of a nation and sustain it, there is need for people in the society to understand the need for improved and stable economy and this can be effectively done through the use of appropriate educative speech(es) that will be able to convince the people on the attitudes that boost and sustain the national economy. For instance, in this year 2019, the Federal Government of Nigeria counted their gains for the temporary closure of the borders using appropriate utterances that were able to make the masses support the issue of closing the borders. Moreover, in order to carry out business both national and international, the use of appropriate language is required and this can be achieved through the insights from sociolinguistics.

The Role of Sociolinguistics in Maintaining Peace

The ideas from sociolinguistics help to maintain peace in the society. It is written in the Holy Bible that there is power in the tongue. With the knowledge from the sociolinguistics, a language user will be in a position to use appropriate linguistic structures and politeness strategies to make and maintain peace in the society.

Summary of Findings and Conclusion

In this section, the researcher summarizes the findings of this work. It also contains the conclusion.

Summary of Findings

The research shows that sociolinguistics which studies language in practical life situation holds an important place in the society as it concerns human interactions. It serves a pivotal role in the society hence it is seen by the researcher as an indispensable tool in any society. The research shows that sociolinguistics equips human beings with the skills and knowledge that are required to be successful in communication, education, politics, administration/government, religion, mass communication (advertisements), theatre arts, creation of new words to accommodate new concepts in the society, criminology/forensic, oratory, etc.

Conclusion

Having seen all the relevance of sociolinguistics in the society, one can now say that sociolinguistics is like a village pond where all the people in the village draw their water which helps to sustain their lives from. So, sociolinguistics has a significant place in the society as far as language study and use are concerned. Even as sociolinguistics is not classified as a major area of language study, it is evident from our study that without the ideas from sociolinguistics, it will be too difficult if not impossible for human beings to inhabit and interact effectively in the society. One can imagine the situation at the tower of Babel when none could understand the other as it is recorded in *The Bible* according to the book of Genesis (11, verses 1-9). The situation is worst when people understand one another but the appropriate choices of words are not made and used by the language users as that can lead to chaos and even war among the language users. Based on that, the researcher concludes that the place of sociolinguistics in any human society cannot be over emphasized hence she sees sociolinguistics as an indispensable tool in a society. The idea behind language use in the society is not only having the knowledge of the language but being able to make the right linguistic choices that will be able to perform the function of communication which is the basic role of language in the society.

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Appendix

An extract from the speeches of a church pastor of Latter Rain, Baptist Church, Akenfa 111, Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

“...as Christians, our target is heaven, therefore, we should desist from any attitude that will make us to miss heaven, any rotten attitude will not give us a warrant to heaven, so, brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus avoid sins so that when the trumpet sounds, we will all meet in the kingdom of heaven.”

“...brothers and sisters” and apart from that, she was telling them what they should do to prepare themselves for the kingdom of heaven. Another example is a speech from a prayer session by the same pastor, “Oh God, our father! the king of kings, the lord of lords, the lion of the tribe of Judah, we worship you, we adore you...”