

Sociolinguistic Perspective on Solidarity and Politeness Strategies among Tiv Language Speakers

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Abstract

Owing to the fact that language use differs among speakers in different situations, this paper examines solidarity and politeness strategies among Tiv language speakers as determined by the interplay of linguistic resources, social parameters and contexts. The concepts of social class and social context are explained as they are related to language by their influence on the way people use language in the society. The connection between sociolinguistics and the sociology of language is explored to establish the relationship between language and society as well as the ways in which they act upon each other. The notions of language, solidarity and politeness are viewed as universal phenomena but situated here within the Tiv environment. The paper recognises the nomenclature, Tiv, as referring to both the people and language of the people. The data used for the analysis were collected from primary sources through oral interviews, observations and experience of

the researchers. The descriptive method was used to analyse the data. The study was hinged on William Labov's Variationist Theory which holds that the way a language is spoken or written differs according to the individual as well as according to the context faced by the same individual. This study concludes that solidarity and politeness strategies adopted by Tiv language speakers reflect the social conditions of their use and they could be likened to the nuances of communicative engagements among users of other indigenous Nigerian languages especially in view of cross-cultural affiliations. It reveals that solidarity and politeness are consistent elements in the sociolinguistic continuum.

Key words: Solidarity, Politeness, Tiv Language, social class, context, sociolinguistic

Introduction

The concepts of language and society are inextricably interwoven due to the fact that one cannot exist without the other. Society operates on the basis of language and the functions of language are predicated on the existence and organization of society. The Tiv people live in a society and commune by means of the Tiv language. The language enables them to operate at different strata and their communality influences the ways in which they use the language including the adoption of solidarity and politeness moves. This is in tandem with the Whorfian Hypothesis which states among other things that 'We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages' (quoted in Holmes, 2013: 342). Thus, to a reasonable degree, the Tiv people perceive the world and respond to it as provided for by their language and by the organization of their society.

It is useful to make the point that the nomenclature, “Tiv” refers to both the people and the language spoken by the people. The Tiv people of Nigeria are found in Benue State, Nasarawa State, Taraba State, Cross River State and Plateau State (Udu, 2009). The language is used for interpersonal communication, trade, religious worship and for other human engagements. It is also the language of the media because radio and television programmes are presented in Tiv.

In the Tiv society and any other societies, the nature of interactions is determined by many variables including social classes of interactants and the social contexts in which the interactions take place. Therefore, social class and social contexts are among the numerous factors which influence the way people speak or use a language. Oha and Uwajeh (2014) assert that social class is the position of the speaker in the society, measured by the level of education, parental background, profession and their effects on syntax and lexis used by the speaker. They further argue that the social context determines the register used according to changing situations: formal language in formal meetings and informal usage during meetings with friends, family members, peers, and such other social contexts.

Social class and context are variables in the deployment of solidarity and politeness in the use of language as well as other linguistic choices. McGregor (2009: 156) notes that “All speech occurs in an interactive context in which interactants – speakers and hearers – make choices from the linguistic system. The variables in the linguistic system and the context act together to elicit linguistic attitudes, a concern which situates our

discourse within the domain of sociolinguistics. It becomes expedient to briefly define the subject and her sister discipline, the sociology of language.

Many scholars have given different definitions of sociolinguistics. However, each of the definitions does not fail to acknowledge the fact that sociolinguistics deals with language and the way society influences its use and vice versa. Anyogo (2014) defines sociolinguistics as the study of speech functions according to the speaker, the hearer, their relationship, and the contact situation. This implies that the concern of sociolinguistics is about how language is used in relation to the speaker, the hearer and the context. Hudson (1996: 1) as cited in Agbedo (2000), submits that sociolinguistics is the study of language in relation to the society. Going by this definition, the focal point of sociolinguistics is to analyse how the society affects the use of language and vice versa. In other words, sociolinguistics studies language and society, taking into consideration the social aspect of language as a means of human communication. Oha and Uwajeh (2014) posit that sociolinguistics is the study of the relationship between language and society, of variation, and of attitudes about language. The submission considers the interface between language and society, peculiar features of a language based on the social context and attitudes of the society towards the use of language.

Sociology of language, on the other hand, is a term which views society as being broader than language, and therefore, as providing the context in which all language behaviours must ultimately be viewed. It embraces features such as ethnography of communication,

linguistic etiquette, et cetera (Akindele and Adegbite, 2005).

The views above suggest that both sociolinguistics and sociology of language study the relationship between language and society. While one emphasizes language, the other emphasizes society. Nevertheless, the interconnectivity of the sister disciplines cannot be waived aside as evidenced in the cross-current of their concerns. For instance, both of them are concerned with the way people adopt or express solidarity and politeness in their use of language.

Methodology

The study was limited to Gboko, Guma, Kwande, Kastina-Ala, Vande-kya out of fourteen Local Government Areas in Benue State where speakers of Tiv language are natives. The study could not cover the entire Tiv nation due to some constraints. The selected Local Government Areas represent the descendants of Ipusu and Ichongu, the only sons of Tiv. The researchers relied on the primary source of data collection; hence the data was collected by conducting oral interviews, observations and experience. Thirty (30) persons were interviewed, among them were twenty men and ten women between the ages of 25 and 55. With the use of intuitive knowledge, the researchers sampled the collected data from the native speakers and in addition to their observations and experience got the data for analysing how the use of Tiv language reflects solidarity and politeness based on family relationships, peer groups, social status, and friendship among others. The descriptive method was adopted for analysing the data

Theoretical Framework

The study is based on the variationist paradigm introduced by William Labov in the 1970s. According to Agbedo (2018), William Labov is the pioneer variationist who initiated the quantitative approach to the analysis of linguistic variation and change in the sixties. The differences in individuals' speech are amenable to quantitative analysis and also sensitive to various kinds of social structure. Individuals may then be grouped into various social categories by virtue of frequency of occurrence of particular variable features in their speech as constrained by different social contexts.

Labov was a prominent voice in American linguistics in the early 1960s. He pioneered an approach to investigating the relationship between language and society and developed a field which has come to be known as Variationist Sociolinguistics. The central doctrine of this field holds that variation is inherent to linguistic structure. The way a language is spoken or written differs across individuals as well as across situations encountered by the same individual. This view challenges the Chomskyan ideology which centres on language structure or, better still, universal grammar. Chomsky does not deny the existence of variation, rather he tends to downplay its relevance and treats it as a superficial phenomenon obscuring a fundamental uniformity that characterises language. The theory is suitable for the study since the aim of the paper is to examine the variations among Tiv utterances showing solidarity and politeness between interactants in different contexts.

Language, Solidarity and Politeness

Being the universal human phenomenon that it is, language has received unreserved attention in many fields of scholarship such as linguistics, sociology, philosophy, psychology, anthropology etc., resulting in many perspectives on the subject. The many and varied perspectives speak of the nature, functions and complexity of the phenomenon while describing it basically as a means of human communication. Agbedo (2000), submits that language is a natural ability possessed by every human for the sole purpose of communication. He further submits that language is the unique medium through which the belief system, world-view, moral values, and virtually all the basic ingredients of any given society are passed on from generation to generation. With respect to Agbedo's views, language is the means by which human beings communicate with one another for various purposes. A language is a people's native or natural and dominant system of sounds and symbols for communication; it is their means of exchanging messages, ideas, opinions etc. Afolayan (1989) describes language as an important instrument in the development of human beings. Childs (2003: 5) asserts that "language is a core cultural institution and at the heart of an individual's and society's identity". Thus, language occupies a profoundly essential place in the existence of man and society.

As has been recapitulated above, language users, in this case, Tiv language users have recourse to strategies that facilitate their communicative intentions, among them, solidarity and politeness. Solidarity is a relation which is based on familiarity, similarity, or even sameness of salient characteristics in two or more persons (Brown and Gilman, 1960). Solidarity hinges on the fact that the

concerned persons have a number of things in common such as lineage, social and linguistic backgrounds etc. Such relationships are reciprocal i.e. they obtain equally for both individuals. The varying aspect of the solidarity is its intensity, or degree of solidarity, ranging from intimacy to distance. The former type of relationship is likely to be marked by a mutual use of first names and nicknames while the latter by reciprocal use of titles and last names. Summarily, solidarity draws from the distance between the characteristics people share and/or from how many social characteristics (religion, sex, race, occupation, interest et cetera) they share.

Solidarity acts express intimacy and familiarity. The solidarity relationship is symmetrical in such a way that if speaker A has the same parents or attended the same school as B, then B has the same parents or attended the same school as A. However, it is pertinent to note that not every shared personal attribute creates solidarity. For example, two people who live in the same vicinity or go to the same school will not automatically have an intimate relationship. But should they share political membership, occupation, religion, family background among others which make for like-mindedness or similar behavioural dispositions, the likelihood of solidarity relationship increases. The expression of linguistic solidarity is, therefore, based on the social relationship of familiarity and intimacy. Familiarity is a kind of social relationship that expresses a high degree of solidarity between the speaker and the addressee. For example, the use of the singular second personal pronoun “tu” in French and the use of first names only in English, respectively, indicates some familiarity. Particularly, in English, addressing someone by their first name signals a high degree of

solidarity between the speaker and the addressee. This is also apparent in Tiv language and culture. In a similar way, the interactants may adopt a casual way of addressing each other with nicknames or social names.

Linked to solidarity is linguistic politeness which has been attractive since the landmark study by Brown & Levinson (1987). They argue that politeness occurs across all languages. In an attempt to buttress the universal applicability of linguistic politeness theory of Brown & Levinson, Urbanová and Oakland as cited in Švarová (2008), define politeness as the ability of the speaker to show respect, discretion, and goodwill. The definition implies that politeness is the use of a language in a way that shows respect, discretion, goodwill to the addressee. This theory relates to the Face Theory which Brown and Levinson (1987) equally dwell on. It is evident that solidarity or politeness is borne by words, bodily expressions and prosodic features which come under what has been called face. Scollon and Scollon (1995) state that the concept of 'face' is derived from the notions of deference and politeness, proposing that participants in a communication event are aware of their self-image or 'face' and they do protect or would want to protect it.

According to Agantiem (2017: 175), "participants in a communication event are unavoidably influenced by circumstances and intentions in their deployment of face. Their face constitution is tailored toward the achievement of their illocutionary goals". Brown and Levinson as cited in Liu & Allen (2014) aver that face is an individual's self-esteem or the public self-image that every member wants to claim for themselves. It consists of two related aspects: negative face and positive face. Negative face is the basic

claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction – that is, to freedom of action from imposition. In other words, negative face is the want of every competent adult that their actions be unimpeded by others. This view creates a meaning that reflects non-imposition. Positive face, on the other hand, is defined as the positive consistent self-image or personality (crucially including the desire that this self- image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants. It is the feeling of every member that their wants be desirable to at least a few others. This implies that individuals want others to recognize their achievement of goals, ambitions or possessions. That is why achievers want to be identified with their achievements. For example, a Nigerian professor would wish other people to address them as professor or Prof Terfa, Prof Viashima et cetera.

Brown (2015) acknowledges that politeness is the feature of language use that most clearly reveals the nature of human sociability as expressed in speech. He argues that politeness is essentially a matter of taking into account the feelings of others as to how they should be treated in interactions, including behaving in a manner that demonstrates appropriate concern for interactants' social status and their social relationship. Going by Brown's definition of politeness, we would say that politeness is the attribute of language use which accords respect to the interactants and reflects the social class and social relationships of the people involved in the communication.

Tiv Language Speakers and Solidarity

Speakers of Tiv language reflect solidarity in their communicational interactions. Their interactions take

place at various levels of relationships such as family, peer (age) groups and social groups. They show their intimacy and familiarity to one another through the language by using address terms. At the family level, children do not and cannot call parents by their names as a mark of solidarity and respect. The intimate and familiar relationships among interactants in Tiv can be seen in the following examples:

Solidarity Based on Family Relationship

Parents

'Terfa (name), va'.
(Terfa, come).
'Doo (name), za shin kasua'.
(Doo, go to the market).

(Interactants) Children

(Baba, m ngu van).
(Baba, I'm coming)
Mama, m za shin kasua?
(Mama, should I go to the market?)

Uncles/Aunties

Tor (name), u ngu nena?.
(Tor, how are you?)
Sewuese (name), za fele.
(Sewuese, go quickly).

(Interactants) Nephews/Nieces

'Ngodoo (name), kwagh er ga.
(Ngodoo, fine).
Terhemen (name), me za fele.
(Terhemen, I will go quickly).

Cousin

Terkura, va ya ruam.
(Terkura, come and eat food).
'Mwuese , yevese va'.
(Mwuese, run and come).

(Interactants) Cousin

Doo, me ya ruam ga.
(Doo, I won't eat food).
Ayem, m va ve.
(Ayem, I've come).

Grandparent

Terkimbi, yila ortwer.
(Terkimbi, call a medical doctor).
Dooyum, u nder vee.
(Dooyum, good morning).

(Interactants) Grandchild

Baba, m yila ortwer'.
(Baba, I've called a medical doctor).
Mama, u nder vee.
(Mama, good morning).

Going by the examples above, we would say that speakers of the Tiv language use address terms to show solidarity. Parents, uncles/aunties and cousins address their children, nephews/nieces, and cousins with first names respectively. Children address their parents and grandparents as Baba and Mama respectively. Nephews/nieces may address their uncles and aunties with kinship terms and sometimes with first names depending on their age differences. Cousins also address one another by their names or with respect-showing terms depending on their age brackets.

Solidarity Based on Peer Group and Friendship

Interactant A

Ter, nger iti you.

(Ter, write your name).

Orne, u ngu nena?

(Orne, how are you?)

Nomor, yamen msorum.

(Nomor, buy me drinks).

Interactant B

Doo, me nger iti yan ga.

(Doo, I won't write my name).

Orne, kwagh er ga.

(Orne, I'm fine).

Nomor, se yem shi kasua.

(Nomor, let's go to the market).

In the light of the examples above, we would say that peers and friends show their linguistic solidarity during exchange of greetings or conversations by calling each other by the first names as terms of address. They also use other informal forms such as nicknames or pet names they give themselves or one another. Informal terms of address include 'Orne (my friend)', 'Huror (friend)' among others.

Apart from the use of address terms, Tiv speakers show their intimacy and familiarity with each other through utterances that convey same. This can be conveyed by the prosodic features of the utterance rather than by their common semantic components. For example:

I. Orne, va yoo. (This man, come).

- II. Doo, chir zwa. (Doo, shut up).
- III. Wanye, de ayôôse. (Small boy, stop making a noise).
- IV. Kesem mngerm, Mimidoo. (Fetch water for me, Mimidoo).
- V. Baba, yamen ityakeda. (Daddy, buy books for me).

In (i) above, 'This man' is ordinarily not friendly but the speaker here uses it to express his social closeness with the addressee. Likewise, 'Shut up' in (ii) should not be taken in the light of a command but is uttered to someone with whom the speaker shares some familiarity. People would not ordinarily tell one another to shut up if they are not engaged in a quarrel. Therefore, the use of the utterance among Tiv language speakers reflects a degree of solidarity rather than authority. The same can be said of 'Small boy' in (iii).

Politeness in Tiv Language

Speakers of Tiv Language show politeness in the course of their interactions through the use of address terms and longer utterances. Certain discourse strategies are adopted to express social distance or closeness between speakers. The feelings of people reveal how they should be treated in interactions, especially by respecting their social status. The exhibition of politeness through the use of Tiv Language can be seen in the examples:

Politeness Based on Social Status

King/Leader

Terfa, va yo.
(Terfa, come).
Msuur, yila mama wou.
(Msuur, call your mother).
Zege, u er tom.
(Zege, weldone).
Yina, va a mama wou.
(Yina, bring your mother).

(Interactants) Subject

Zaki, m ngu van.
(Zaki, I'm coming).
Pasetô, me yila mama wam.
(Pasetô, I'll call my mother).
Zaki, Aondo aver tor.
(Zaki, may God bless the chief).
Gomna me va a mama wam.
(Gomna, I'll bring my mother).

The examples show that chiefs and leaders usually address their subjects by first names while the subjects address their chiefs and leaders with address terms that are associated with their social status or achievements. Apart from the address terms and first names, other politeness strategies are usually adopted even with longer utterances. As Richards and Schmidt (2012: 405) observe, “Politeness markers include differences between formal speech and colloquial speech and the use of address forms”. The types of utterances each interactant makes is influenced by some politeness consideration. A subject cannot become colloquial without the tacit or overt permission of the chief. This also applies in the case of parents and children or elders and younger people. But interactants that belong to the same peer or age group freely adopt colloquial language among themselves.

Politeness based on close or equal social status

Interactant A

Mista Tor, m ngu keen we.
(Mista Tor, I'm waiting for
you.)

Barista Gbande, va yô.

(Barista Gbande, come.)

Fada Gber, u nder vee.

(Fada Gber, good morning.)

Interactant B

Mista Ver, m ngu van.
(Mista Ver, I'm coming.)

Barista Amough, m ngu van,
washima.

(Barista Amough, I'm coming, be
patient.)

Een, Pasetô Yina. U nder nena?

(Pasetô Yina, yes. How did you
sleep?)

The examples above show that through the use of address terms with titles, interactants show politeness to each other in Tiv.

Among the Tiv language speakers, politeness is also shown to one another through certain sentence

structures, patterns and nuances or tonal variations. This claim can be seen in the following sentences:

- (i) Mista Aseer, wea lumun yô, man se lam.
(Mr Aseer, can we talk?)
- (ii) Orvesen, u nder vee.
(Sir, good morning.)
- (iii) Zaki Ahaa, mngu zamber me ma u wasen.
(Chief Ahaa, I am begging that may you help me.)
- (iv) Barista, er ishima yough amo.
(Barrister, do your wish with me.)
- (v) Fada Gber, wea lumun yô, ma u eren msen.
(Fr Gber, may you pray for me.)

The expressions given above are uttered respectfully. In (i), an indirect request is made in the form of a question whereas the speaker means to seek the consent of the addressee. This is a politeness strategy to curry the favourable response of addressee in (v), a humble request is obviously made because of the use of appeal word, 'may' and it is directed to a personality that accorded a lot of respect in the socio-religious circle. In each of the utterances, the addressee's title or status is first said before the message for politeness sake.

Conclusion

The relationship of language and the society is inextricable and this can be seen in the ways in which these influence each other as reflected in the people's use of their language. The deployment of solidarity and politeness strategies by Tiv language speakers affirms that relationship. Because of the norms and ethics of the Tiv society, speakers of the Tiv language make use of certain address terms when they engage with people of certain social class in particular social contexts. They also adopt

prosodic mechanisms in order to express solidarity and to achieve politeness.

The thrust of this paper has been to expose that relationship between Tiv Language, its speakers and the society in terms of the use of solidarity and politeness strategies. Examples of utterances by Tiv speakers are given and analysed revealing how these important features of human communicative interactions are carried out. However, it need be mentioned that there are conversations in which politeness strategies may be avoided to blatantly express a speaker's negative state of mind. This is not unusual as our states of mind can fluctuate according to the prevailing social circumstances. It is for this and other reasons that we constitute positive or negative face in our interactions depending on our communicative intentions, or the social relationship we hold with others or the social context of the interactions.

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