

## LANGUAGE AS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON: ITS FUNCTIONS AND SOCIAL FACTORS IN LANGUAGE USE

*Ogba Thank-God Igiri, Ph.D*

Department of Linguistics and Literary Studies, (English Unit),  
Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki,  
Ebonyi State.

### **Abstract**

The ability of humans to use language to communicate is one thing that makes them different from other creatures. Language should not just be seen alone as a tool for communicating, but also as a means for establishing social relationships between human beings. It is the social essence of language and the different ways people use language to achieve socialization that the writer will be examining in this work.

Indeed, Language is a social phenomenon because the users of any particular language live in a society and their interactions through the language reflects the worldview of the society. Certain social factors have been identified, which shape the way we construct meaning in Language. Such factors determine what language we use, and how we use such language. They include the context of language use, the social status of the Language user, the age of the language user, and the sex of the language users. In this paper, the writer's central focus borders on language as a social phenomenon, various functions of language in the society and social factors in language use.

### **Language as a Social Phenomenon**

Language, according to Wikipedia Dictionary is a system of signals including

voice sounds, gestures or written symbols which encodes and decodes information.

However, languages are not just sets of symbols. They also often conform to a rough grammar or system of rules, used to manipulate the symbols. Language is constructed by humans, who live in communities to express their ways of life. So, whatever system of rules and symbols a language possess are given to it by its speakers.

Every language use is situated within a group of speakers who have something in common. They may be people living in the same community who may share the same origin, profession, social class, and so forth. Such a group of people tend to behave alike because of the environment or context in which they operate constrains them to use language in a particular way. Since language is a system of symbols, the speakers choose from the linguistic system in which they

operate only those symbols that will communicate something meaningful to them. The words and the structure of a group of language speakers reflect the way they see the world view. For example, Yoruba speakers see and view kinship relations in a different way from the English speakers see them. Someone's brother in the Yoruba world view is not just "a male who has the same parents as the person". Someone's brother includes all male relatives who are slightly older or younger than that person.

It is also important to note that in some cultures, greetings are used more for socializing than in other cultures. In most African cultures, a lot of value is placed on greetings before the commencement of conversation, during conversation and at the end of conversation.

Different contexts of language use have their distinct social identity and style makers. For instance, the way language is used in casual conversation setting is different from the way it is used in institutionalized discourse setting, such as: Church, debate, quiz, symposium, public lecture, and so forth. There are ways people behave when they speak different languages. This means that language has a connection with behaviour. In fact some scholars have summarized this by saying that language is a form of behaviour. For instance, there are ways to speak and behave in a courtroom, and this is essentially different from the way one behaves when he/she for instance is in the open market for any form of transaction. The market situation in Africa allows for sellers to advertise their goods/services by

calling out to potential buyers. There are also ways one behaves in conversation that makes him/her look orderly. For instance, participants in conversations will not usually task all at once. Conversely, there will not usually be stretches of time in which no one talks at all.

Language cannot be discussed without mentioning the culture in which it is used. Culture is regarded as the way of life of a people. The language a people speak is used to express the various elements of their culture. Likewise, one cannot speak meaningfully about culture without talking about the society in which the culture resides. So, one sees that the society is the base for all the discussions he/she may be having about language, and within each society or segments of the society, one has different cultures, which those who belong to him /her expresses through his/her use of language.

## **Various Functions of Language**

### **1. Communicative function:**

The most basic function of language that readily comes to the mind of everyone is communicative function. This means that language is used to communicate or express the ideas in our mind. These ideas themselves emanate from the world one lives in. This however is too simplistic a way of seeing the function of language.

### **2. Emotive function:**

Language is used to express the state of our mind, the way our mind is working at some particular point in time. The emotive function of language focuses

on the addresser and it is also referred to as expressive function. The addresser's own attitude towards the content of the message is emphasized. Each time one uses certain expressions; he/she shows how he/she feels. Such expressions are called emotive utterances, examples are emphatic speech or interjections, such as "hurray", "damn it", "oh my God", "Wow", "ouch" (English); "yee" in Yoruba to express pain or sorrow), "aah"(to express surprise), and so forth.

### **3. Referential function:**

Referential function refers to the context. The function emphasizes that communication is always dealing with something contextual. It is also called representative function of language. Speakers use language to refer to their world. The only thing that accounts for the difference in languages is the fact that speakers' worlds differ, hence that view, which is expressed in language must equally differ. Most words used in language refer to some entity in the physical or experiential world of the speaker. For instance, the word "Chair" refers to an object in the world that has four legs and is used for sitting. However, one should be aware that some words he/she uses do not refer to anything in the world as such. For instance grammatical words, such as prepositions and articles do not refer to any concrete object.

### **4. Social function:**

Language is used to maintain relationship between speakers. This is the social function of language. It is also

referred to as **Phatic Communion**. It is the use of language that helps the speakers to establish contact. By mere exchange of words, ties of union are created. For instance, greetings are regarded as a way of establishing relationship in language. They come before any form of verbal interaction. This function of language signifies the basic human requirement to signal friendship. The function is more about a ritual exchange about speakers' well-being, for example;

**Good morning-** directed to the person one meets in the morning.

**Bless you-** In Nigeria, directed to someone who has just sneezed.

**Hello-** directed to a person one wants to talk to.

### **5. Poetic function:**

Language is used for creative purposes by some users. Sometimes, our messages convey more than just the context, and until one probes into the deeper meaning conveyed, one may lose the whole message. Most English words have the ordinary surface day to day meaning and in addition, connotation, i.e., meaning, above the ordinary meaning which is not always directly linked to the surface usage. This function of language is commonly employed in literary works, where writers deliberately deviate in their use of language to create certain effects. For instance, a woman described as a "bitch" is a woman of easy virtue, or simply put, a prostitute.

### **6. Other miscellaneous functions:**

The functions discussed above are the generally stated functions of language. There are other miscellaneous functions, which the writer expressed briefly below.

Language can be used as a means of expressing one's identity. Speakers' use of language is constrained by the totality of who they are in terms of their social background, age, sex, profession, and region of origin. For instance, certain expressions are generally associated with certain group of speakers. It is on the basis of this function of language that linguists study how language varies, by examining varieties of language peculiar to an individual (idiolect), variety of language peculiar to people from a particular geographical location (dialect); variety of language that reflect features of speech (pronunciation) peculiar to people from the same region (accent); variety of speech peculiar to people of the same profession (register).

Each utterance one makes is designed to perform certain functions such as: informing the listener, questioning the listener about some facts, promising the listener that one will do something and ordering the listener to do something. This is where language study is referred to as speech acts. This means that our utterance make us and our listeners to behave or act in a particular way. Listeners are expected to recognize the speaker's intention or else communication would not be achieved.

### **Social Factors in Language Use:**

#### **1. Context as factor in the language use;**

It is impossible to determine what most utterances mean without having some knowledge of the situations in which they occur. Such situations are referred to as context. By context here, one means;

(i) the physical environment of the language use, ie, where the language is used, the objects and the actions taking place. This is often referred to as the physical context.

(ii) the utterances made before and after the one under consideration. This is called the linguistic context.

(iii) the general rules of behavior that the language user obey, the background knowledge shared by the user. This is also known as the epistemic context.

(iv) the social relationship between the language users, which is also known as the social context.

We cannot study possibly the language without considering the context in which it is used, because context creates possibilities for interpretation and helps us to remove ambiguities that utterances would have had if they had occurred in isolation. For instance, if someone utters the statement; - **I need a mouse urgently**.

The meaning will depend on the contexts in which the utterance is made. If this statement was made by a scientist who is running an experiment, the **mouse** he/she is referring to will then be a rodent with a long tail. However, if the same statement was made by a person who has a computer that he uses to word process his documents, the **mouse** will then refer to

the device one uses to do things on a computer screen. One need to look into the physical context, the people involved and where the discourse is taking place. Our understanding of the word **mouse**, which is not limited to one meaning, and so forth.

Halliday (1973) described the knowledge speakers have of the context of the language they use by identifying three mental functions namely: ideational knowledge, the interpersonal knowledge, and the textual knowledge. The ideational knowledge refers to the knowledge of the culture prevalent within the society gained by means of direct experience by the speakers. The interpersonal knowledge is the knowledge of how people behave in particular situations i.e the degree of formality that a culture assign to different situation and the roles people assume as consequence. The textual knowledge refers to the knowledge gained from the other texts including the knowledge of intra and inter-textual contexts, conversations for the organization of texts, how texts are made to stick together as a meaningful whole (cohesion and coherence).

## **2. Social status:**

Every society has a social structure, which usually is based on certain socio-economic indices, such as occupation, the level of education, the income, the dwelling place, and so forth.

Status in this sense is therefore anything a set of language speakers have that distinguish them from other users. The status of language users influence the way

they use language. It is easy to identify the different layers of any society in terms of the status of the people. For instance, there is the likelihood that people who live in the same area of a particular society have the same linguistic behavior. Likewise those who belong to the same profession tend to speak the same way because of the profession that binds them together reflects in the language they speak. People who live in the exclusive areas of the society like the government reservation areas (GRA) are those who are regarded as the upper class socialize mostly in English, while the people in the lower class socialize in the local languages.

It is important to state that ones status also refers to the roles we take up in different speech situations. People are generally aware of their own status in relation to one another, and will choose the appropriate linguistic forms consciously to reflect this status in different speech situations. For instance, when one is talking to people of higher social authority, his/her language becomes more formal than when interacting with people of the same social status or lower status.

Status also reflects in the medium of language one uses, for instant, most writings are formal, probably because most of the relationships that are expressed through writing are formal in character.

## **3. Age:**

Age is a very important factor in language use. As one would recognize people of different age brackets have

different linguistic behavior. Children have their own way of speaking especially when they are just learning the language. Scholars in language acquisition have recognized different stages children go through to acquire language. Each of these stages has its different characteristics. Even adults recognize that they have what is called “baby talk” which is the expression for the sounds and words babies used when learning to speak and the words used by adults when talking to babies. One recognizes words like “wee wee” (to urinate) “poupou” (to defecate) as part of children vocabularies.

One also recognizes that the young people mainly the youths have a linguistic culture different from that of the adults. This culture is further strengthened by the new technologies for communication. The youth culture is evident in every human culture and since one has established that language is used to express or transmit culture, then it is clear that the youth culture is projected through their language use. For instance, expression as “dad” “pop” “popsie” (daddy) “mum” “momsie” (mummy) “chill” (to relax) are common among Nigerian youths. The way young people use their mobile phones for creative means is increasing. In fact, this generation of young people is often referred to as the “net generation”. Through the new technologies, the youth are reinventing conventional linguistic and communicative practices (Thurlow,2003). The languages of the youths are characterized by non conventional forms, sometimes deliberately used as a rebellion

against the well known linguistic convention.

Adults also have their own form of language, and it is usually the case that one can recognize the speech of an adult through the lexical items chosen and some to confirm more to the conventions of language use. Their language especially those of elderly people is characterized by the use of proverbs and aphorisms.

#### **4. Sex/Gender:**

Sex and Gender are also very important social varieties in Language use. Generally speaking research findings have shown that men and women use language differently. Men and Woman use language in particular ways because of their gender. Apart from the differences in voice pitch of man and woman, other findings reveal that woman speak in a considerably different way from man.

Coates (1986) studied men only and women - only discussions and found that when women talk to each other, they reveal a lot about their private lives. They also stick to one topic for a long time, let all the speakers finish their sentences and try to have everyone participate. Men on the other hand, rarely talking about their personal relationships and feelings, but compete to prove themselves better informed about current affairs, travel, sports etc. The topics change in men’s conversation and they try to establish a reasonably stable hierarchy, with some men dominating the conversation and others talking very little (Coates, 1986). Women are also known to vary the pitch

and intonation of their voice more than Men.

### **5. Education:**

Education is a very crucial factor in language use. The level of a person's education determines the kind of language he/she speaks. Particularly, the variety of language he/she uses. This factor is closely tied with social status, which has been discussed earlier. The more educated a person is, the higher he moves up on a social ladder. For instance in Nigeria, where English is the language of prestige, the standard form of the language is used by the well educated people, while the base form of language, generally referred to as pidgin, is used mostly by the people with very low education.

### **Conclusion**

This paper examined language as a social phenomenon. It looked at the nature of human language and how the code used by the speakers is derived from their world view of the society in which they dwell. It underscored the importance of culture and society which are both essential ingredients of any instance of language use.

The second aspect of the work dwelt with the major functions of language: emotive, referential, social and poetic functions. It also looked at two other additional functions, those that view language as a means of expressing our identity and controlling reality.

Lastly, the writer tried to relate to his/her readers that social factors are essential determiners of the way one uses

language. So, in this work, the writer has been able to see how contextual factors aid meaning in language use. Apart from this, author also looked at another related issue- the ways three social factors- social status, age and sex/gender affects the way one uses his/her language.

### **References**

- Fasold, R.W, and Cannon- Linton, J.(2006), *An Introduction to Language and Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gumperz, J.(1983). *Language and Social Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Yule, G. (1995). *The Study of Language*. Cambridge: Cup.
- Fasold, R.W. (1990). *The Sociolinguistics of Language*. London: Blackwell Publishers.
- Halliday, M.A.K (1994). *Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Wardhaugh R.(2002). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. Blackwell Publishers Coates (1986).