

The Ubiquity of Signs

By

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Abstract

Language is a means of human communication that sets man apart from other animals. Language gives structure to experience and every other aspect of life. Language, of course, is primarily spoken and society is dominated by the spoken form, but for those who are unable to speak, communication takes place through signs. This article seeks to find out if the society can do without signs and symbols in daily communication. The population of sign language users is insignificant as compared to the population of persons that use spoken language yet some aspects of society seem to function better with signs and symbols. This is a descriptive work and it is qualitative. The instrument in operation here is the questionnaire and the theoretical framework hinges on Functionalism. Seventy-four (74) respondents took part in this study. This study concludes that the society in general cannot function maximally without signs and symbols.

Keywords: ubiquity, signs, iconicity, signals, symbols

Introduction

Language is essentially a communication system in the sense that it associates meaning (i.e. the message) with a set of signs (i.e. the sounds or symbols). All linguistic units of expression (sounds, words, sentences) are the signs of the objects, entities or states of affairs that they represent. There is a relationship between a sign and the entity it stands for. Language contributes to the totality of knowledge immensely. It is a unifying factor for everything and connects environmental practice with knowledge of culture and transmits everything synchronically and diachronically among members of a speech community between various generations, (Crystal, 2000; Egbokhare, 2011). Language gives structure to experiences and establishes and maintains social relations. Language is also used to release nervous tension physiologically and psychologically. The necessary tool to acquire skills and knowledge is of course, language.

Language can be described as a code which comprises meaningful sounds and symbols shared by a speech community for the purpose of

communication. The set of sounds and symbols are governed by a system and structural rules which permit combination possibilities.

Ndimele (2006) describes language as a semiotic system that entails the use of certain agreed upon symbols or signals to convey meaning, from one person to another within a given speech community. This definition seems to be all encompassing as it recognizes every variable that make up the entity called language. Semiotics investigates the properties of signaling systems, both natural and artificial, especially with regard to the meanings or messages that they convey. This is the most convenient definition for this paper as is bothers on signs, which forms an integral part of communication.

Sign language interpretation can be regarded as semiotic in a sense but that has to do with the fact that all simultaneous interpretation – indeed all use of language – is semiotic, rather than establishing language in opposition to other semiotic systems. From Ndimele's perspective, linguistic translation, including the simultaneous interpretation of sign languages as well as spoken languages, are not as distinct from semiotic translation but as subset of the more general category of semiotics.

Recent findings about sign languages are but one entity in a growing list of factors pointing to the inadequacy of contemporary linguistics to describe human languages,(Hymes, 1973). Thus, one of the problems to be overcome with regard to language is the linguist's usual conception of it. A broader, differently based notion of the form in which we encounter and use language in the world therefore is needed. To Hymes, this broader view is represented by the term, "ways of speaking" or "the ethnography of communication".

Ingram (1977), in his study of sign language interpretation, declared that we must combat the assumption that sign languages are not only grammatical surrogates of spoken languages, but also that they overlap spoken languages semantically. A sign language output may seem easier to facilitate than a spoken language output simply because the former is easier to fake. An interpreter can always shift into a sign language form that is easier for him, but not necessarily more comprehensible. A spoken language output, though is not so easy to fake, its flaws become readily apparent to the hearer/receptor and an interpreter's only recourse is to complain that interpretation from a sign language to a spoken language is a more difficult task.

Societal pressures being what they are, may have likely established the spoken form as the dominant language. It is expected that the greater the

linguistic dominance the more likely an interpreter will identify with the speakers of the dominant language, rather than with clients speaking his “other” language.

Sign languages use two different modalities, the visual and the gestural. Although, the two modalities clearly differ in the production and perception of communicative signals, the underlying linguistic structures seem to be very similar across both modalities (Meier 2002, 2012, Sandler & Lillo-Martin, 2006). Nevertheless, sign languages, retain some modality-specific properties that may impact the linguistic structure and the cognitive processes underlying the perception and production of signed communication.

First of all, sign languages employ various articulators such as the hands, the upper part of the body, the head, and the face to express grammatical features simultaneously. Second, sign languages use the geometrical properties of the signing space to realize morphosyntactic, semantic and pragmatic categories in the three dimensional space (Pfau & Stanbach 2016).

Third, sign languages grammaticalize and integrate gestural elements, since sign languages and manual as well as non-manual gesture use the same modality. As a consequence, the interface between these two systems is permeable and leads to a more prominent presence of iconicity at different grammatical levels. By contrast, there is much less transparency between the signals used in auditory communication and their meaning (Schlenkes 2018). Besides these linguistic differences, sign languages differ from many spoken languages also in various socio-linguistic dimensions (Aronoff et al., 2005).

Problem Statement

The study of signed languages is of great theoretical interest. By and large, claims about what is universal across human languages are based on the examination of a relatively small percentage of the world’s languages. And signed languages have not been included among that small percentage.

Language whether spoken or signed, is a tool of communication. But this tool of communication can sometimes create a communication gap when two people do not have a common means of a communication language. This is the reason globalization came with a demand for a standardized language for international platforms. In-depth studies of signs could reveal a great deal about the characteristics of language that are truly universal. Signs seem to cut across cultures and languages. Signs have

meanings that permeate all languages. Thus, the common means of communication we seek for is embedded in signs.

Conceptual Review

Signals, signs and symbols, these three related components of communication processes found in all cultures have attracted considerable scholarly attention because they do not relate primarily to the usual conception of words or language. Each is apparently an increasingly more complex modification of the former, and each was probably developed in the depths of prehistory before or at the start of early human experiments with vocal language.

Signals

A signal may be considered as an interruption in a field of constant energy transfer. The basic function of such signals is to provide the change of a single environmental factor in order to attract attention and to transfer meaning. A code system that refers interruptions to some form of meaningful language may easily be developed with a crude vocabulary of dots, dashes or other elemental audio and visual articulations.

Taken by themselves, the interruptions have a potential breadth of meaning that seems extremely small: they may indicate the presence of an individual in a room, an impatience, agreement, or disagreement with some aspect of the environment or in the case of a scream for help, a critical situation demanding attention. Coded to refer to spoken or written language, their potential to communicate language is extremely great. It seems likely that the underlying opposition between “sign” and “background” needs to be invoked and that much of the point of these proposals is precisely that they address cultures and persons without discussing mode of production or treating social class as a factor in change (Hymes, 1978).

Signs

While signs are usually less germane to the development of words than signals, most of them contain greater amount of meaning and by themselves. Ashley Montagu, an anthropologist, has defined a sign as a “concrete denote” possessing an inherent specific meaning, roughly analogous to the sentence. The most common signs encountered in daily life are pictures or drawings, although a human posture like a clenched fist, an outstretched arm or a hand posed in like a “stop” gesture may also serve as signs.

Road Signs



Road signs are universal. Symbols often get noticed when they are out of context, used unconventionally, they convey strong messages. A stop sign on the door of a corporation makes a political statement as does a camouflage military jacket worn in an antiwar protest. Together, the semaphore signal “N” and “D” represent nuclear disarmament – and form the well-known peace sign. (Westcott 2008)

Today, some students have taken to wear pajamas and bedroom slippers to class, clothing that was formally associated only with privacy and bedtime. Though students might deny it, the outfit defies traditional cultural norms and makes a statement.

Sports signs



These wears are indicative of sports. The flags on the football pitch are all signs. A football match goes on for ninety (90) minutes without verbal communication. This shows that communication with signs is possible across board.

The main difference between a sign and a signal is that a sign (like a policeman's badge) contains meanings of an intrinsic nature while a signal (like a scream for help) is merely a device by which one is able to formulate extrinsic meanings. Their difference is illustrated by the observation that many types of animals respond to signals while only a few intelligent and trained animals (usually dogs and apes) are competent to respond to even simpler signs.

Symbols

The world is filled with symbols: sports uniforms, company logos and traffic signs are symbols. In some cultures, a gold ring is a symbol of marriage. Some symbols are highly functional, stop signs, for instance, provide useful instruction. As physical objects, they belong to material culture, but because they function as symbols, they also convey non material cultural meanings. Some symbols are valuable only in what they represent.



Trophies, blue ribbons, or gold medals for example serve no other purpose than represent accomplishments. But many objects have both material and non-material symbol value.

A police officer's badge and uniform are symbols of authority and law enforcement. The sight of an officer in uniform or a squad car triggers reassurances in some citizens and annoyance, fear or anger in others.



It's easy to take symbols for granted. Few people challenge or even think about stick figure signs on the doors of public bathrooms. But those figures are more than just symbols that tell men and women which bathrooms to use, they also uphold the value that public restrooms should be gender exclusive. Even though stalls are relatively private, most places do not offer unisex bathrooms.

Symbols are more difficult than signs to understand and to define, because unlike signs and signals, they are intricately woven into an individual's ongoing perception of the world. The symbol has been defined as any device with which an abstraction can be made. Although far from being precise construction, it leads in to profitable direction. The abstractions of the values that people imbue in other people and in things they own and use, lie at the heart of symbolism.

In Whitehead's opinion, symbols are analogues or metaphors (that may include written or spoken language as well as visual objects) standing for some quality of reality that is enhanced in importance or value by the process of symbolization itself.

Even the destruction of a symbol is symbolic. Effigies representing public figures are burnt to demonstrate anger at certain leaders. In 1989, crowds tore down the Berlin wall, a decade old symbol of the division between East and West Germany, communism and capitalism.

While different cultures have varying systems of symbols, one symbol is common to all languages. Language is a symbolic system through which people communicate and through culture is transmitted. Some languages contain a system of symbols used for written communication while others rely on only spoken and non-verbal actions. Societies often share a single language and many languages contain the same basic elements. An alphabet is a written system made of symbolic shapes that refer to spoken sound. Taken together, these symbols convey specific meanings. Some

gestures are nearly universal, smiles often represent joy and crying often represents sadness. Shakespeare says, “action speaks louder than voice”

Iconicity

The visual-gestural modality of signed languages has greater resources for iconic representation than does the oral-aural modality of spoken languages. Aside from onomatopoeic representations of sounds (e.g., bow-wow, meow), the mapping between form and meaning in the words of spoken languages is seldom imagistic; rather, form-meaning mappings are typically arbitrary. In contrast, the movement of the two hands in the transparent, three-dimensional signing space allows signed languages to represent the shape and movement of objects imagistically. Whether in sign or speech, the mapping between form and meaning need not always be arbitrary, but all languages must allow arbitrary form-meaning mappings in order to have lexical items for abstract, non-imageable concepts (Meier, 2002). Crucially, whether arbitrary or imagistic, form-meaning mappings in signed and spoken languages are conventional within particular linguistic communities. Rich clusters of related and unrelated symbols are usually regarded as icons. They are actually groups of interactive symbols, like the “brick house” in Port Harcourt, “Aso Rock” in Abuja.

Methodology

A survey research design method was adopted. The target population comprised two groups: students and lecturers in the University of Africa, Toru-Orua, Bayelsa State. The study adopted simple random sampling. The bulk of the relevant data were collected through questionnaire. A questionnaire containing ten (10) items was administered to students and lecturers across the four (4) faculties in the University. One hundred (100) questionnaires were given out, twenty-five (25) per faculty, out of which seven (7) were given to lecturers in each of the faculties and eighteen (18) to students in the various faculties as well. Out of one hundred (100) questionnaires, eighty-seven (87) were returned, of which seventy-four (74) were found useful for the data analysis. Functionalism theory was employed in the analysis of data.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The data gathered in the course of the study was carefully harnessed and analyzed based on the theory of Functionalism which has to do with the extent to which a given activity promotes or interferes with the maintenance of a system.

Demographic Information of Respondents

The sex and age were the only demographic information that was taken from the respondents. The essence is to ascertain the gender and the age range of the respondents so as to validate the data in relation to the respondents. This is because the study does not require detailed demographic information. The total number of males that took part in the study is forty-two (42) while the total number of females is thirty-two (32). The implication is that, both genders were satisfactorily represented. Thus, there is gender balance.

Age is another factor that is important to this study. Issues about language almost always depend on the age factor. The age range of respondents is between fifteen (15) and above fifty (50). It means that there is no gap within the age groups, that is, all the useful, productive age groups were fully represented in the study. The level of the student respondents was taken not for anything significant but to enable one get across all the age groups. Thus, the different age groups were captured between 100 level – 400 level. Secondly, it was easier to distribute the questionnaires when the students were taking their various faculty courses, hence the uniformity of levels across faculties.

S/N	FACULTY	LEVEL	NO. OUT	NO. RTND
1	ARTS & EDUCATION	200	18	16
2	SOCIAL & MANAGEMENT SCIENCES	300	18	14
3	SCIENCES	400	18	16
4	AGRICULTURE	100	18	18
TOTAL			72	64

Table 2: Distribution of Questionnaires (lecturers)			
S/N	FACULTY	NO. OUT	NO. RTND
1	ARTS & EDUCATION	7	7
2	SOCIAL & MANAGEMENT SCIENCES	7	5
3	SCIENCES	7	5
4	AGRICULTURE	7	6
TOTAL		28	23

As clearly stated in Tables 1 and 2, a hundred questionnaires were given out to students and lecturers but eighty-seven (87) were returned and seventy-four (74) were found useful for the analysis of the data.

Data Analysis

This paper is an attempt to find out if the world can do without signs in communication, since prominence is given to the verbal form of language. Sign language may not necessarily be the use of signs but it uses more of signs and gestures. People tend to live their daily lives without actually acknowledging the place of signs and symbols in communication. We encounter signs and symbols on daily basis in our interaction with the world especially in public domains yet sign language is seen as inferior to spoken language. Thus, this paper regards the use of signs as a part and parcel of sign language.

The first item in the questionnaire which has to do with what sign language is, received an interesting response. 73% of the respondents agreed that any language that uses visual modality to convey meaning is a sign language including non-verbal communication. Thus, the respondents view road signs, laurels, uniforms, traffic lights, gestures, etc., as part of sign language.

The implication is that virtually all the respondents are conversant with what signs and symbols are, which is attributed to sign language. It means that there are other significant modes of communication other than spoken and written forms and these tend to be in close association with sign language. That is, sign language is not strange to the respondents. They all have a peripheral idea about sign language but not its complexities.

Concerning the level of importance of sign language in society, some of the respondents are of the view that life can go on smoothly without signs and symbols. Signs and symbols are of no importance to the society that is free of deaf and dumb persons. Precisely, 87% strongly disagree that sign language is very important. The respondents think that their lives are not connected to sign language in any way. Better still, sign language is not involved in their day to day activities since they can speak. That is, they strongly disagree on the importance of sign language while an insignificant percentage which is about 13% of the respondents agree that sign language is very important.

Other respondents think it is important because of the signs, symbols, gestures and the likes encountered on daily basis in their interaction with the world. Driving around town, one comes across road signs that give direction as to know when, where and how to go. The sea sign is indicative of a vehicle that stopped on the road as a result one thing or the other. As a matter of fact, when a vehicle breaks down, the driver makes attempt to put it in order by calling a mechanic or moves away to look for solution. Nobody expects him/her to stand there and continue to flag down vehicles to give such information for as long as the vehicle remains there. The sea sign, for instance, speaks to everyone driving along a road. Little wonder, the road signs are taught before one is allowed to handle the steering, hence their importance.

91% agree that spoken language is the primary mode of human communication while 8% are of the opinion that sign language is the primary mode. There is no argument as to which of the modes is primary. It is obviously the spoken is the primary mode of communication but life does not leave a vacuum. So, if there are communication barriers, signs take the stage. This implies that communication with signs is possible for everyone pending on the situation a person finds himself.

Some respondents identified the spoken form of language as being superior to sign language since the spoken form is the primary mode of expression. Others observed that both are forms of communication and that no one is superior to the other. This is similar to prescriptive linguistics where some languages were seen as being superior to others. Today, descriptive linguistics has taken over, thus the question of superiority does not exist anymore. The spoken form and the sign form are both distinct and they perform communicative roles that are unique.

Humans, consciously and subconsciously are always striving to make sense of their surrounding world. Symbols such as gestures, signs, objects, signals and words – help people understand that world. They

provide clues to understand experiences by conveying recognizable meanings that are shared by societies. Signs and symbols come to play here as society searches for universal communication modes.

Examining the response to this item further reveals that people have a negative notion about sign language. They seem to think that it is the language for imbeciles, language of the down trodden in the society. Thus, the exhibition of negative attitudes. As a matter of fact, they are not willing or do not want to have anything to do with signs and symbols in communication, since such communication is perceived to be sign language.

People tend to have stigma towards sign language just as the deaf and dumb are stigmatized. The stigma towards signed languages is based on assumptions, from attitudes and beliefs that signed languages are not “real” or full languages. But the tools of linguistics reveal that signed languages are just as complex as spoken languages: they have phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax & semantics. Furthermore, neural imaging has revealed that users of sign languages recruit the same areas of the brain for producing and understanding language as users of spoken languages do.

Safety signs are crucial in any work environment. The primary importance of displaying safety signs is to prevent emergencies and ensure staff and visitors are well aware of the possible dangers and hazards ahead in certain situations and/or environments. Without signs, many employees would lack the necessary direction in times of crisis and employers might find themselves in significant legal difficulties, if any accident arises as a result.

Conclusion

Language is constantly evolving as societies create new ideas, in this age of technology. Even while it constantly evolves, language continues to shape our reality. Symbols tend to appear in clusters and depend upon one another for their accretion of meaning and value. They are not a language by themselves: rather they are devices by which ideas too difficult, dangerous or inconvenient to articulate in common language are transmitted in common ways. It does not appear possible to compile discrete vocabularies of symbols because they lack the precision and regularities present in natural languages that are necessary for explicit definitions.

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