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Linguistic Codes for Security and Social Stability in Urhoboland: Implications for the Translator

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This paper posits that every language is characterized by linguistic codes needed by speakers for their security, identity, and social stability in today's doubtless several security issues. In Urhoboland, such codes manifest in spoken and extra-linguistic forms with varying degree of meanings to different people at various times and places. The paper explores, among other conceivable objectives, some salient linguistic codes which the forebears of the Urhobo people did not pass on the younger generations as well as their translatability. The theoretical framework underlying the discussion hinges on Bernstein (1971) sociolinguistic theory of language codes which is cognate with language use. Taking cognizance of Urhobo believe systems, their social-cultural and religious practices continue to exert considerable challenges in translation studies as well as their importance to the people in contemporary times. Moreover, a large corpus of interviews and participant observation methods subsist in gathering and analysing relevant data for the research. Finally, the paper concludes that all linguistic codes in Urhoboland manifest themselves in socio-cultural contexts through which the people gather experiences for concentration, attention, and as a panacea for staying out of trouble.

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INTRODUCTION

Evwierhoma's (2014) quest for knowledge about Urhobo reveal that the people occupy a strategic position in the modern configuration of the Niger Delta. Historical reports detail their migration from Benin through the wetlands of present-day Rivers and Bayelsa states to their present location in Delta state, Nigeria. This brought about two emergent notions of the Urhobo people: as one ethnic group and different indigenous polities. According to Ekeh (2006) cited by Evwierhoma (2014), we do have a legitimate ground for proposing that Urhobo country was long settled before the first arrival of the Portuguese in the Western Niger Delta in the early 1480s. Therefore, that the Urhobo people had lived in their various settlements for several centuries before the colonial contact is quite certain.

Both written and oral languages are cognitive instruments that enable members of a given race to use the vocabulary, grammar, and phonology to actualize speech. They also help, through the use of linguistic codes to actualize meanings (Aaron and Joshi, 2006). However, they are synonymous with traffic signs which every road user needs to know in order to enhance safety of lives and properties. In like manner, linguistic codes in most African traditional societies are significant for co-operate existence of man; lack of such knowledge and nonchalant attitude towards them could result in sanctions, fines, and sacrifices to appease the gods in order to avoid misfortune, hence, Urhobo people continue to harness their rich cultural resources and language from possible extinction.

Central to Urhobo religious practices, beliefs, thoughts, myths, and worldviews are spiritual forces believed to exist in natural phenomenal bodies of water, trees, plants, traditional grounds, and the like. These spirits are pervasive forces whose powers encompass nearly all aspects of Urhobo life (Foss, 2004). The veneration of these spirit beings and believe systems have brought into existence the use of linguistic codes in their cultural practices and social settings believed to be relevant for security, identity, and social

stability. In comparison with the Yoruba society, Coker (2018) argues vehemently that culture is the unwritten constitution of the society. It is a guide to morality, a determiner of ethics, and a paradigm of interpersonal relationship. Furthermore, Urhobo oral traditions revealed that lack of knowledge or non-adherence to such linguistic phenomenon has led to the death of some people in the society. For instance, there is always a sign or symbolic code to alert members of a given society that *igbu* 'warrior-murderers' have laid ambush in the environs. One may guess its consequence to a non-initiated person about this culture.

The lack of intergenerational transmission of such indigenous knowledge can result in the non-reproduction of culture and knowledge in each successive generation (Corsaro, 1997), given that continuity and change of cultures over generations are affected by cultural transmission (Trommsdorff, 2008). Linguistic codes have become an all-embracing area of study in literature, hermeneutics, and psychology. To be adjudged competent in a language, the speaker should be able to use the idioms, proverbs, wise sayings, and other indigenous knowledge systems of the people which are always passed by word of mouth from one generation to another. Onibere (2016) attesting to the origin of these practices agrees that:

Many of the bearers of indigenous knowledge are from the older generation and now find it difficult to communicate their beliefs and practices to the scientifically educated younger generation, once the older generation passes away the knowledge disappears with them (p. 136).

The data collected from interviewees for this study may look controversial to the Christians who may consider them as anecdotal and barbaric practices due to their imported cultural norms system acquired through Western education and Globalization. The objectives of this study are three folds. First, it aims at exhuming Urhobo indigenous knowledge on linguistic codes in the domain of oral tradition, religion, and mythology

needed to enhance security and peaceful coexistence among the Urhobo in an era fraught with insurgences. In addition, the study according to Igun (2014) will help in the cultural preservation of indigenous arts and the oral history of the Urhobo people. Finally, it exposes the public to those salient cultural practices which the younger generations could not learn from their forefathers and their translations from the source language, Urhobo to the target language, English.

With the above goals in mind and for ease of referencing, the paper is discussed under eight sub-headings. The introductory section launches into the main stream of our discourse. Section two examines the theoretical framework of the research and in section three the concept of code in linguistics and anthropological studies shall be examined. Section four presents the research methods in their entirety. Section five is poised to examine the role of translation in the teaching and learning of these culture-bound linguistic codes and symbols in Urhoboland. In section six we present and discuss the research data wholesomely. In section seven, attention is paid to the research findings and finally, section eight synthesizes all argument in sub-headings above.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The research is grounded on Bernstein (1971) sociolinguistic theory of language codes which projects how language is used in everyday communication to reflect and shape the belief systems of a given social group and how they affect speakers' use of language. Consequently, the way language is used in a particular society affects the way people assign meaning to objects about which they refer or speak about. Littlejohn (2002) agrees also that people learn their place in the world by virtues of the linguistic codes they use. Bernstein (1971) also maintains inter alia that the code a person uses indeed symbolizes their social identity. This brings us to two typologies of language codes: elaborated and restricted codes.

In elaborated code, the speaker does not assume that the listener shares the same views spoken about with him. In restricted code however, the speaker shows mastery of the topic thereby,

making it more explicit and thorough without leaving the listener in doubt on the objects spoken about. Its relevance could be gleaned from the domains of shared and believed knowledge amongst speakers, its economical nature, and richness in practice. Summarizing the importance of restricted code, Atherton (2002) conveys a vast meaning about a given code with a complex set of connotations that acts like an index, pointing to the hearer a lot more information which remains unsaid.

THE CONCEPT OF CODE IN LINGUISTIC AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDIES

The head-word *code* in the topic needs authoritative definition. Hornby (2010) identifies code as a system of words, letters, numbers, or symbols that represent a message or record information secretly or in a shorter form. This definition is in harmony with research in the sciences and humanities. Relatively important too is that it foregrounds linguistic studies – as a system of words and in anthropology, as a study of symbols. From our understanding of the above definition of code, there is an absolute need to add symbols to the scope of our research: codes and symbols; one is abstract and the other concrete.

In this study, code refers to operational sets of verbal linguistic codes used by Urhobo people in disseminating security information which permeate indigenous belief of the people. Symbols according to Otite (2011) are agents which are impregnated with message and with invitation to conform and to act when decoded in their social and cultural context found to have both cognitive and emotional meanings. This definition implies that there are multiplicities of symbols in Urhoboland with different interpretations. Sometimes, an erroneous interpretation may depend on the interpreter's consciousness and intelligence vis-à-vis the societal convention. Consequently, the meaning attached to a given symbol in community "A" may be different from the one in community clan "B" and vice versa.

Linguistic codes and symbols therefore, are integral part of Urhobo worldviews and other

African societies before the advent of Western education in Urhoboland. Apart from the religious beliefs of the people, they are still renowned for their observance of taboos, rituals, and other cultural practices involving the use of signs and symbolic utterances (Anthony, 2015). Consequently, to understand the social and cultural practices of the Urhobo, it is pertinent to think of symbols as independent objects which enable objects and actions to have meaning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

There are twenty-four clans (it could also be referred to as kingdoms) in Urhoboland with different polity and cultural diversities. Consequently, Agbarho and Agbon clans are chosen as representative populations of study because indigenes from both clans speak the same dialect and have similar cultural practices. The methods employed in gathering research data for the study are interview and participant observations. Both approaches are aimed at exploring in depth humanistic focus on the broad topic. First, the interview method involved eleven (10) community leaders randomly selected and inter-subjectively interviewed. In all, the interviewees consist of six male and five females, and were drawn from different clans, in order to have a representative sample from the different sub-units in Urhoboland. With the exception of one male, all the interviewees are within the age bracket 60-90, an age bracket adjudged to be embodiment of knowledge and archive of Urhobo language and cultures. However, the initial data guided us in shaping our questions with the other interviewees.

Burgess et al. (1988) state unequivocally that in qualitative research of this magnitude, one explores the realities of everyday life as they are experiences explained by the people who live with them. This is the relevance of participatory research method also explored in the work. The method is cross-cultural and establishes context for dialogue as well as providing much scope for emphatic understanding of the data canvassed for in this discourse. Content analyses involved regular interaction with the data which involves

glossing, translation, context analyses, and embedded meaning from Urhobo to English Language.

RELEVANCE OF TRANSLATION IN THE DISSEMINATION OF LINGUISTIC CODES IN URHOBOLAND

The relevance of translation and its theoretical definition are necessary at this point. According to Catford (1965) quoted by Oyeleye (1995), translation is the replacement of lexical material in one language (source language) by equivalent textual material in another language (Target Language). In this definition, Catford distinguishes between “full” translation and “partial translation. In full translation, the entire text is submitted to the translation process. That means every part of the SL (Source Language) text is replaced by TL (Target Language) text material while in partial translation, some parts of the SL text are either left untranslated or incorporated in the TL text as partial translation.

According to Ajunwa (2017), translation performs a wide range of useful functions in a globalized multilingual and multicultural world. Since the topic being examined here is culture based, translation could play a leading role in the teaching and learning of the salient linguistic codes and symbols in Urhobo. To buttress this point, many Europeans and Americans did not know much about the traditions of the people in the third world countries until they read their literatures, especially traditional or oral literatures translated or transliterated into English and other European languages (see Andindilile, 2011). Based on this analysis, translation could help to propagate Urhobo linguistic codes and symbols to the non-initiated public. Its implication to this study could be gleaned from Larson (1998) standpoint:

Culture is a complex of beliefs, attitudes, values, and rules which a group of people share. The writer of the source document assumed the beliefs, attitudes, values, and rules of the audience for which he wrote. The translator will need to understand the source text and adequately translate it for people

who have a different set of beliefs, attitudes, values, and rules (p. 470).

Despite the seeming coherent system that man's universal culture appears to show, there are peculiar and autonomous entities involved and since in translation cultural features of the SL need to be rendered in the TL, it seems to us that full translation is an ideal suggestion for translating all culture bound linguistic codes and symbols. Agbogun & Ifesieh (2011) arguing on culture – bound phraseologies suggest five ways a translator can adequately face the challenges posed by culture-bound source texts. Three of those approaches are relevant here. They are: paraphrasing, translation by adaptation, and the integrated approach.

Translation by paraphrase is the first conceivable approach suggested in translating Urhobo linguistic codes and symbols. Translatologists recommend that when an equivalent culture related item cannot be found or when it seems inappropriate in a target language, probably due to stylistic preferences of the source language, the translator could resort to use different lexical items to express more or less the same idea as in the source language (Cozma, 2022).

Another strategy worthy of mention is translation by adaptation. Since meanings of linguistic codes and symbols are unattainable in the target language due to non-correspondence of habits and customs of the target audience, either because the meaning of the word is unparaphrasable or due to stylistic reasons, such expressions could generally be adapted to suit the cultural expectation of the target audience (Sukmaningrum et al., 2022; Assaqaf, 2016).

Finally, the integrated approach can also stand the test of time in translating all linguistic codes and symbols. This approach follows the global paradigm in which a translator's global vision of the source text has primary importance. Such an approach focuses from the macro to micro level in accordance with the principle which states that an analysis of parts cannot provide an understanding of the whole (Snell-Hornby, 1988). Thus,

translation studies are essentially concerned with a web of relationships, the importance of individual items decided by their relevance within the target context: text, situation, and culture. The application of all preceding approaches to teaching and learning makes translation a discipline for disseminating information from one culture into another.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

The data presented below for discussion in this discourse are in two categories: five on linguistic codes and same on symbols – all based on the security and peace of the micro and macro societies in Urhoboland. All data are presented in Urhobo, glossed, translated and their contextual meanings explained for clarity.

Linguistic Codes in Urhoboland

Linguistic codes are common cultures in Urhoboland, and the coding of thoughts vary from one kingdom to another, howbeit minimally. These codes have not been transferred from the older generation, as the younger generation are unaware of them, hence the need for their documentation, part of which this study seeks to achieve. As opined by one of the respondents, the lack of intergenerational transmission may be attributed to the forefathers' myopic security importance about them by one of the respondents. In this subsection, we examine selected veiled expressions (linguistic codes) associated with security in Urhobo. The examples include glosses, translations and encoded meanings as present.

Isɔn ɔhɔ ɔtɔ

Gloss: A Fowl excreta is on the ground.

Translation: A traitor is around.

Embedded meaning: This expression is a verbal linguistic code or phrase used for alerting members in a gathering of the presence of the presence of a perceived traitor and the need to take precaution in what they say or do. As noted by one of the respondents, the expression grossly signifies the entrance of a strange person known to be a perpetual “*ogbejugbeje*” or “*ovwerhia*”,

(reporter, traitor) or someone popularly known as “*Aproko*” in the Warri/Sapele variety of the Nigerian Pidgin English (a tale bearer). As the code is uttered by a member of the group, the topic of discussion is changed until such a person leaves. Apprehensive of such insinuation, he/she feels uncomfortable to participate further in the discussion. Thus, the expression does not correspond to a secret language, as the perceived antagonist is very much aware of the state of things. Another possible function of such expression then is its potential to force the antagonist to retrace his or her steps, as rightly opined by one of the respondents, ‘he/she has no option but to retrace his/her steps in shame’.

Isi ogba

Gloss: Pigs are in the garden.

Translation: Thieves or armed robbers are in the vicinity.

Embedded meaning: This linguistic code is a secret language employed by community “*Inotus*” (town criers) to alert the villagers of the presence of thieves or armed robbers. According to Mr. Ighofose, from Oguname, Agbarho, whoever suspects a criminal in the village raises alarm by shouting “*Isi ogba!*” as many times as possible. Whoever hears it comes out with weapons of war to chase away or possibly catch the criminals and whatever happens thereafter is not to our knowledge.

Ajomaso!

Gloss: Night people are around.

Translation: Thieves are in the village.

Embedded meaning: From participant observation’s point of view, we grew up to understand that this code is used to inform villagers of the presence of robbers or *Igbu* ‘warriors’ from other ethnic nationalities or clans. Thus, it alerts the villagers to be battle-ready and also that all able-bodied men should be ready for war and in no distant time, the men folks keep night vigil in readiness for open confrontation with the “night people”.

Orho mre evun

Gloss: The town is pregnant.

Translation: Trouble is brewing in the community.

Embedded meaning: This is a metaphoric code of insecurity employed by elders, especially in town hall meetings. The spokesman in the gathering uses this code to inform his kinsmen of a serious problem brewing in the community like mysterious death of a villager in the bush. This code when sounded alerts all and sundry to be careful in their daily activities and utterances with members of other communities until anticipated insecurity issues at stake are resolved, as explained by the interviewee, Chief Obukoadata. According to him, if the present generation of Urhobo youth is sensitized on the security implications of linguistic codes, Nigeria and Africa at large will be ridden of insurgences.

Irehwo! Koi!

Gloss: Run for your life

Translation: Take refuge.

Embedded meaning: This code is more onomatopoeic than metaphoric, and it is strictly uttered by an “*Ogbu*” (confirmed murderer) to signify his readiness either to kill or to indicate that he has already killed somebody, usually from a neighbouring community. According to Olorogun Ukere from Okpara-Inland, in Agbon Clan, and the Director of Urhobo language Centre, Abraka, whenever an aggressive man makes such utterances without fear of intimidation, it means he is in possession of dangerous weapons ready to kill, injure, or maim whoever comes close to him. This view was also corroborated by the interviewee, Chief Mrs. Akpojene of Okurekpo, Agbon clan. In view of this, bystanders are expected to be careful in relating with the person at that moment.

Cultural Symbols in Urhoboland

For a rigorous examination of cultural symbols in Urhoboland with a view to ensuring the validity

of facts gathered for this research, we also proceeded to collect data which were subjected to an elaborate error analysis on the basis of which we arrived at relatively valid arguments on the following prevailing symbols in Urhoboland:

i. *Orhẹ rẹ a kọn gaviotọ:*

Gloss: Plantain planted upside down.

Translation: Plantain planted abnormally.

Embedded meaning: The primacy of plantain in Africa is well articulated in the people's culture. It is a staple crop cultivated by planting the sucker, most especially around a compound or on a farmland. According to Chief Dr Onojete, whenever a plantain is planted upside down at the outskirt of a community, entrance to a compound or on a piece of land, it portends war zone and bad omen to all concerned. The responses gathered from our respondents confirmed that it actualizes danger. Below are some peculiarities of this phenomenon.

First, when planted at the outskirt of a community it alerts inter-tribal war, and immediately it is observed, the "*Okpako rẹ orho*" (Eldest man) sends a town crier to inform the villagers of an impending war with an unknown community. Thereafter, everybody is summoned to a meeting in the eldest man's house where the villagers are advised to be security conscious and stay indoors till the gods of the land are consulted to verify the perpetrators before sending "*Igbu*" (Murderers) to fetch them out from their hideouts.

Second, when planted upside down on a farm land, it means that such a parcel of land is under siege. The owner of the said property finds out from his immediate neighbours to ascertain whom he has offended but if he goes ahead nonchalantly, he may die mysteriously or be maimed. Finally, if planted in front of a compound, it means that warriors are planning to invade the occupants. Therefore, any person imbued with this culture quits such a compound till the problem is sought out and settled. Most times, the occupants are advised to quit such a compound.

Ovwen

Gloss: Young palm fronts.

Translation: Tender palm fronts.

Embedded meaning: "*Ovwen*" is sacred and dynamic in Urhobo culture. It is usually placed on the entrance to shrines but when tied to the entrance of a house, around a tree, the entrance to a forest or at a cross junction, it symbolizes that a deity is being worshipped there. Most often than not, it could mean the presence of spiritism. In addition, it is also tied to any vehicle carrying corpse. The interviewee, Chief Egworo of Ovu-Inland, Agbon kingdom claims that the use of "*ovwen*" is dynamic to every culture. When tied on both front and back of a vehicle it implies that the vehicle is conveying a corpse from one place to another either to be deposited in a morgue or for interment. Consequently, it alerts every one of the contents (corpse) of the vehicle. It must be emphasized here that no policeman dares subject such a vehicle for search. According to Mrs. Onomimuobo from Oherere, when such a vehicle is used as an Ambulance, it is capable of converting any form of danger on the road to joy till the corpse gets to its final destination.

Oghriki (Tamarisk)

Gloss: A (tamasisk) tree in front of a compound.

Translation: A cultural tree representing the gods.

Embedded meaning: According to Arererian (2008), oghriki is the symbol of God that people plant in their compound and it is a symbol of protection. It is commonly found in every shrine in Urhoboland but if planted upside down elsewhere, it symbolizes danger and invitation for war. In effect, it means that the place is unsafe to live in. "*Oghriki*" is also a symbol of ownership of land popularly referred to as "*oto rẹ orho*" (community playground).

Oda rẹ a chọrọphiyo otọ yanjovwo

Gloss: cutlass pinned to the ground.

Translation: A cutlass pinned to the ground and abandoned.

Embedded meaning: A cutlass found in such state, according to the interviewee Dr. Akpomadaye from Agbarho clan and corroborated by other respondents, it is either a harbinger of danger or probably someone is planning to invade the land. On noticing such an unusual culture, the people consult their gods and diviners. If proven positive and they are battle ready then the cutlass could be removed from that spot while the villagers lay ambush waiting for the intruders. If on the contrary, they seek ways to appease the gods by way of averting an imminent war.

Okpọ rẹ igbu rẹ a chorophiyọ otọ

Gloss: Igbu walking stick pinned to the ground.

Translation: Igbu staff of office pinned to the ground.

Embedded meaning: *Igbu*'s staff whenever pinned to the ground and left in that spot in any part of Urhoboland is a taboo and symbolizes danger. In Ughievwen kingdom, according to interviewee Darah, whoever has an axe to grind with his neighbour in the community, he may decide to invite the "*Igbu*" court to summon the opposition for peace talks. If he refuses to honour the invitation, the messengers of the "*Igbu*" court pay visit to occupants of such compound and pin their staff there after several failed warnings. This makes the place unsafe for people to live in. After seven days interval everybody in the compound is expected to pack out to avoid the wrath of the "*igbu*". Thus, "*igbu*'s staff in Urhoboland is generally regarded as a symbol of war. Observance of all linguistic codes and symbols are more security assuring than community policing noticeable in every nook and cranny in contemporary Nigeria.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Resulting from the research data presented under linguistic codes and symbols, the following findings have emerged:

- that the present generation of Urhobo people blame their insecurity woes on our forefathers for their failure to bequeath such linguistic codes and symbols to them as their cultural heritage,
- that linguistic codes and symbols pervade the twenty-four kingdoms of Urhoboland except that they are not mutually understood by the addresses due to migration from one kingdom to another and dialectical issues therein,
- that the present generation of Urhobo youth are in dire reverence for such linguistic norms in Urhoboland,
- that to be more security conscious in our contemporary unsecured society, translation could be helpful in spreading the contentious linguistic codes and symbols from Urhobo cultural worldviews to another through teaching and learning,
- finally, that through participation method the researchers did not equivocate all data presented and enunciated in this study. Rather, we suggest total adherence to both linguistic codes and symbols with a view to ensuring more security and social stability of the people more effectively than the present call for community policing across Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

In this research, attempts have been made to expose few among the numerous linguistic codes and symbols in Urhoboland. The data presented revealed that all issues raised and discussed are in anthropology and linguistics field of study. Hence, all data were subjected to critical cultural and linguistic analyses. As efforts are being made to save Urhobo language and culture from the pangs of extinction by all and sundry concerned stakeholders should pander to linguistic codes and symbols as inseparable aspects of language teaching and learning. While language reveals what is important in a culture, the former shapes the later. Moreover, we are not overwhelmed to have succeeded providing partial exposition of linguistic codes and symbols in Urhoboland. It is

however plausible to assert that we only join the rank and files of researchers in Urhobo language and cultural studies to restore all forgotten security practices. Finally, translation practice shall continue to be an asset for the propagation of both aforementioned linguistic and cultural worldviews of the Urhobo people to the larger communities.

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