

Shades of Intimidation in Language Use: A Study of Selected Nigerian Film

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Abstract

It has been established in sociolinguistics that language is a social tool used in communication; hence, anybody can learn any language for effective flow of communication. Nevertheless, not everybody has access to the learning of some languages that affect their lives. Consequently, languages have become not only a way of perfecting inequality but also a weapon for manipulation and intimidation of others. Against this backdrop, this paper explicates some shades of language intimidation using a Nollywood film titled *The Village Bride*. A limited number of studies have investigated language intimidation using movie paradigm. The paper highlights shades of classification, discrimination, inequality and above all intimidation using the above mentioned film. The study adopted a qualitative research design and de Hann's and Maxwell's Theory of Exclusion forms the theoretical framework. The work concludes that it is sheer intimidation to use a language in a situation which the interlocutors do not have one language in common and worse still, when both are literate in another language. Again, trying to deprive someone of his/her cherished belonging or property on the premise of lack of education in a particular language or dialect is a clear intimidation as being observed. The study recommends that interlocutors should try to accommodate other language users irrespective of their class.

Keywords – sociolinguistics, language, communication, intimidation, English language

Introduction

Language is used for different communicative purposes. The functional approach to language studies goes beyond the linguistic or formal studies of language to describing what language is used to achieve in concrete situations. In different situations, language performs different functions which could be to appeal, request, advise, apologise, assert, insult, include, exclude, intimidate and many others. Society has always had a way of making distinctions between groups as a way of classifying or determining inclusion and exclusion. Prominent among these parameters include race, colour, gender, social class, ethnicity, nationality occupation, language, religion (Bamgbose2000, p. 25). It is a truism that anyone can learn any language; however, not everyone has access to the learning of most languages that affect their daily lives. In view of this,

language continues to serve as a parameter for making distinctions between and among people. The fact that language separates people into groups makes it a convenient way of classifying, exclusion and intimidation.

In every human society, language plays a very vital role. It is the basic instrument through which human beings achieve and carry out collective behavior in a particular language area. It is a powerful instrument of identification and classification. It is one of the major ways by which social inequality is perpetuated in society. Thus, language has become a weapon for the manipulation of others and a tool for societal domination, exclusion, marginalization, discrimination and above all intimidation.

Review of Literature

Rereading of Language

Language is central to every human endeavour for effective functioning and availability of information to society. It is a social tool whose major function is to enable people to communicate. Language has taken several definitions. Quoting Brooks and Naldman, Azikiwe (1998, p. 1) states that 'language is a learned systematic, symbolic vocal behavior and a culturally acquired and exclusive mark of man. It is a system of articulated sounds organized by human for purposes of communication.

It could be seen that language is the exclusive preserve of human without which it will be different. This presupposes that the possession of language basically makes us human. Language could be said to be a means of social control. It functions symbolically and so is used for verbal communication. Language is a human characteristic that distinguishes man from the lower animals. In a similar view, Hall quoted in Lyons (1981, p. 4) opines that language is "the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols"

Emphasizing further, Lyons perceives language to be a human institution. The implication is that the language that is used by a particular society is part of that society's culture. Hence, the feature of arbitrariness which argues that there is no direct link between the form and meaning of a word is explicitly x-rayed. Language is an important and personal part of everyday life. In a country characterized by multiple languages and communication and peaceful co-existence, language is one of the strongest symbols of shared culture in human society. It is an integral part of society which reflects the people's culture. This is strongly confirmed by Wardhaugh when he says: "there are several possible relationships between language and society" (1998, p.10). This implies that there exist inter-relatedness between language and society.

In all, language is a social tool whose basic function is to communicate. Through language, people express, define as well as share their feelings, opinions, values and experiences. George Yule (2002:p.6).It then means that for communication to flow without hitches, the language of interaction should be commonly shared between the speakers. In other words, there should be a shared medium of language for effective communication to exist. However, when there is lack of shared medium; in a situation in which the interlocutors do not have one language in common, exclusion, and intimidation might set in as effective communication will not be achieved.

English in Nigeria Situation

English, though, a colonial language has come to stay in Nigeria. The multilingual settings usually faced by African developing countries of which Nigeria is not left behind enhanced its survival and retention. It is an invaluable legacy left behind by the British. Several years after the departure of the colonial administrators and independence, “English still survives and has assumed a more important status in Nigeria”. (Akindele &Adegbite1999,p.57). Besides being a national language, it is a means of social integration among the various ethnic groups in the society.

In addition, English performs three broad functions in Nigeria. They include; accommodation, participation and social mobility. In terms of accommodation function, English as a world language serves as a link between people of multilingual societies of Africa and beyond. Hence, it is the country’s official language. In view of this, those who wish to participate in the meaningful affairs of the nation ‘must know’ English as proficiency in English is a requirement via various essential domains of the country such as education, media, politics, and so on are discussed or shared (p. 61).

Looking at the social mobility function, Akindele and Adegbite (1999, p.6). assert that ‘because of the prestige attached to the language (English) a speaker is considered an illiterate if she/he cannot speak English, even if such a person, is literate in the mother tongue’.The above scenario might serve as a tool of marginalization, exclusion as well as intimidation.

Classification of English Users in Nigeria

Users of English in Nigeria may be classified into basilect, mesolect and acrolect.

The Basilect

The basilect is the least prestigious variety of a language. (Mcarthur Tom and FeriMcarthur (1992, p.109). It is spoken by the least educated people in society Fosu(2014,p.23) also lends his voice that basilectal users characteristically include those who have never been to school or who dropped out early in their school life.

The Mesolect

The mesolect is found between the basilect and acrolect in the continuum of competence. Again, Fosu (2014:23) describes this level as where competence in the use of language decreases. It is English spoken by the middle class.

Acrolect

This is the variety of English spoken by the elite. It is the most prestigious variety of a language; the highest point in speech continuum.

In the second language situation, that is ESL, acrolect is the standard that is equivalent to standard English. As Fosu(2014,p.24) states it: “in the written medium, someone who produces the acrolect may be described as being linguistically competent or proficient” . The acrolects he continues, would be used, at least in a more formal situations by those with higher levels of education.

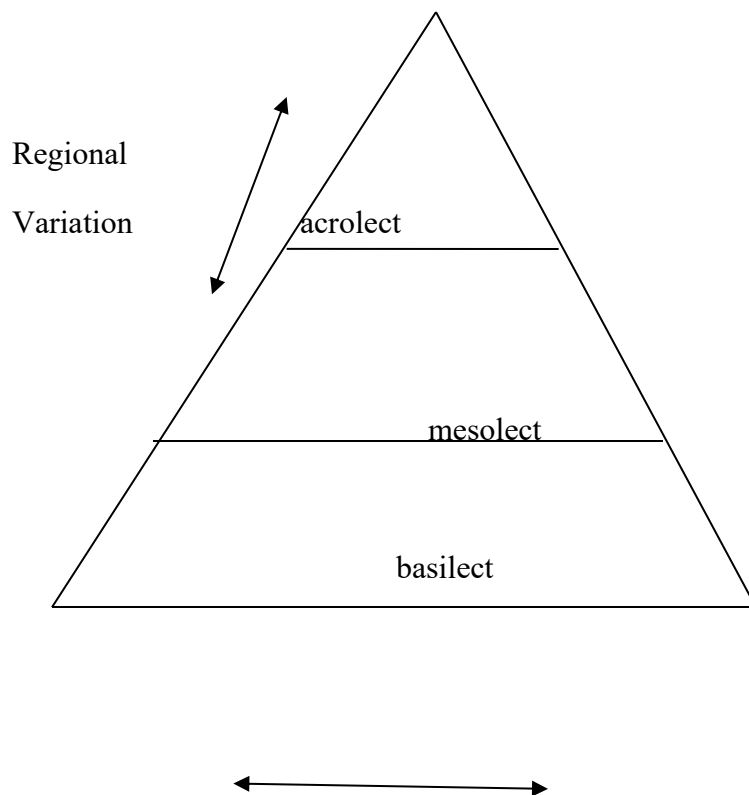


Diagram of Social Variation (online source)

The implication of the above is that one's level of education determines one's use of English. Since English is regarded as an elitist language in Nigeria, it is considered synonymous with a good command of English. Invariably, English is the language of the literate and apparently the educated. The ability to speak English places one higher on the social ladder than one who is unable to speak it. In agreement, Bamgbose (2007, p.78) asserts that "because English is the country's official language ... a gulf is created between the elite who can manipulate it and the masses who cannot".

Still on the foregoing, some group of speakers tends to exert inequality as a result of their competence in the English language. This inequality sometimes attains a worse level of intimidation and discrimination on the side of the lower level.

Language and Social Class

The relationship between language and social class has been a great concern in sociolinguistics. Language use and social factors are closely related. Consequently, some factors such as wealth, educational status as well as occupation are considered in relation to language and social class. In a similar dimension, some social groups such as working class, upper class, middle class are sometimes, used as measures of economic status. This invariably implies that social stratification plays an important role in the ordering of groups within a society. However, that is obtainable only in Britain where group hierarchy may involve into middle class English and working class English (on-line source). In the Nigerian society where social class is fluid, such stratification is based on one's level of education, the educated and non-educated/illiterates or "elite and non-elite class". Akindele and Adegbite 1999, p. 12).

Again, Elugbe and Omamor (2007, p.11) lend their voice in these words: "English is an elite's language and that of the educated ...". Akindele and Adegbite still maintain that since education is achieved through school, many children do not have access of formal education while some that have dropped out along the line. Hear them:

In a country where a greater percentage of the nation's citizens are illiterate and do not have access to education, and also in a country where a greater percentage of which who attend school terminate their education at the primary level, there is no doubt that some children have advantage over other children ... (109).

The Concept of Intimidation

The term intimidation could mean subjecting someone in a reasonable state of fear using words or other conducts. An on-line source explains that intimidation implies "intentional behavior that would cause one to fear injury or harm". (Kupfer – man and Golden Family Law). The harm they continue might not be physical but emotional and sometimes psychological. Intimidation

sometimes involves threats in order to get someone to do what you want. The feeling of intimidation can make someone short of words and appear worse than one really is.

Synopsis of the Movie

The movie 'My Village Bride' is a Nollywood film from the Eastern part of Nigeria (Igbo). The researcher says so because the directors, producers, actors and audience are all Igbo. Besides, the film portrays Igbo world view. It is a film produced by Judge Austine and directed by Yul Edochie. It is about Uchenna (one of the major characters in the movie) a wealthy and educated man who lives in America; hence "America nwa" as fondly calls him by his loving mother. He marries a beautiful, hardworking but native wife named Ekwutosi as arranged by his mother, Agnes. Ekwutosi is the first daughter/child of Akunna and Omeekachie who reside in a small village called Umuoji. Ekwutosi seems morally upright, beautiful in appearance and manners but not refined in behaviour. In other words, her social life is formless. This ugly behaviour irritates her husband and keeps him disgusting. This is no fault of Ekwutosi, she is not educated and cannot speak English. Though this is not intentional, as her father was very sick and she willingly decided to drop out of school in order to help her mother make money to take care of the family since she has two other siblings to cater for. Ekwutosi becomes a drop out in primary two to join the mother in 'akara' business. She later proceeded to opening a restaurant where she prepares delicious "ofe onugbu". She later got to the level of making public cooking which earned her the name "Osite" in the whole Umuoji and its environs, thus the reason for her lack of education and ill exposure. Although, Ekwutosi is good in other areas, but her lack of education and her inability to speak English makes her husband treat her with contempt. Most times, he intimidates her just on that ground.

Besides, other people including Ekwutosi's younger sister Nkiru and bosom friend Chinenye try hiding under the same umbrella to intimidate her and snatch her husband. To them, she does not deserve such a fine man because she is not educated. At a point the husband threw her out of their matrimonial home in the bid to marry another woman who is educated and exposed. Finally, the husband returned to take her back after pleading for forgiveness.

Theoretical Framework

The paper is guided by the theory of social exclusion. Social exclusion is a multi-dimensional process. It embraces diverse ways in which people may be denied full participation in society and full effective rights of citizenship in the civil, political and social spheres. (Rawal 2005,p.162). According to de Haan and Maxwell, there are ten social structures that impact exclusion and can fluctuate over time. These include: race, geographical location, class structure, globalization, social issues, personal habits and appearance, education, religion, economics and politics (2002,p.2).

Social exclusion is a process in which individuals are denied some rights, opportunities and resources that are normally available to others. It is the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or excluded from full participation in the society in which they live. It is something that can happen to anyone.

However, some people are significantly more at risk than others. It has been observed according to on-line source that people with certain background and experiences are disproportionately likely to suffer social exclusion. The major factors again include low income, school problems, living in a deprived neighbourhood in urban or rural areas, etc. The outcome of social exclusion is that it affects both the quality of life of individual and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole.

Data Analysis

Shades of intimidation and depression are not only drawn, but clearly painted in the movie titled “My Village Bride”; A Nigerian movie directed by Yul Edochie and Produced by Judy Austin. As given in the story line, Uchenna, who is an acrolect speaker, commands a high proficiency in the use of English treats his wife, Ekwutosi with disdain. Because Ekwutosi belongs to the basilect, the least prestigious class, on the ground of not being educated in the English language. She suffers intimidation from her husband.

He intimidates her in several ways simply because of her inability to speak English. He assigns task to her without considering whether she understands the message or not. In fact, he usually makes use of big words just to intimidate her the more. Hear him:

Uchenna: “Cook continental dish as Mark and his wife will be visiting our home today”.

Ekwutosi: Konti ... osinoo Konti...-“

Instead of Uchenna to explain actually what he means, when she asked him he goes ahead to add “goggle it”. This leaves her more puzzled than before as she keeps on thinking of what the word means. When she decided to enquire from Stephen, the gate man, he answers:

Okey, come ask me again, see e get one English wee Oga speak for me since last two years which I still de look for the meaning in the dictionary till today (part one).

This scenario buttresses the point that Uchenna does not consider the class level of his interlocutors. Hence, he deliberately uses language to exert pressure on his lower interlocutors thereby intimidating them and sometimes causing depression to them.

Furthermore, he derives pleasure in intimidating them and punishing them sometimes. This is clearly shown in the scene where he threatened to slash Stephen’s salary for speaking bad English. Excerpt:

Uchenna: “Why are you still washing cars by this time?”

Stephen: “Sorry Oga, I wake up late, I late wake up”.

Uchenna: “You’re speaking wrong English and if it continues I am going to slash your salary”.

In a similar manner, Uchenna threw his wife out of their matrimonial home as a result of another woman whom he fancies because she is educated and so belongs to the same class. When the father-in-law called to ask him what happened he simply replied “She is not my class, your daughter is not my type”. He also added “it cannot be resolved”. By implication, the problem cannot be resolved since she is not educated (part 2). Despite his friends plea to take it easy with her fell on deaf ears.

Again, the case of Ekwutosi’s childhood friend (Chinenye) who came in disguise to rejoice and congratulate her on her marriage. After pouring out her heart to her concerning her husband’s ill behavior as a result of her inability to speak English, she promised to talk to Uchenna on her behalf. Ironically, she goes in to lure Uchenna into marrying her instead. According to her “Ekwutosi is a dons. She therefore asked Uchenna to consider her since they belong to the same class while Ekwutosi does not. Her words: ... Somebody of your education and class should not stoop so low to marry a stark illiterate like this That girl is trouble ... Bundle her and send her back to her parents. I will take care of you very well since we belong to the same class (Part 2).

As if that was not enough, Chinenye also told Ekwutosi to her face while lying on her husbands’ bed during her visit.

Ekwutosi – looking surprised

Chinenye - “Ekwutosi, you are not educated, go back to the kitchen where you belong, I belong here”.

In addition and most surprising, Ekwutosi’s younger sister (Nkiru) exhibits another shade of intimidation to her elder sister. In pretence to go to the city and talk sense into Uchenna, she repeatedly requested for Uchenna’s address. When she finally gets it, she laughs her sister at her back as she feels such a handsome and rich man does not befit her sister who is an “illiterate goat”. She tells her girl friend that she is going to the city to persuade Uchenna into marrying her rather than her sister. She sees herself a better match to Uchenna since she is educated and can speak English. When Ekwutosi gets to know of this she cried, “All these are happening to me because I am not educated”.

It was because of this sister of hers and her only brother that made her drop out of school at primary two just to give them a better future. Ekwutosi faced a lot of challenges and intimidation in the hands of her close persons: husband, sister, friend. At a point in her life; she felt so depressed and traumatized that she attempted to take her life with rat poison safe for the quick

intervention of her mother. (Part 2). In fact, the feeling of intimidation leaves her more devastated and even worse than she appears.

Conclusion

Language is a powerful instrument of identification and classification. It performs different functions in different situations. In the field of sociolinguistics, language and social class are among the existing parameters of classification and determining inclusion, exclusion as well as intimidation. One's level of education places one on a social ladder of elite and non-elite class. This fluid stratification, sometimes, leads to manipulation and invariably intimidation on the non-elite group or class. It is these discursive shades of intimidation based on educational level as well as social class that, the work highlights bringing out the social and psychological effect on the victim(s).

It is observed in the film under discussion that Ekwutosi faces so great a psychological trauma that pushed her to attempt suicide before the quick intervention of her mother. The paper finally recommends a situation where language accommodation, should be encouraged especially in a multilingual situation. English should be used with caution as not everyone has the opportunity of learning it.

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Filmography

Title – *My Village Bride 1 and 2*

Story – Judy Austin and Yul Edochie

Screen Play/Casting - Yul Edochie/Judy Austin

Additional Screen Play – Ikenna Donald Ekwuibe

Executive Producer – Judy Austin

Director - Yul Edochie

Actors - Yul Edochie, Judy Austin

Adaeze Chiegbu, Vanessa Okeke

Language - English and Igbo

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