LANGUAGE AND SITUATION: AN EXAMINATION OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *Language cannot be separated from the society. It is the unifying instrument among the members of any given society. Languages are used in situations. If the situation is not given, there is nothing the language use could be marched with. It is on this note that this paper examined language and situation with particular reference to English language in Nigeria context. Various crucial aspects of language were examined. Some English lexical items were also discussed in various situations. The paper concluded that the choice of lexical items used in communication is determined by certain factors in situational context. It was therefore recommended that every language speaker should study and understand the situation in which he/she finds himself/herself before selecting lexical items. A good knowledge of register is also expected of every speaker and writer of English. This will go a long way in assisting the speaker's/writer's choice of appropriate lexical items as situation demands.*

KEYWORDS: Language, Situation, Lexical Items, Register

INTRODUCTION

Language cannot be separated from the society. The unifying element among members of a society is language. The language exists as a means of promoting the values of the society. The society, on the other hand, promotes the language. Every society has its own language which distinguishes it from others. Nigeria is an heterogeneous society owing to its multilingual nature. Language, according to Oderinde (2005), is one of the indices or makers of culture. According to him, language is a vehicle for thought. Feelings and thoughts are expressed through language. Freedictionary.com defines language as communication of thoughts and feelings through a system of arbitrary signals, such as voice sounds, gestures or written symbols. It is the faculty for the use of systems which is a distinguishing characteristic of man as compared with other animals. Gee (2015) describes language as a body of words and the system of their use common to a people of the same community or nation.

Classification of Human Language

Foyewa (2012) classified human language into three:

i.   **First language (L1):-** This is the language the child is first exposed to at infant. Most children have their Mother Tongue (MT) as their first language. The mother tongue is also known as indigenous language. The rudiments of other languages are acquired right from the L1. Language acquisition takes place unconsciously here.

ii. **Second language (L2):** The second language is the language the child is exposed to after the Mother Tongue (MT) or first language (L1). It is usually a language of better/greater value. The child is conscious of the time he is being exposed to the language here.

Learning therefore takes place here consciously. Most Nigerians have English as their second language.

iii.   **Foreign language:** All other languages other than first and second language are foreign languages. However, a foreign language in a situation can be a second or first language in another situation French is no longer a foreign language to some Nigerians.

English Language in Nigeria Situation

Halliday (1976) identified three crucial aspects of a language events, these are (i) substance (ii) form and (iii) situation.

i.   **The substance:** This is the linguistic materials made up of phonic (sounds) or graphic symbols (letter). They are the features of language used in speech and writing.

ii.   **The form:** The form is the intelligible sound sequences or meaningful bits of expression guided by graphological rules. It deals with organization of the phonic and graphic substances into meaningful entry.

iii.   **Situation:** This is the relevant extra-textual circumstances, linguistic and non-linguistic of the language event or text in question. It is not only the structure of the language that determines the meaning or its interpretation, the situation at times gives meaning to the language under use.

Fischer (2010) opined that the situation influences language use quantitatively to a great extent. According to him, if the situation is not given, there is nothing that language use could be matched with.

Semantic understanding of a text, according to Ibraheem (2008), is largely based on situation. He averred that every meaningful oral or written statement is made in a particular situation or context for a particular purpose in order to understand its purpose and respond to it. He argued further that it is necessary to have a good background knowledge of the situation in which a statement is made.

To him:

> *"The concept of situation is used as a technical term to mean the situation which serves as an appropriate environment for a given piece of language… There are ways of using language which are appropriate to one situation than others. People feel embarrassed when language is used inappropriately"* p. 28

English language, as observed by Foyewa (2014), is the second language spoken across the six geo-political zone of the country. The language, according to Adegbija (1989), is the linguistic Alpha and Omega in Nigeria. Akindele and Adegbite (1989) affirmed that the language has been cultivated and re-domesticated in a socio-cultural milieus. Other writers, including Lawal (1995), Makinde (2000) and Fakeye (2012) highlighted various roles play by the language in the Nigerian societies.

In English, as in other languages, many at times, the information required for interpreting some elements in the text may not be found in the text but in the situation. Consider the following example:

(i)   "I am happy"

It may be naturally interpreted to mean the state of the mind at a particular time (especially at the particular time of speaking). It is also possible to be as a result of other factors emanated from the environment, that is, the situation. The statement could be in response to good news delivered to the speaker.

The responses will be welcome positively. For instance, "I am happy" could be in response to the statement- (ii) "I got my promotion letter"

However, the same statement may generate negative reactions in some other situations, especially in sad and sorrowful ones. If the statement is a response to any of the following statements, it may create great problems.

> (iii)   I failed my examination.
>
> (iv)   I lost my bag.
>
> (v)   I had an accident.
>
> (vi)   My daughter cannot be found.

In another situation, (vii) "it's unfortunate" is a statement that can adequately complement some negative incidence. Therefore, it may be used to show concerns, regrets and affection. It will be acceptable if it is in reaction to statements such as:

> (viii)   I lost my purse.
>
> (ix)   I saw hell in his house.
>
> (x)   I missed the promotion.
>
> (xi)   Or any of (iii) to (vi)

The features of the situation are relevant in the semantic interpretation of any statement. The internal and external aspects of a text are not completely separable. There are certain external factors affecting the linguistic choices of the speaker or the writer. These include (a) the nature of the audience (b) the medium of communication and (c) the purpose of communication.

(a)   **The nature of the audience:-** The interest of the audience/reader(s), their level of education among others will go a long way in determining the choice or selection of the vocabulary that the speaker or the writer selects during every communication process. In English language, certain lexical items are restricted to higher education level. For instance - "astounded", flabbergasted", astonished" all mean "surprised", but they are not expected to be used when communicating with primary school pupils. The vocabularies are on the higher side. Also, instead of making use of such words in communicating with the secondary school students, "amazed" or "puzzled" could be used. Therefore, in order to avoid breakdown in communication, the nature of the receiver of the message, that is audience or reader(s), should always be considered.

(b)   **The medium:-** The medium of communication is another major factor to consider during communication. The medium could be spoken or written. There are certain features peculiar to each of the two media. All forms of contractions, slangs that are peculiar to spoken speeches are expected to be avoided as much as possible in written messages.

(c) **The purpose of communication:-** The purpose of communication is also a major factor the speaker or the writer often considered in the choice of his or her lexical items. The purpose could be for education, information or entertainment. The lexical items often vary according to each purpose. For instance, the lexical items in education are likely to be more formal and stricter than when communicating for the purpose of entertainment.

The Register

In every linguistic situation, a speaker or writer considers the most appropriate vocabulary that is well suitable in such a situation.

Gregory (1967) defines 'register' as the linguistic reflection of recurrent characteristics of user's use of language in situation. Fischer (2010) classified registers as linguistic forms that are part of linguistic choices that often concern with their appropriateness in, and association with particular situations.

Gregory and Caroll (1967) identified three components of register as (i) field of discourse (ii) mode of discourse and (iii) tenor of discourse

i. **The field of discourse:** This is the linguistic reflection of the purposive role of the language user in the situation in which text has occurred. It deals with the purpose for which the user uses a language. Various fields of discourse include laws, education, religion, politics and so on.

A particular word may seem to have similar meaning with another in a particular field, but the speaker or the writer needs to consider various factors earlier discussed in this work before choosing the one that is most appropriate. For instance, words like "killed", "murdered", and "assassinated" may seen to be synonymous, therefore, expressions like

> xii.   The man was killed.
>
> xiii.   The man was murdered.
>
> xiv.   The man was assassinated.

are acceptable in English. Example (xii) suggests that the actor may or may not be human being. For example, the man could be killed by a lion/a snake, a human being and so on.

However, examples (xiii) and (xiv) suggest that the action was performed by another human being. Therefore, the killing was devoid of human feeling.

One other thing to notice is that "murdered" and "assassinated" can not be used for animals other than human beings. Hence, though the below examples are grammatically correct, they are semantically unacceptable.

> xv.   I murdered the mosquito
>
> xvi.   I assassinated the mosquito

ii. **Mode of discourse:-** The mode of discourse is another major component of register. It is the medium of communication employed in disseminating information to the audience or reader(s). The medium can be spoken or written.

Alimi (2010) identified some peculiar characteristics of spoken medium to include:

(i)   Contracted form: can't, won't wouldn't and so on.

(ii) Incomplete expressions,

(iii) Use of mannerism, vocal phenomena such as prosodic features and non-verbal features; he also identified some features of the written medium to include structural organization in terms of structural unit, punctuation marks, explicitness, economy and precise of words.

However, most often, the choice of lexical items or vocabularies in these medium is influenced by situation. For instance, even in spoken medium, all forms of contractions, mannerism, slangs are avoided as much as possible in a very formal situation.

iii. **Tenor of discourse:-** The tenor of discourse according to Kaite (1989) involves the relationship between participants in the situation. Roles and status often affect the choice of lexical items especially in respect to the degree of formality. Alimi (2012) defined tenor of discourse as the manner of expression and relationship between participants towards the subject matter. According to him, the context of situation as well as the type of relationship between the participants in any language activity determines the choice of registers to be used. The relationship could be formal or non-formal. The kind of lexical items to be selected will be formal in a formal situation. It will be void of slangs, contracted words and so on. The kind of lexical items to be selected in an informal situation will be non-formal. Slangs, contracted forms of words and mannerism may be employed here.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Language is heavily influenced by situation. The choice of lexical items selected in communication is determined by certain factors in the situational context. Every speaker of English language is expected to study and understand the situation in which he/she finds himself/herself before selecting lexical items. Choice of lexical items that may cause embarrassment must be avoided as much as possible. The speaker or the writer also needs to consider the interest and the level of education of the listener(s)/audience or reader(s) in the selection of lexical items during communication process.

A good knowledge of register is expected of every user of English language in Nigerian society. This will go a long way in aiding understanding and ensuring mutual respect among the interlocutors. Every speaker of English is also expected to consider the relationship between him/her and the audience or the reader(s). A conscious effort should be made to select items that are formal in nature in every formal situation.

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