



An Evaluation of the Impact of Language on Communication

Ezenwe, I. Chibuike and Iloabuchi, C. Joshua

Department of English Language

University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

Publication Process

Date

Accepted

November 16th, 2021

Published

November 30th, 2021

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to inform the users of specific language such as professionals like doctors, lawyers, scientists etc. to minimize the excessive reliance on the language of their profession otherwise, known as jargon in their professional relationship with the uninformed who are novice in their different professions. This is because over a time, people who apply for the services of these professionals often complain that they hardly understand their language of communication. Two keen terms: language and communication were properly defined and, in the process, it is discovered that the two are joint concepts that are directly related. When spoken language is properly expressed, it enhances communication, but where the reverse is the case, communication is hampered. A review of the work of some writers on the subject matter in this paper enables the reader to have a full grasp of the topic. The study further traces and discusses the factors that prevent language from making effective communication, and how these factors prevent effective communication.

Keywords: Impact, Language, Communication

Introduction

Language according to Obuasi (2002), “has many definitions – some wide and some narrow depending on the contexts in question. The definitions can also take different shapes – either by nature or scope”. She had earlier pointed out that “when two people come together, they engage in conversations and interaction, employing a code. The code in most cases is what we call language (Obuasi, 2002). The Wikipedia – a free encyclopedia identifies language as the mental faculty that allows humans to produce and understand utterances. The encyclopedia also defines language as a formal system of signs governed by grammatical rules of combination to communicate meaning; it sees language as a system that enables humans to exchange verbal or symbolic utterances.

Furthermore Obuasi (2002) defines language as an “artificial and consciously organized method of control by the use of symbols and conventions involving notion and meaning”. The Oxford Companion to the English Language (1992) defines language as, “a human system of communication which uses structured vocal sounds and can be embodied in other media such as, writing, print, and physical signs”. Language could also be seen according to the Companion (1992) as “a particular of this system, such as Arabic, French, English, Kwakwaka'waka, Sanskrit, Swahili, etc.” and “as the usage of a special group, such as scientific language, technical language, journalese, slang.” Whatever the definition is, language, in a specific sense can be understood to mean the particular ‘tongue’ of a group of people which they use to communicate among themselves like Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, legal language, medical language, scientific language and others. In a general sense, language refers to that universally accepted medium of communication which is used in international relations for trade, politics and socialization, like English language, French language etc.

Communication as clearly identified by the Wikipedia is from the Latin word ‘communicate’, meaning to ‘share’. It defines communication as a purposeful activity of exchanging information and meaning whichever is available or preferred. The Oxford Companion to the English Language (p.238) defines communication as a fundamental concept in the study of behavior, whether by humans, animals, or machines that act as a frame of reference for the concept of language. It goes further to state that communication refers to the transmission of information (a message) between source and a receiver, using a signaling system. In linguistic studies both the source and receiver are humans, the system involved is a language and the idea of feedback (message) holds a central place. It asserts that in theory communication is said to have taken place if the information received is the same as that sent. However, in practice according to the Companion allowance had to be made for all kinds of interfering factors (technically known as noise) which reduce the efficacy of the transmission, such as poor articulation or hearing, extraneous noise and unconscious association for words.

The Wikipedia tends to agree with the Oxford Companion on the relationship between the source of language and the receiver; it however, goes further to state that in communication the receiver of the message needs not be present or aware of the sender’s intent to communicate at the time of the communication. Thus, communication can occur across vast distance in time and space. It further points out that the communicating parties share an area of communicative commonality. That is to say that they share a common background and experience. Otherwise there will be a barrier in communication.

The Oxford Companion identifies some modes of communication; they include “oral-aural in the form of speech and the systematic visual reflex in the form of writing and the non-verbal (kinesics and proxemics aspects) which includes the visual and the tactile modes of communication”. For the Companion, language is usually restricted to the verbal communication because it exhibits a high sophisticated internal structure and creativity. However, non-verbal communication on the other hand involves relatively little creativity. It should also be noted however, that effective verbal or spoken communication according to the Wikipedia, is dependent on a number of factors and cannot be fully isolated from the other interpersonal skills such as non-verbal communication, listening skills and clarification. It could therefore be said, that communication enables man to share his thought and feeling with another man with the purpose of eliciting or receiving a response from the other man.

Historical Perspective

One of the distinct qualities which differentiate man from other mammals is the power of language. This can come in form of spoken words or written work. However, according to the Wikipedia spoken language predates writing by at least tens of thousands of years. The Braille language represents language in a tactile form; cuneiform is first known form of written language. The Wikipedia estimates the number of languages in the world to vary between 5,000 and 7,000. As regards the origin of language, the Wikipedia pointed out that thinkers such as Rousseau, Herder argued that language had originated in the instinctive expressions of emotions and that it was originally closer to music and poetry than to logical expressions of rational thought. However, we can deduct from the Bible (Genesis) that the power of language as a means of communication started when God instructed Adam to name all the animals he created.

When is Language Communicated

According to Obuasi (2002, p. 103), “a distressing fact about language is that a speaker may have hidden a devious intention when making himself to be heard. He may fail to do what he intended”. This brings in the issue of communicative competence; the ability to know how, when, where to use language to make oneself understood.” In other words, when is the use of a particular language communicated or not communicated? This question is apt because, when language is used in a specific or private sense, it may not make any meaning to the receiver thereby hindering communication. However, language is communicated when the information (message) is transmitted from the source to the receiver and the receiver is able to acknowledge the receipt of the message through a feedback. This feedback could be a reply or an action indicating understanding of the message sent.

Objective

The purpose of this study is to inform users of specific language such as professionals like doctors, lawyers, scientists etc. to minimize the excessive reliance on the language of their professions otherwise, known as jargon in their professional relationship with the uninformed who are novice in those professions. This is because over a time, people who apply for the services of these professionals often complain that they hardly understand their language of communication.

Problem

It has been observed that professionals in most cases cannot but use the language of their profession. This is because at their formative stages, they were taught to use such language. The question therefore is, can these professionals in their various fields of learning be taught in plain language that the ‘uninitiated’ can understand? If they cannot be taught in plain English language, how else can they relate effectively with their would - be customers?

Significance of the Study

It is believed that this study will help those in the career profession to have a better relationship with their clients. When negative communicative hitches are expunged from their language of profession, the uninitiated will come to understand them better. This will go a long way to creating a society where the impact of learning and training will yield positive result.

2. Literature Review

The Communicative Role of Language in a Multilingual Environment

Obuasi (2002) in a very systematic and comprehensive manner looks at language from its general role to its specific role in the society. That is, the communicative roles of language in a multilingual setting. She tried to marry the two concepts – language and communication together. To achieve this, she looks at the nature of language and communication separately in order to have a workable definition. She sees language as “a material object that could be used at will”. According to her, words cannot be trusted to represent the real or what is actually known for.

She also asserts that what is being spoken may not be the intention of the speaker. This for her makes language problematic. It is here that the issue of communicative competence comes in. This is true because a country like Nigeria that “has about four hundred indigenous languages (Obuasi, 2002) cannot afford to be the ‘Babel’ of old. There must be a vehicle of understanding and unification of the various ethnic groups. It is for this reason, that English language was made the official language in Nigeria.

The Legacy of Linguistic Fence: Linguistic Patterns among Ultra- Orthodox Jewish Girls.

Tannenbaum and Abugoo (2010) are quick to point out that the historical experience of Israel had contributed to large extent to the formation of many variants of the Hebrew Language which is the official language in Israel. The Jews who lived outside Israel after the holocaust during the Second World War had a different ideological perception of reality from the Jews who remained in Israel. This, the authors attribute to the effect of language on the ultra-orthodox Jews who lived outside Israel. For them, language is a carrier and transfer of symbolic values and ideology. They also believe that language plays a divisive role as it helps to strengthen and legitimize the existence of smaller groups and cultures within larger societies.

In their study, they examine linguistic patterns in the Jewish-Orthodox community among girls of 10-12 years and come up with the conclusion that language played an interesting role in the segregation among the various Jewish sects or groups. This is because most ultra-orthodox Jews in Israel use modern Israeli-Hebrew as their main language of communication both inside and outside their community." While some of the extreme subgroup use Yiddish as their primary language of communication and relate to Hebrew, one of Israel's official languages, as a holy tongue to be reserved for praying and for study of traditional texts. It can therefore be deduced from the write-up that language can create a barrier in a society by including or excluding others in its language community. When language does that, it prevents communication rather than promoting it.

Speech, Language and Communication Difficulties Young People in Trouble with the Law.

The writer is of the view that young people with speech, language and communication need not to have poor-conversational skills, poor non-verbal skills and poor social perception, all of which can hinder their ability to form friendships with their peers and may lead them becoming marginalized. Through a research conducted by the writer using a questionnaire, he discovers that young people who commit one crime or the other become victims of the crime due to their inability to understand the language of the law. Hence, the writer sees a link between speech, language and communication. Where the language is alien to the listener, communication will not be able to take place.

For instance, most young people interviewed, who were serving various jail terms, said that they don't really follow court proceedings due to the fact that the language of the court is not comprehensible to them. The writer concludes that speech and language control communication. This is true because what one says will only make meaning if one is comprehended. It is only at this point that it could be said that communication had taken place. And effective communication can help restructure one's negative perception of reality towards a positive orientation.

The Role of Language in The Propagation of Values: Making a Case for the Igbo Nation's Indigenous Language

Joseph C. Ogbodo (2002) begins by claiming that it is through language that man's reasoning is expressed. A quality which separates man from other animals. He recognizes the fact that it is through language that man's cultural values are established. Therefore, the Igbo language which he recognizes as being threatened by extinction should be encouraged, and salvaged by the various stakeholders that are involved in the propagation of Igbo language such as the family, the educational institutions and the government.

For him, language conditions a person's behavior and as well as his world views. For instance, it is through language that the Massai in Kenya came to believe that cattle ownership is their God given prerogative and as such no other community is entitled to rear cattle. Therefore, they go about raiding other communities for their cattle without a prick in their conscience "that they are committing theft or robbery (Ogbodo 2002). It is also language which informs the cultural belief in polyandrous communities that a man could accept other men as co-bedmates with a particular woman without resentment. Whereas an Igbo man would draw his machete in pursuit of another man, who attempted intruding his bed. The point is that it is through language, an instrument of reason that our cultural values are upheld. And language can achieve this through the process of communication.

Hindrances to Effective Communication

We have seen that language plays several roles in the society. Such roles are used to achieve certain objectives which include but not limited to: upholding of cultural values, integration of the society, moral orientation, enhancement

of order and peace in the society, self enhancement etc. Indeed, Obuasi 2002 groups the functions of language under three broad functions: an instrument of thought, an instrument of communication and an instrument of social identity

The communicative role of language is the primary concern of this paper. This is because language is the code through which one communicates. The communicative role of language can be grouped under two broad functions – “first for establishing social relationships and, second, for conveying information about the speaker and the subject”. (Obuasi), As noted earlier, effective communication lies on the receiver understanding the content or message of the sender. However, this is not always the case. Instances abound when what is communicated is not understood. There are a lot of factors responsible for this, such factors include:

1. Geographical factors
 2. The nature of the language itself – dialect.
 3. Biological factors
 4. Specialized languages (jargon)
- These factors are discussed in the next chapter.

Geographical Factors

Ordinarily, the place of birth of a person may influence the person's language if other factors did not interfere with the process of acquiring such language. Hence, we talk of mother tongue, native language, and native speaker. These words mean, “the language of the childhood home, learnt ‘at one's mother's knee”

However, one who has just travelled from his place of origin to a new location may find it difficult to understand the language of that new location. The only option left for him or her is to learn the language of that new location. If he and as such language of the new place and as such communication will be hindered and understand the new language.

The Nature of the Language Itself-Dialects

Within a language, there may be variations. These variations may be referred to as dialect. Dialects may show distractive accent, grammar, vocabulary, and idiom. For instance, the Igbo Language spoken by an Owerri man is quite different from that spoken by an Nsukka man. But all of them are Igbos and the language is Igbo language. However, when an Owerri man travels to Nsukka, he may not understand the Igbo language of the man. In this case, there is a dialect variation between the Igbo language of the Nsukka man and that of the Owerri man. Hence, between the Owerri man and the Nsukka man, there will be a communication breakdown if conversation ensues. Therefore, dialect helps to prevent communication.

Biological Factors

There are some persons born with certain physical disorders such as deafness, deformed mouth or cleft palate, etc. For this group of person's languages, though spoken communication is impaired. For instance, a deaf person will not hear the words addressed to him except it is accompanied by signs and gestures. For such a person, communication is impossible because one must first hear what it is spoken before understanding could take place. Again, a person with a cleft palate cannot articulate the ideas they have built up in their mind and so unable to communicate them. In these various ways, communication through language is undermined.

Jargon

This particular factor is the main thrust of this paper. Jargon is seen as an often-pejorative general term for outlandish language of various kinds, such as speech perceived as gibberish or mumbo jumbo, slang, a pidgin language, or, most commonly, the specialized language of a trade, profession, or other groups. (Oxford Companion, 1992, p. 543). Words often associated with law, medicine, and the sciences are referred as technical jargon or scientific jargon. To non-members of professional, occupational, and other groups, their usage is filled with terms and syntax that are not typical of general English and may therefore impede understanding among lay people, but to members of such a group, the usage is familiar and generally serves its purpose well.

The importance of jargon to those who understand it, is that it helps them to make precise use of words thereby making long explanations unnecessary, "When used by the members of a profession or group, it can be an efficient and effective language." Oxford companion (1992). For instance, for physicians, the surgical removal of a gall bladder is a cholecystectomy. For lawyers, an involuntary conversion is loss or destruction of property through theft, accident or condemnation, and estoppel means that a party is prevented by his or her own acts from claiming a right that would cause injury or loss to another party. According to the Oxford companion, (1992), jargon is also used for the identification of members of a group or profession. It therefore helps to keep at bay those who do not belong to the group. Also, using jargon according to the companion can lend an air of authority and prestige to those who use it, especially if the jargon is associated with a profession that enjoys a high social position.

However, Jargon according to the Oxford Companion is probably more known for its abuse by people who use it to confuse, confound, needlessly complicate subject matter, and lend an air of importance and sophistication to their message and to themselves. For instance, "while doctors may easily understand bilateral periorbital haematoma which means, black eye, agrypnia insomnia, cephalgia which means headache, and emesis, meaning vomiting, patient rarely if ever understand such terms. Oxford Companion, (1992). Moreover, according to the companion, jargon allows the speaker to make fairly simple idea appear complicated, if not profound. Generally, when people use jargon not to communicate but to impress audience with their importance or the importance and complexity of their subject matter, or use it to announce membership in a group, communication suffers and the jargon quickly degenerate into something close to the twittering of birds. Oxford Companion (1992, 545).

Conclusion

The essence of language is to communicate and communication entails understanding, where this is not the case, the language will lose its essence. Therefore, in a multilingual setting like Nigeria, the use of English Language as a lingua franca should be emphasized in our schools especially at the primary and secondary levels. This will help to eradicate the effect of dialects or variation in our indigenous language. Moreover, persons in the professional career or occupation should be made to understand, during their formative years in the higher institutions that living and studying with their academic enclave is quite different when they are exposed to the outside world. That is to say, that they should make the benefits of their knowledge easily accessible to persons that are not members of their profession by using the language they could understand rather than obfuscating a simple issue with jargon.

References

- Mearthur, T. & Mearthur, F. (ed.) (1992). Oxford Companion to the English Language. New York. Oxford University Press.
- Obuasi, B. (2002). The Communicative role of language in a multilingual Environment. In C. Ogbuehi (Ed.), *Journal of Liberal Studies*: 102-111.
- Ogbodo, C. (2001). The role of language in the propagation of values: Making a case for the Igbo Nation's Indigenous Language. In C. Ogbuehi (Ed.), *Journal of Liberal Studies*: 82-93.
- Tanmenabaum M. & Abugor N. (2010). The Legacy of Linguistic Fence: Linguistic patterns among Ultra-orthodox, *Heritage Language Journal*, 7.
- Speech, Language and Communication difficulties young people in trouble with the law unpublished. (2014). 19, 2017.