

LANGUAGE CHOICE IN SELECTED NOLLYWOOD MOVIES: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPROACH

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Abstract

The research examines language choice from a sociolinguistic point of view using selected Nollywood movies as primary data for analysis. In other words, this study sets out to examine language choice in selected Nollywood movies; such as “*Desperate Maid*”, “*Weeping Soul*”, “*Who Owns the City*”, and “*Parish Council*” with analysis on certain sociolinguistic variables such as sex, age, educational qualification and regional variants. The method of data collection was by viewing and extracting the various linguistic forms and choices used by different actors and actresses for analysis. The study adopted variationist theories as its theoretical framework for the analysis of data. The work observed that language varies in society depending on who uses it, the gender of the speaker (or user), his or her educational qualification or background as well as his or her age. In this regard, the educated speakers tend to use the high variant of languages than the uneducated speakers. Relatedly, the elderly people use language with valued context and encoding system than the younger people. Men, on their part, use language assertively and firmly, while women’s linguistic form is soft, and romantic to cultivate harmonious relationship and romance. The regional speakers employ their phonological elements to reflect their region. The paper concludes that language is flexible, dynamic and adaptable to situations it finds itself. It varies based on purpose, the speaker, his social standing and other sociolinguistic components. The paper therefore recommends that language users should consider the flexible and dynamic nature of language when deploying same to actualize their set goals.

Language is a social affair. It exists for the sole purpose of human communication. Man operates within expected values in a speech community. Yule (2014) describes a speech community as members who share norms and expectations

regarding the use of language. The Nollywood platform is a typical speech community where actors act out their roles using language as a medium of communication.

Language generally constitutes the method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way. Language also consists of the development, acquisition, maintenance and use of complex systems of communication, particularly the human ability to do so. Moreover, language may also be viewed as a system of conventional spoken, manual or written symbols by means of which human beings as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves. Therefore, language functions to aid communication, express identity and identify social status (Robbins and Crystal, 1973:2).

Language is a vehicle for transmission of culture, values, literature as well as the entire well-being of a people. Again, language may also be observed to be a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures or marks, which has understood meanings. All natural languages, therefore rely on the process of semiosis to relate signs to particular meaning.

However, aside from its primary essence of communication, language also functions to signify group identity, identify social stratification, religious affiliation and social grooming, among others. Furthermore, Brown and Ogilvie (2000:23) see language as a communication by voice in the distinctively human manner, using arbitrary sounds in conventional ways with conventional meanings. They go on to assert that language constitutes “any set or system of such symbols as used in a more or less uniform fashion by a number of people, who are thus enabled to communicate intelligibly with one another” (Brown 2008:63). Similarly, language according to (Dictionary.com 2017) is any system of formalized symbols, signs, sounds, gestures or the like, used or conceived as a means of communicating thought and emotions, among others. Language, therefore, cannot be said to be isolated from the society that it speaks it. It is often said that language impinges on language, and language impinges on the society. Hence, there must be a relationship existing between language and society. The interdependency of these two entities – language and society leads to the study of sociolinguistics.

Sociolinguistics is, therefore, the branch of linguistics which studies all the aspects of linguistics applied towards the connections between languages and societies, and the way such languages are used in different social situation. The field studies language in relation to social factors, including differences in regional, class and occupational dialect, gender, differences and bilingualism.

Furthermore, sociolinguistics is said to be the descriptive study of the effect of any and all aspects of society, including cultural norms, expectations and context, on the way language is used, and society’s effect on language (Wikipedia, 2017). Language is

seen as a unifying force and a common ground among various people through which effective communication is carried. It has been observed that even within the same language, there are different ways or styles of speaking. This reveals the different status of language, speakers in society; especially in terms of age, academic status, sex and regional variants.

This determines the variants of language that a speaker uses within the above category. It could, therefore, be a high variant of the same, category if the speaker is educated, it could conversely be the low variant, if the speaker is fairly or not educated in the language. Other (sociolinguistic) variables also determine the way language is used in the society. Accordingly, this study seeks to examine the choice of language in selected movies of the Nigerian movie industry (Nollywood) “Desperate Maid”, “Weeping Soul”, “Who Owns the City” and “Parish Council”. The language in focus is the English language; but this research intends to investigate into the variants of English language usage by actors and actresses in selected Nigerian movies.

Nigerian movie industry, often known as Nollywood consists of films produced in Nigeria. Its history date back to as early as the late 19th century, into the colonial era in the 20th century (Wikipedia, 2017). However, after some declines in the past, Nigerian film industry experienced a second major boom in the 1990s, marked by a movie “Living in Bondage” (1992). Therefore, the industry rose to its peak in the mid-2000s to become the second largest film industry in the world in terms of the number of annual film productions, placing it ahead of the United States and behind only India.

It started dominating screens across the African continent, and by extension, the Caribbean’s and the diaspora with the movies significantly influencing cultures and the film actors becoming household names across the continent. However, the boom, also led to backlash against Nigerian films in several countries, bordering on theories such as the “Nigerianisation of Africa” (cfWikipedia, 2017). Since mid-2000s, the Nigerian cinema has undergone some restructuring to promote quality and professionalism, with “The Figurline” (2009) widely regarded as marking the major turnaround of contemporary Nigerian cinema or movie industry. There has since been a resurgence of cinema culture in Nigeria. As recent as 2013, Nigerian cinema was rated the third most valuable film industry in the world based on its worth and revenues generated.

Therefore, as stated earlier, this study seeks to examine the specific choice and use of language by some actors/actresses in selected Nollywood movies. This intends to take a sociolinguistic bearing with focus on age, sex, educational qualification and regional variants.

Methodology

With regard to this research, selected Nollywood movies shall constitute the primary data, from which analysis of the sociolinguistic variables would be made. However, since this study is to some extent, library based, books, journal, reviews and other information relating to the scope of this study will be employed. Furthermore, the internet also constitutes a rich source of information which aids in a smooth sociolinguistic analysis of the data.

Theoretical Framework

This research is anchored on the sociolinguistic theory of variation propounded by William Labov (1996). In other words, variationist theory constitutes the theoretical framework with which this research would thrive. Variationist (sociolinguistic) theory is interested in or concerned with accounting for linguistic variation and change, at least partly as a product of the social distribution of language varieties. It is, therefore, less concerned with meaning as process and more concerned with the interaction of linguistic and social systems; in this view, the significance of language is mainly symbolic.

William Labov has been a prominent voice in American linguistics since the early 1960s. He pioneered an approach to investigate the relationship between language and society and developed a field that has come to be known as “Variationist sociolinguistics”. The central idea of variationist sociolinguistics is that an understanding of language requires an understanding of variables as well as categorical processes, and that the variation witnessed at all levels of language is not random. Rather, linguistic variation is characterized by orderly or ‘structured heterogeneity’ (Bayley, Cameroun and Lucas, 2013).

Variation is a characteristic of language: there is more than one way of saying the same thing depending on the status or background of the speaker. Therefore, speakers may vary in pronunciation (accent), word choice (lexicon), or morphology and syntax (grammar) (Chamber, 2003). But while the diversity of variation is great, there seem to be boundaries on variation – speakers do not generally make drastic alterations in sentence word order or use sounds that are completely foreign to the language being spoken. In other words, language variation does not equate with language ungrammatically, but speakers are still (often unconsciously) sensitive to what is and is not possible in their native tongue.

Variationists study how a language changes by observing it. This is accomplished by looking at authentic data. For instance, language variation can be studied by looking at linguistic and social environments, then the data is analyzed as the changes occur (Wolfram, 1969:764). Language variation is a core concept in

sociolinguistics; in this case, this linguistic variation can be attributed to differences in the social characteristics of the speakers using the language, but also investigate whether elements of surrounding linguistic context promote or inhibit the usage of certain structures. Chamber (2003:13) asserts that although contemporary sociolinguistics includes other topics, language variation and change remains an important issue at the heart of the field.

Studies in the field of sociolinguistics typically take a sample population and interview them, assessing the realization of certain sociolinguistic variables. Labov specifies the ideal sociolinguistic variables and classifies them into:

1. High frequency
2. Containing certain immunity from conscious suppression
3. Being an integral part of larger structures and
4. Being easily quantified on linear scale (Labov, 1996:180)

Accordingly, this theory will be applied in the analysis of language choice in selected Nollywood movies. The choice of this theory is at the instance of its relevance to the present study with reference to the variety of language choice by members of the society.

Language Choice in Nollywood Movies

The procedure for data analysis for this study is based on selected sociolinguistic variables which include: sex, age, educational qualification and regional variance. The data are derived from four (4) Nigerian movies which are “Desperate Maid”, “Weeping Soul”. “Who Owns the City” and “Parish Council”. The choice of these movies is based on their contents of varying choices of linguistic items by the actors and actresses, who invariably represent members of the society.

Age/Educational Qualification

From the linguistic perspective, there are several types of age-based variation that are available within a society. One of such is the vernacular of a subgroup with membership typically characterized by a specific age range. This is also an indication of linguistic change or variation progress. One example of such subgroup with such notable vernacular is the speech of street youth as seen in the movies “Who Owns the City”. Thus, just as street youths dress differently from the ‘norm’, they also often have their own ‘language’. In the movie, we have the following conversation which takes place among the youths in the movie:

Pascal: I don de want dat girl since

Emeka: I go bambeledat your mouth if you talk dat nonsense again o, you no say, that girl na my girl?

Pascal: But you no talk to am yet na?

Emeka: I don tell you, forget dat girl, she be my girl.

Pascal: Ok, no wahala, but make I 'poi' her small na!

Emeka: I don tell you my own o, leave that girl!

The above quotation illustrates language variation as is typical of the youth. In other words, the above passage illustrates language use to reflect the status and identity of the speakers. Therefore, as can be seen, the two interlocutors use pidgin to engage their conversation. As it is obvious, pidgin is largely used by the younger people in their social conversations. Similarly, pidgin is equally used by young people to reflect their age and aspiration. As evident in the above passage, pidgin is used by the two characters to discuss their interest in a certain young lady in the village.

Accordingly, the use of pidgin in the above passage reveals the sociolinguistic variation or language pattern of the youth. This variation, in turn, reveals the following: (i) Enhances their own cultural identity, (ii) Identifies with each other, (iii) To exclude others who are not members of their class or age mate and (iv) to invoke the feeling or sense of belonging among them. This, for instance, may be seen in some word choices such as "bambele" (knock or beat) and 'poi' which in the context means "has sex with". Therefore, when pascal says "But makes I 'poi' her small na!" it means "let me make love to her at least once". Again, as observed above, such language pattern excludes others who do not belong to their class.

Moreover, the language pattern also reveals their educational background or status. On this note, their status as ordinary village youths is reflected in their language which is seen to contain local slangs. In essence, the youths may be considered, from the educational status or qualification to possess little or no formal education. Hence, they employ the 'lowest' linguistic medium (which pidgin English is perhaps known to be).

Conversely, language tends to shift its dimension from the educational point of view when the only son of the king Kenneth came back from London where he went to study Medicine. Here, language takes a new dimension from education or academic point of view, even though he is also young. His language choice is decided and influenced by his educational background or qualification. This is evident in his statement with his friend Okochukwu, thus:

Kenneth: Are you in right physiological frame?

Okechukwu: My guy, thank God you are here. The Medical officer said my sickness is severe, I hope you have something good for me?

Kenneth: Yea, infact, I don't care what the medical officer said but I assure you that this is nothing but a cocofied agency antipasimodical producing nothing but voscandium, miszandum and tisco. This medicine I have here is called grand Electrical Punchutical Demo Scandium which cures all diseases...

As stated earlier, the character's different status are revealed more by their linguistic choices than their action. In this case, the conversation is seen to take place between two young men of reasonable educational background. This is informed by their language use. However, Kenneth seems to show more social and educational sophistication in his language use. And this in turn reveals his educational background as a medical doctor. The above conversation took place in the City hospital where Okochukwu was.

Therefore, Kenneth is seen displaying his rich knowledge of jargon and medical register in his conversation with his friend. This goes to emphasize his social status in the society using a unique variety of English language.

In terms of age, language also varies to reflect the speech pattern of an elderly person or persons. This again is directed or observed through the choice of language of the speaker(s). In other words, language variation in this direction is determined by the characteristic choice and combination of linguistic variables in a higher way. Such variables may be idioms, proverbs or transliteration. This is, accordingly, seen as follows in the movie "Parish Council" as follows:

Ifeyika: EzeNnwadibia, what is bigger than the cricket has entered the mouth of the cricket.

EzeNnwadibia: I knew that man was going to be a hard nut to crack. However, Nnwadibia will deal with him once and for all.

Ifeyika: Nnwadibia, please do something, so that something will not do me.

The above conversation takes place in the native doctor's house where Ifeyika went to seek (spiritual) powers to fight the new Rev. Father that is sent to the Parish. The language used in the above conversation vividly reflects the language pattern, typical of elderly (Igbo) men. This variation reveals the use of proverbs and symbolism in the language pattern of elderly people in the society. The characteristic(s) of this pattern of language is, therefore, that of (i) Indirectness, (ii) Encoding system and (iii) Value-added language system.

In terms of indirectness, it could be observed that the above conversation contains proverb; Ifeyika, complains to the native doctor that what he did not expect has actually happened to him, and in this case, it is something bigger than what he can handle. This information is encoded in a proverb and therefore carried more value. Age-graded variation is a stable variation which varies within a population based on age. This

means that, speakers of a particular age will use specific linguistic form at different point in time.

Sex

Men and women (on average) tend to use slightly different language styles. These differences tend to be quantitative rather than qualitative. That is, it is like saying women use a particular speaking style than men do. Thus, from the standpoint of gender difference in terms of language, it could be said that the linguistic form of women is unconsciously tied down to the social rule in which the society assigns for them. Such rule may include: housekeeper, caregiver, wife, a human being in subordinate position, mother and lover among others. This is evidently seen in women rule and their linguistic forms in the movies, “Weeping Soul”. In it, the linguistic form of men and women is revealed thus:

Chief Barnabas: I told you that, that girl is a bad girl and that I am going to throw her out of this house. Look at the shame she had brought on me and my reputation.

Mama Ada: But Nnahi, if you throw her out, where do you think she will go to, she is our only daughter and...

Chief Barnabas: I don't care; she can go to anywhere, for all I care.

Mama Ada: Nnahi, please take it easy, let's try and find out who is responsible for her pregnancy... my husband, did you hear me?

As it has been stated before, women's linguistic forms conform to the societal rules assigned to them. Conversely, men's language pattern reflects their status in the society; firm, strong, assertive and bold, while those of women are said to be weak, dull and feminine. The above passage illustrates in clear terms, the differences in the language variation of men and women. Accordingly, the above passage reveals that men have a report style. With this, they aim to communicate factual information as is seen in the open report of Chief Barnabas “I told you that...”, whereas women have a report style; which is more concerned with building maintaining relationships and romance. This is clear in the accompanying response of Mama Ada “Nnahi, please take it easy...” This reveals a polite linguistic form which seeks to establish friendship and romance while at the same time trying to solve the problem at hand.

Regional Variants

A commonly studied source of language variation is regional dialects. Dialectology (the study of dialect) studies variations in language based primarily on geographical distribution and their associated features. Dialectologists are therefore concerned with grammatical and phonological features that correspond to regional areas.

A regional dialect is a distinct form of a language spoken in a particular geographical area (Siegel, 2010).

Regional variants are mostly concerned with the phonological elements of the language. The way a particular group speaks is usually a good indicator of their social background and there are many speech features which can be used as clues. These features can be observed in the movie “Desperate Maid” Thus:

Chief: My friend, what are you doing hia?
Gateman: Sorry zar, small madam said make I buy something for am
Chief: My friend shut up your mout and get out of dis place now
Gateman: Sorry zar....
Chief: Call Victor for me, fast!....
Gateman: Fictor, Chief is calling you.

The above passage signals the phonological structuring which is typical of two regions – Igbo and Ibibio. The words which carry asterisk show the regions dialect interplaying with English. Thus, these words are seen as follows:

Igbo		English
Hia	-	Here
Dis	-	This
Mout	-	Mouth

Similarly, the Ibibio regional dialect is also seen interplaying with English thus:

Ibibio		English
Zar	-	Sir
Fictor	-	Victor

Therefore, from the regional variants point of view, sociolinguistics have shown that any linguistic feature in a community which shows variation, such feature tends to be different in frequency from one social group to another. However, some features are stable and their pattern of usage seems to have relationships with their pattern of a particular regional group. In this case, such linguistic variety becomes the characteristics of a particular group of such regional language speakers.

Conclusion

Language has been said to be a vehicle for transmission of culture, values, literature as well as the entire well-being of a people. It has also been established that language is a systematic means of communicating ideas, feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures or marks which have peculiar meanings. This Study has also observed that languages, aside from its primary function to signify group

identity, it can help to identify social stratification and social grooming, age, sex, education status as well professional bearings, among others.

Accordingly, this research has examined the sociolinguistic features of language, employed by different people to achieve set objectives. It employed such sociolinguistic variables such as: sex, age, educational qualification and regional variants. The study has understood sociolinguistics to be the branch of linguistics that studies all the aspects of linguistics applied towards the connection between languages and societies, and the way such languages are used in different social situations. Therefore, this study has applied the four sociolinguistic variables in the analysis of selected Nollywood movies. It has been observed that language varies in society depending on who uses it, the gender of the speaker (or user), his or her educational qualification or background and also his or her age.

The educated speakers tend to use the high variant more than the uneducated, similarly, the elderly people use language with valued context and encoded system than the younger people. Men, on their part use language assertively to engender harmonious relationship and romance. The regional speakers employ their phonological elements to reflect their region as the case may be. It could be concluded that language is flexible, dynamic and adaptable. It varies based on purpose, the speaker, his social standing and other sociolinguistic components.

Recommendation

This paper recommends that language users should be aware of the dynamic nature of language and always use language according to situations.

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