

The Use of Language for Social In/(Ex)clusion: The Intervention of an Applied English Linguist

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Introduction

Language use is common to all living things, including animals and plants. This is because all species have their peculiar way of communicating, whether through elaborate means of using symbols or moderate use of signs, gestures or other means. However, the humans are the only ones that have become skilled at cognitive language communication, and that is why human communication has been described as very complex, multi-dimensional and highly sophisticated (Pinker, 1994; Babalola and Babalola, 2004). Human language is a dynamic system of communication that enables us to convey thoughts, ideas, and emotions. It consists of verbal and non-verbal elements, including speech, writing, gestures, and facial expressions. With over 8,000 natural languages and an array of artificial languages being developed daily for specialised functions in computer and robotic engineering, the world continues to be inundated with multiple voices unprecedented in human history (Myers-Scotton, 2007; Crystal, 2018).

On the other hand, animal language refers to the various forms of communication used by animals to convey information and express themselves, such as vocalisations, body language and chemical signals. Though animal language might not be as elaborate and cognitive like human's, they use it to warn of predators, attract mates, and navigate social hierarchies. Research however has identified some primates such as dolphins, baboons, certain birds and some species of dogs as being capable of exhibiting human-like linguistic traits almost similar to that of humans (Bradbury, et al 2011; Seyfarth, et al 2017; Hauser, et al 2003). So also are plants capable of some form of communication in form of responses to their environment. While plants do not possess a central nervous system or sensory organs, they are able to adapt and react to stimuli through complex cellular and molecular mechanisms (Trewavas, 2014). They also respond to environmental cues, such as light and temperature, to optimise growth and survival. While plant's language is fundamentally different from human and animal language, it highlights the intricate web of communication that exists in the natural world (Baluska and Mancuso 2009; Karban, 2015).

It should be noted however that the concept of plant language is still a topic of research and debate in the scientific community, and some scientists may not consider it a form of language in the classical sense. Now that it has been established that language use for communication is not an exclusive preserve of the humans, let us go into details of the dynamics of language use among diverse human population in our contemporary world.

Language use and usage of language among humans

Language use refers to the communicative meaning of language; that is what meaning we get or hope to get when we use language. It should be noted that apart from the fact that human language is inherently meaningful, its usage also can impose meaning on it and this will lead

us to one important characteristic of language: displacement. According to Ayoola (2007: 8), this is 'a unique property of language' that 'enables us to talk about things and places whose existence we don't know... or change from the current topic to a topic not contemplated at the beginning of the speech act.' It can be compared to usage, which refers to the rules for making language and the structures we use to make it.

The usage of a language is the ways in which its written and spoken variations are routinely employed by its speakers; that is, it refers to "the collective habits of a language's native speakers", as opposed to idealized models of how a language works (or should work) in the abstract. For instance, Fowler (1926) characterized usage as "the way in which a word or phrase is normally and correctly used" and as the "points of grammar, syntax, style, and the choice of words." In everyday usage, language is used differently, depending on the situation and individual (Smith, 2006). Individual language users can shape language structures and language usage based on their community (von Mengden, 2014 et al).

The ubiquitous role of language to the smooth running and development of any group, community, or nation is not in doubt and this informs the reason why government at all levels, especially at the federal, formulates policies that will ensure development, maintenance and preservation of languages within its territory. Part of the linguistic responsibilities of government is the planning for and assignment of roles to languages in order to maximise their use and ensure their continued relevance and survival. In Nigeria, languages have been variously designated as official, national, major, and minor, notwithstanding that there has never been a consensus of opinion among language scholars and researchers on the designations.

Language use in a multilingual setting

In a multilingual setting, languages often assume different roles, reflecting their status, function, and value in the community. This phenomenon is known as language role assignment. Typically, one language dominates as the lingua franca, used for official purposes, education, and intergroup communication. The languages may be assigned roles such as: Mother tongue of home language, used in family and community settings; Second language, used for specific purposes like trade or tourism; Liturgical language, used in religious contexts; Symbolic language, used to represent cultural identity or heritage (Hornberger, 2002; Solsky, 2004; Kroskrity, 2000). Language role assignment can be influenced by factors like power dynamics, cultural values, and historical context.

Effective language role assignment can promote linguistic diversity, social cohesion, and communication. However, it can also perpetuate language inequality and marginalisation. For instance, assigning a low status to a minority language can lead to language shift and cultural erosion. Conversely, recognizing and valuing diverse languages can foster inclusivity and multilingualism. In multilingual settings, language policy and planning play a crucial role in shaping language roles. Stakeholders should consider factors like language rights, community needs, and social justice when assigning roles to languages. By doing so, they can promote harmonious co-existence and effective communication among languages, contributing to a more equitable and diverse society.

What is social inclusion?

Social inclusion is a process that ensures all citizens have the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, social and cultural life. It encompasses equal access to facilities, services and benefits, and aims to enhance opportunities, access to resources, voice and respect for rights for disadvantaged groups. Key aspects of social inclusion include:

- Improving the terms of participation in society, particularly for disadvantaged people.
- Enhancing opportunities, access to resources, voice and respect for rights.
- Tackling social exclusion by removing barriers to participation and taking active inclusionary steps.
- Enabling people or communities to fully participate in society.

Social inclusion is multidimensional, encompassing social, political, cultural and economic dimensions. It is relational, arising from unequal power relations in social interactions, and dynamic, impacting people in various ways over time. Promoting social inclusion involves enabling socially excluded groups to be included in society as a means of relieving their needs and helping them re-adjust and re-integrate. It also includes raising awareness, challenging discrimination, and encouraging development of talents and capabilities of all members of a community.

Language and social exclusion

As has been argued above, inclusive language usage at all times shapes social relationships and promotes good neighbourliness, but non-inclusive language usage can be a tool of social exclusion, marginalising individuals and groups who do not speak the dominant language or dialect. Thus, language can be used to include or exclude individuals from social, economic, and political opportunities. In addition, language is closely tied to power dynamics, with dominant groups often using language to maintain their position of power. While evidence to affirm this submission as regards the dynamics of political activities in Nigeria may not be readily available, this may be the case elsewhere in other parts of the world where dominant languages exist and lord it over minority languages.

Bourdieu (1991) argues that language is a form of symbolic capital, used to reinforce social hierarchies. Those who speak the dominant language or dialect are often granted greater access to resources and opportunities, while those who do not are marginalised. Addressing language-based social exclusion requires a critical examination of language ideologies and power dynamics, as well as efforts to promote language diversity and inclusivity.

What is inclusive language use?

Inclusive language use refers to the use of words and phrases that avoid biases, slang, and expressions that discriminate against groups of people based on race, religion, gender, socioeconomic status, and ability. Put differently, inclusive language refers to language choices that are sensitive to and respectful of diverse identities, backgrounds, and experiences. It aims to avoid language that could marginalise, exclude, or offend individuals or groups based on characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, age, socioeconomic

status, or other factors. But the opposite is the case in most language usage involving people, be it educated or fairly educated alike. The non-inclusive use of language is even more rampant among politicians, government officials, journalists, media practitioners, religious leaders, business men and women, and language users from all walks of life. As has been said among several variables that are considered to be proxies for social inclusion/exclusion are race, sexual preference, class, whether privileged or outcast, social standing, etc. Examples of inclusive language include using gender-neutral terms, avoiding stereotypes, respecting preferred pronouns, and being mindful of the impact of words on different communities. It's about creating an environment where everyone feels valued, seen, and respected.

In most speeches that have been adjudged as exemplar of language inclusivity, the use of pronominals such as “you”, “we” “I”, “us”, etc was very common and it became apparent that the writers of such speeches have mastered the ways of using the language in a way that the people are held spellbound to believe that they are very important and that the speaker means so well for them. This is typical of most politicians or statemen in history. In addition, certain lexical items feature prominently that a simple frequency count will reveal their dominance in the speeches. Examples of these lexical items are “fellow” “folks” “people”, “you all” “team”, “our country/our nation”, etc. Perhaps an example of such a speech in recent history is the short speech recently released by President Joe Biden of America to announce his stepping down from the ongoing presidential race in the United States of America. Let us consider the following statements from President Joe Biden’s speech to announce his standing down from the presidential race on the 21st of July, 2024.

Read Mr. Biden's full letter here:

My Fellow Americans,

Over the past three and a half years, we have made great progress as a Nation.

Today, America has the strongest economy in the world. We've made historic investments in rebuilding our Nation, in lowering prescription drug costs for seniors, and in expanding affordable health care to a record number of Americans. We've provided critically needed care to a million veterans exposed to toxic substances. Passed the first gun safety law in 30 years. Appointed the first African American woman to the Supreme Court. And passed the most important climate legislation in the history of the world. America has never been better positioned to lead than we are today.

I know none of this could have been done without you, the American people. Together, we overcame a once in a century pandemic and the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. We've protected and preserved our Democracy. And we've revitalized and strengthened our alliances around the world.

It has been the greatest honor of my life to serve as your President. And while it has been my intention to seek reelection, I believe it is in the best interest of my party and the country for me to stand down and to focus solely on fulfilling my duties as President for the remainder of my term.

I will speak to the Nation later this week in more detail about my decision.

For now, let me express my deepest gratitude to all those who have worked so hard to see me reelected. I want to thank Vice President Kamala Harris for being an extraordinary partner in all this work. And let me express my heartfelt appreciation to the American people for the faith and trust you have placed in me.

I believe today what I always have: that there is nothing America can't do — when we do it together. We just have to remember we are the United States of America.

Considering the texture of this short speech, the following extracts testify to the fact that President Joe Biden or his speech writers have mastered the art of inclusive language use in the way and manner the speech has been crafted.

- a. My Fellow Americans
- b. ...we have made great progress as a nation
- c. We've made historic investments...
- d. We have provided critically needed care...
- e. I know none of these have been done without you, the American people
- f. Together, we overcame a once in a country pandemic...
- g. It has been the greatest honor of my life to serve as your President.
- h. I believe it is in the best interest of my party and the country...
- i. I believe today...: there is nothing America can't do – when we do it together.
- j. We just have to remember we are the United States of America.

It is important to ensure inclusivity when we use language because it tends to improve communication and collaboration; inclusive language breaks down barriers, building trust and mutual respect among colleagues. By speaking with an inclusive voice in external communications, organisations can experience a lift in their reputation and the perception of their brand.

Another index of inclusivity in language use is the use of gender-neutral terms. Gender-neutral terms are words that do not imply or suggest a specific gender identity or expression. For example, instead of using "he" or "she" as pronouns, you can use "they" or "them" as singular or plural pronouns. Instead of using "chairman" or "chairwoman" as a title, you can use "chair" or "chairperson" In the same vein, inclusive language use can be promoted in schools and in dealing with students, notwithstanding this is not within the purview of this paper. Using gendered language such as 'girls and boys', 'ladies and gentlemen' can be alienating for gender non-conforming and gender diverse students. This can be avoided by adopting vocabularies such as 'students' 'class', 'crew', 'everyone' 'people', etc. which are more inclusive and gender-neutral.

Language use for social inclusion

As has been emphasised in this keynote paper, language is a powerful tool that plays a crucial role in shaping social interactions, relationships, and inclusion within society. The way we communicate, the words we choose, and the languages we speak can significantly impact how

individuals are perceived, accepted, and included in various social settings. To this end, by using inclusive language, individuals can create a more welcoming and respectful environment that values diversity and promotes social inclusion. Inclusive language acknowledges and respects the identities, experiences, and perspectives of all individuals, regardless of their background, gender, race, or abilities.

Language use significantly affects social inclusion by shaping interactions, relationships, and opportunities within society. The way language is employed can either facilitate or hinder social inclusion. Inclusive language that respects diversity and avoids discrimination promotes a welcoming environment where individuals feel valued and accepted. On the other hand, discriminatory language, stereotypes, and exclusionary remarks can perpetuate prejudice, create divisions, and marginalise certain groups, hindering the development of inclusive communities. Therefore, language plays a crucial role in either fostering social inclusion by promoting respect and understanding or impeding it by reinforcing social hierarchies and exclusionary practices.

Conversely, language can also be a barrier to social inclusion when it is used in a discriminatory or exclusionary manner. Stereotypes, derogatory language, and discriminatory remarks can perpetuate prejudice, reinforce social hierarchies, and marginalise certain groups within society. Such language not only creates divisions but also hinders the development of inclusive communities where all individuals feel valued and respected.

Strategies for promoting social inclusion through language use

To promote social inclusion through language use, individuals and communities can adopt various strategies that foster respect, understanding, and empathy. Some of these strategies include:

1. **Educating and raising awareness:** By educating individuals about the impact of language on social inclusion and raising awareness about the importance of using inclusive language, we can promote a more inclusive and respectful society.
2. **Promoting multilingualism:** Embracing multilingualism and recognising the value of different languages can help bridge communication gaps, foster cultural exchange, and create a more inclusive environment for individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds. This is even more encouraged in a multilingual situation like we have in Nigeria.
3. **Challenging stereotypes and biases:** By challenging stereotypes, biases, and discriminatory language, we can work towards dismantling harmful narratives and promoting a more inclusive and equitable society where all individuals are valued for who they are.
4. **Creating safe spaces for dialogue:** Establishing safe spaces for open and respectful dialogue can encourage individuals to share their experiences, perspectives, and concerns, leading to greater understanding, empathy, and social cohesion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, language plays a significant role in promoting social inclusion by shaping how individuals interact, communicate, and relate to one another. By advocating and using inclusive language, challenging stereotypes, and fostering dialogue, we can create a more inclusive society where diversity, linguistic and otherwise, as we have it in Nigeria, is celebrated, and all individuals feel valued and respected. It is through conscious efforts to promote inclusive language use that we can build a more equitable and harmonious world where everyone has the opportunity to thrive and contribute to the richness of our shared humanity.

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