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# **A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF A SPEECH EVENT**

**BY**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

A speech event, as observed by Wales, (1989:428) is an "influential model of the canonical situation of discourse, or *content of utterance*". A context of utterance has six key constituents of communication. These comprise (1) an addresser, (2) (who) sends a message, (3) to an addressee, (4) requires a code, (5) the language (or system) contact, (6) is maintained between them by voice and gestures or expressions.

From this description, it can be adduced that an 'informal speech event' is a conversation between at least two speakers who have a code, i.e., language, to impart the message. Crystal and Davy (1975:86) define conversation as "any stretch of continuous speech between two or more people within audible range of each other who have the mutual intention to communicate ...." They further observe the existence of notions in conversation, viz: the notions of discourse and utterance. From the foregoing, discourse "is a continuous stretch of speech preceded and followed by an agreed change of speaker" whereas an utterance could range from a morpheme (or even a meaning less noise) to a string of sentence.

In a similar vein, Edmondson (1981:6) says 'conversation' refers to "any interactional stretch of talk involving at least two

participants, and taking place in a non-formalised setting...." From these definitions, a conversation between two or more speakers who use language, sign, facial expressions, gestures, etc. (at any point in time) constitutes a language event. A speech event occurs within a society and employs the medium of language – an important element in the society. The concept "speech event" belongs in the domain of sociolinguistics. That is to say, that the study of conversational analysis is the speech event which involves the study of natural conversation in a speech community. Therefore, a conversational analysis as found in this paper is concerned with "verbal interaction as instances of the situated social order" (Montgomery 1986:166).

In essence, it means that in a speech community, for example Nigeria, a multilingual nation there are different rules for the conduct of conversation and each member of the speech community applies the knowledge of the rules in every conversational situation.

## **LANGUAGE SITUATION IN NIGERIA**

The existence of several languages in Nigeria makes this speech community a multilingual one. The process that has resulted in multilingualism is the language contact situation. This process came as a result of the arrival of the English language into Nigeria through colonialism, trade among others, thus, a Nigerian acquires his mother tongue, which could be any of the indigenous languages (MT/L<sub>1</sub>), whereas she or he learns English which is not her/his mother tongue. The English language is the official language which serves as the medium of communication, education, language of the law and of administration. It is a second language (L<sub>2</sub>) to many Nigerians. Nigerians who have

mastered two languages that is, English and any indigenous Nigerian language, can use the two appropriately when the situation calls for it. Such Nigerians can be called bilinguals. The bilingual individual has, at least, two languages at his disposal. Besides, there are some Nigerians who speak another indigenous Nigerian language in addition to their L<sub>1</sub> and English. These can be described as multilingual.

### **RELEVANT SOCIOLINGUISTIC CONCEPTS**

Since a speech event takes place within a society (in this case Nigeria), it is relevant to examine some of the sociolinguistic concepts which are applicable to the analysis of a speech event. There are several sociolinguistic concepts, but this work would focus on code-switching and code-mixing.

As already mentioned a bilingual Nigerian varies his/her choice of language according to the social context as well as the social group within which he/she is operating at the time. He/she at times switches from one language to another or mixes words from the two languages within the utterance. That is, the tendency or ability to code-switch or code-mix is a characteristic not only of Nigerian bilinguals but of all bilinguals. Code-switching, therefore, is "one conversational strategy used to establish cross-or destroy cultural boundaries, to create, evoke or change interpersonal relations with their (speakers') rights and obligation" (Wardhaugh 1986:102). Hence, code-switching is "the alternate use of two or more languages or varieties in distinct social or functional domains (Sridhar 1978:111). To corroborate this point, Beebe (1981:148) states that code-switching, which is a communicative strategy, involves linguistic variation. We wish to argue that this manipulation of language

expresses feelings of solidarity between the interlocutors as will be shown through the analysis of the data for this paper. Code-switching is a symbol of change or a response in which the participants can use/apply consciously or unconsciously (Scotton & Ury, 1977:6).

Conversational code-switching (a twin of code-switching) involves the deliberate mixing of two languages without an associated topic change. It "takes places rapidly frequently and almost unconsciously, within a single social event". This linguistic phenomenon also helps in expressing emotions, establishing close personal relationships among the speakers and serves as a solidarity marker among them.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE DATE**

Since conversation necessarily involves more than one person, certain rules are obeyed by the participants to ensure its success. Sacks et al (1974) argue that the participants orient to a pattern where one person is expected to speak at a time, that is take turns. That is to say utterances are ordered in a systematic way, for example: a greeting follows a greeting and an answer follows a question. Sometimes, it is observed that interruptions may occur where more than one person speaks. This period is usually brief since the interlocutors correct such mistakes. 'Turn-taking' is an important element in conversation because its "organisation at least partially controls the understanding of utterances (Sacks et al, 1974:728).

## **ANALYSIS OF DATA**

There is a recording of a conversation which has been transcribed and is contained in Appendix A. It is an informal

speech event which took place in a Postgraduate hall in one of Nigeria's Tertiary Institutions. The speakers comprise two males and one female. The males are both postgraduate students while the female is an undergraduate who is an experienced nurse. In spite of the difference in their levels of education, there is a measure of equality among them because of their being about the same age. The degree of familiarity is seen in the interest of one of the males in the female's activity for that day, the activity being a "workshop on family planning". From the foregoing description of the setting for the speech act we wish to state that the analysis will consider the sociolinguistic elements as well as the personality of the interlocutors. It will also comment on the structure of the language used.

## **SOCIOLINGUISTIC FEATURES**

### **CONVERSATION 1**

The interlocutors are labeled A – C for easy identification. The conversation is initiated by 'A' with the question – 'Are you there? The question elicits an answer from 'B' 'mmh-mmh'. The topic is introduced – 'family planning' – through A:

A        'How was your family planning workshop?

B        "Well – fine'.

In this speech act, there are elements of the use of the standard variety of English as illustrated in A's turns 2, 3, 6, 8 etc. B's 2 and C's 1.

A<sub>1</sub>       'Are you there?'

A<sub>2</sub>       'How was your family planning workshop?'

B<sub>2</sub>       'Well – fine'

C<sub>1</sub>       'I feel like lying outside'



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A Sociolinguistic Analysis of A Speech Event*

A, through his response/comment, suggests how to check population

A<sub>8</sub> "Oh-oh-o, I think war is the best way of checking population.

Draft tem to Bakassi".

The suggestion of using war to check population is not acceptable to B (cf 'B's turns 6, 7 and 8).

This conversation, being in the spoken form, portrays colloquial peculiarity as seen in A's turn.

A<sub>3</sub> You hear me.

This statement is like a command, it also stresses the idea of provision of panadol (cf turn A<sub>3</sub>)

A common linguistic feature is shown in the switch from standard English to Pidgin, for example A's turn A<sub>7</sub>.

A<sub>7</sub> How is that? People no dey do free work now.

In addition, 'A' makes use of code-mixing technique in which he mixes English with Yoruba and Pidgin as in turns 3, 4 & 5; C's turn 2, and B's turn 4.

3 Come inside jo!

4 Water de here, wa jeun.

2 O se jare

4 E go finish this one?

5 I no go finish am.

Even with the use of Pidgin the speakers are knowledgeable such that there is no break down in communication and all the three interlocutors contribute actively. From the excerpts above, it is A's linguistic competence which enables him to switch from standard English to Pidgin. The sense of this process is to change the mood of the conversation from formal to an informal one as befits equals. The use of

Pidgin serves the purpose of change in the topic from the academic issue of "family planning" to a social, informal one of an invitation to share in the meal. This change is a "conscious" process in which 'A' seeks to mellow down the atmosphere of the conversation. Similarly, the use of Pidgin creates a rapport among the participants as social equals. For example, "water de here, wa jeun", is a combination of Pidgin and the language of the immediate environment, that is Yoruba. This language choice expresses a "we-type solidarity" among the speakers and it is good in-group and informal activities (Gumperz as quoted by Wardhaugh, 1986:103).

Furthermore, the discourse/linguistic competence of speaker 'B' is depicted in her response to 'A's turn 2.

A<sub>2</sub> How was your family planning workshop?

B<sub>2</sub> Well-eh-fine.

The start and pause before continuation by speaker B is normal in conversations. Secondly, the next speaker did not need to repeat the topic because of the shared knowledge between them. The linguistic competence of 'B' is not quite good as shown in her substandard English, for example:

B<sub>6</sub> We are checking population

The use of definite article 'the' is missing and this is a result of transfer. In Nigerian languages, there is a paucity of articles; consequently, often times, articles are not used as in the example cited above by B – an undergraduate. Also, speaker A has the same problem as speaker B.

The element of coherence is illustrated in this conversation because 'B's statement on checking the population elicits 'A's suggestion on how to solve the problem of population which is:



A<sub>8</sub> Draft them to Bakassi.

Draft all those people to Bakassi.

At the end of the day how many of them will come back?

The continuity process in this conversation occurs through turn-taking though a new topic, "the Bakassi crisis" has been introduced. A's turn 8 borders on the topic of concern to the discussants and Nigerians as a whole, yet it is introduced on a humorous note – "oh-oh-o." 'A' does not agree with 'B' on how to check the population and he shows this by emphasizing the verb/word "Drafting".

A<sub>8</sub> I think war is the best way of checking population. Draft them to Bakassi. Draft all those people to Bakassi. At the end of the day how many of them will come back?

'At the end of day' here implies – at the end of the war. The use of the pronoun 'them' excludes 'A' and his friend. This pattern in conversational analysis portends an outgroup and 'A' and does not see himself as one of 'those' to be drafted to Bakassi. This pattern of 'non-inclusion of self' is described by Wardhaugh (1986) as "an impersonal kind of relationship".

However, B's next statement shows that she does not agree with A's opinion. She reiterates:

B<sub>7</sub> That's not the best way

That's not the best way

Because the fewer ones will be overtasked

Because the fewer ones will be overtasked

First the use of 'fewer' is wrong grammatically it should be 'few'. Secondly, these statements bring about the change in the mood of the conversation. Speakers 'A' and 'C' contemplate on the statement while the mood becomes tense when 'A' questions the use of the word 'over-worked?' Both 'B' and 'C' simultaneously

say 'YES', because the few men left will be overworked in order to increase the population growth of the country. The conversants recall the other countries involved in the Nigeria/Cameroon border crisis as 'B' says:

B<sub>10</sub> And it is France that is fighting us.

In turn A observes thus:

A<sub>11</sub> US will be here

Whereas B describes US and France as gluttons.

B<sub>11</sub> They are gluttons.

The use of the pronoun 'they' is ambiguous because it could refer either to France from 'B's statement since both countries have interest in Nigeria. But this ambiguity is neutralized by the context of the situation. 'A' recalls a similar incident of the "Falkland" crisis between Britain and Argentina. In recalling the Falkland event he makes use of idiosyncratic exclamation,

A<sub>12</sub> Like the – Like the, ehn-ehn

What do you call it...?

Beside, he also changes his mind midway (anacoluthon) in the exchange. This creates an impression of disjointedness in the conversation. The use of 'it' in that statement refers to 'Falkland'. Speaker 'A' continues his exposition as he narrates how the war ended with Britain as the stronger of the two.

A<sub>12</sub> What of Falkland? What happened at the end?

Like the ... Like the ehn-ehn, what do you call it ...?

Falkland.

One day Britain woke up to say ...

Argentina said No ...

What happened? They went to war. Before one week

Britain

Vanquished Argentina.

That was the end of the story.

To stress the ownership of the piece of land, 'A' makes use of the adverb 'now' which refers to those who own the land at present. There is a debate as observed in the interchange between 'B' and 'A' in the use of the word, 'vanish'. It seem 'B' confuses the word 'vanquish' with 'vanish' but 'A' then gives an explanation to clarify the issue. However, 'vanquish' means to 'overcome', 'to be victor' and the subtle shade of meaning agrees with 'A's' explanation.

The analysis has discussed the different levels of competence of the interlocutors and illustrated the suitability of certain sociolinguistic concept in the analysis of speech event within the speech community. We wish to observe that the application of sociolinguistic phenomena vividly portrays the degree of familiarity among the speakers. For instance, the application of code-switching and code-mixing is displayed by all the speakers. The concept of 'equals' is seen in B's uninhibited contribution. In addition, they are familiar enough to correct one another's perceived expression to erase blemishes – 'vanquish' and 'vanish'.

## **PERSONALITY**

From the above discussion, a brief comment will be made about the personalities of the speakers. For instance, speaker 'A' is the dominant character who is in the 'speaker' role and seems to control the conversation. He displays leadership status and responsibility. His speeches are longer and often expository to show his depth of knowledge. He is the initiator of the conversation; he speaks first and assigns turns to others. It could

be assumed that because it was his room, he acted as the host, was familiar with the environment and therefore more relaxed than the others. He built up the conversation through questions, raised arguments and resolved debates. The application of code-switching by this speaker is an extension of his personality. It illustrates his ability to exercise his sociolinguistic competence. The use of Yoruba by speaker 'A' identifies him with the people and the environment in which he finds himself as a member. 'A' shows vast knowledge of current affairs and is precise in discussing the topic of the Falkland war.

Speaker 'B' has also contributed a lot to the discussion. She has many turns though not as many as speaker A. It is important to observe that though B speaks more than C, speaker 'A' does not address her as much as he does speaker 'C'.

For Example:

A<sub>9</sub> Are you going to register?

This statement is addressed to the man. Moreso, speaker B, being a woman becomes emotional about drafting people to Baskassi to show she doesn't like war and she affirms this by emphasizing:

B<sub>7</sub> That's not the best Way  
That's not the best Way.

Her emotions as a woman supersede the project of checking the population. Speaker B is, ostensibly, the weakest in expression in English, yet she takes very many turns. This possibly means she doesn't feel inferior in the midst of her 'betters' in the use of the language. The reason is that in spite of her level of education compared with the others, she is very conversant with her profession.

Speaker 'C' is in the listener role, though one of the interactants, he does not contribute much to the conversation in spite of the fact that he was present from the beginning of the discussion. He does not involve himself much in the argument and contributes mostly in short utterances. In this conversation, he has only four turns. He is a 'Yes-man' to the others and his response overlaps B's turn 3 – which shows that he is happy to continue in the listener role.

### **STRUCTURE OF LANGUAGE USE**

It has already been mentioned that the interlocutors make use of question – answer routines. Question-answer or greeting-greeting are described as adjacency pairs – 'A' turns 1, 2 and B's turns 3 and 2. Adjacency pairs function as a local organizing device (Montgomery 1986:104). The speakers also make use of repetition as shown in speakers A turn 8, and B's turn 7. Besides, there is also the use of lexical repetition to link turns and there are many examples in the extract (cf. turns A<sub>8</sub>, B<sub>7</sub>). Speaker B uses short, simple sentences to make her points, for instance B's turn 5 and 6. There is also the use of pronouns like 'them', 'they' etc' in place of nouns. The use of continuers like 'And' by 'B' shows the logical continuation based on turn taking. Besides, these elements serve as grammatical devices to link up the chain of thought.

The idea of coherence of fitting in what the speaker says with what has gone before and is relevant for each speaker to follow (see conversation from A<sub>6</sub> to A<sub>8</sub>). This coherence is necessary since the focus is on the topic of checking the population. Besides, there is also the use of deixis in the conversation. As noted by Huddleston (1991:98).



And expression is used deictically when its interpretation is determined in relation to certain features of the utterance – act: the identity of those participating as speaker/writer and addressee, together with the time and place at which it occurs.

Put simply, deixis means pointing, and refers to the way in which speakers can use certain words to point to, rather than name things already mentioned in a conversation (Freeborn 1993:120). The use of pronouns, locatives, and demonstratives can perform this function. A look at the use of the locatives in turns A<sub>1</sub>, A<sub>3</sub>, C<sub>1</sub> and A<sub>6</sub>, among others, illustrates this point.

A general statement need be made at this point that the use of words like 'yanma-yanma' which means "dirt", "rot" or "decay" as well as the choice of the word "eba" in the conversation are words from the indigenous languages that are used in everyday conversation. They illustrate how different languages can carry different communicative loads from one culture to another culture. Speaker A's use of the term 'eba', (a Yoruba word for a type of food) makes that utterance humorous. The argument on the choice of the word 'vanquish' precipitates the end of the conversation as the interlocutors come to the final closure with A's explanation of this word.

## **CONCLUSION**

A speech event is a well-defined unit or structure of social and verbal behaviour that can comprise a series of speech acts and even a register of discourse types. Since a speech event



occurs in a society, it relates to the society and the interlocutors have the choice of which language to use in a multilingual setting. The choice of code shows the level of attainment of Western education, in the Nigerian speech community. Though the 'western educated have different codes like their mother tongue, standard English and Pidgin, among others, the choice of language to use in each instance depends on the setting and the topic.

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