

Sociolinguistic Study of Language, Social Identity and Behavioural Patterns of Keke Operators in Lafia Metropolis

Tanimu Yusuf, PhD; and Chidinma Esther Nwaobasi

Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Nasarawa State University, Keffi.

Corresponding author: tanimuy@nsuk.edu.ng

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Abstract

It is safe to state that sociolinguistics is a study of the language identity and behaviour of a speaker. Such a study of sociolinguistics will normally and apparently rely on the individual's considerable conscious or unconscious degree of choice of the linguistic variables or forms they use in their daily speech. These choices could make essential contribution to the indexing of personal stance, identity, and communicative function of language use since the belief is that language(s) do not exist outside the societies in which they are used. 'Sociolinguistic study of language, social identity, and behavioural patterns of keke operators in Lafia metropolis is a study of how tricycle operators, called 'keke napep' construct their social identity through their linguistic patterns to suit their job. The study also identified the linguistic behaviours and peculiarities of the group. Being a qualitative study, a primary approach was employed with the deployment of a participant observatory method. The ethnography of communication was applied as the basis of the framework of the study, which relied on first-hand observations of the behaviour of the keke operators. The framework itself was an adaptation of the Sapir-Whorf theory of relativity hypothesis concerned with social problems that invade the field of language. The findings showed that language served the function of social identity and aspiration, while the environment in which the group operate does influence their speech, behaviour, and attitude.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, Social Identity, Language, Behavioural, Metropolis, Keke Operators, Ethnography, Communication.

Introduction

Language is by no means an asset that man has; it is used to mark man's identity, express his thought, and preserve his culture. Bloch and Trager (5) state that language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates. Thus, language is a social tool of communication in which important aspects of social behaviour and interaction is conveyed.

The study in this paper is a showcase of the language of members of society with respect to their occupation. The language of the members of a society is usually a speech system that comes in varying forms which may show differences of social status, education, ethnicity, occupation, residency, linguistic background, and many others. This shows the importance of language in terms of its social role in a society and as a social institution. A language is what the members of a particular group speak, but this can take many forms; many

speakers may use more than a language in each speech situation. Indeed, this goes to indicate that language and society are so intertwined that we see people use it in different social situations as well as in different social contexts.

Nature of Lafia in Nasarawa State

Lafia, known as 'Lafian Bare-bari,' serves as the capital city of Nasarawa State, North-central Nigeria. Historically attributed to Muhammadu Dunama's founding in the late 17th century atop a Koro (Migili) village, the town later evolved into a prominent local chiefdom (McKenna 45). The reign of Mohamman Agwai (1881–1903) marked a significant period for Lafia, with its market becoming a vital trading center in the Benue Valley. This era witnessed the opening of trade routes, such as the one to Loko, a Benue River port, boosting Lafia's economic importance (McKenna 50).

Under British colonial rule, Chief Musa was recognized as Lafia's first Emir in 1903, solidifying its status within the Lafia Division of Benue Province. Subsequent administrative changes saw Lafia integrated into Benue-Plateau state in 1967 and later allocated to Plateau state in 1976 (McKenna 50).

Lafia's demographic composition reflects Nigeria's diverse cultural landscape, with populations primarily composed of the Eggon, Alago, Kanuri, Rindre, Aho, and Koro ethnic groups, alongside sizable Igbo, Hausa, and Mwaghavul settlers, among others (McKenna 51). This cultural mosaic has transformed Lafia into a microcosm of Nigeria, fostering interethnic coexistence and interaction.

Economically, Lafia thrives through a variety of activities. While historically rooted in agriculture, with farming, livestock rearing, and agro-processing as mainstays, the city has evolved into a bustling commercial hub. Its markets pulsate with trade, catering to both local needs and regional commerce. Furthermore, Lafia's strategic location and infrastructural advancements have attracted diverse economic ventures, fueling its ongoing phase of development (net).

A notable aspect of Lafia's cultural dynamics is the linguistic assimilation witnessed among its inhabitants, exemplified by the adoption of Hausa among Kanuri speakers. This linguistic convergence reflects the city's role as a melting pot of cultural exchange, where identities evolve amidst interethnic interactions.

In a broader context, the prevalence of Hausa language and culture extends beyond Lafia, encompassing various regions of Northern Nigeria and Southern Republic of Niger. The historical emirates of Kano, Katsina, Daura, Zaria, and Gobir serve as epicenters of Hausa culture, stemming from their incorporation into the Sokoto caliphate following the Fulani Jihad led by Usman Shehu Danfodio in the early 19th century (Suleiman 2 in Adamu 4).

Tricycle (*Keke Napep*) Operation in Nigeria and Lafia

The then military administration of Lagos State in the 90s, under Colonel Buba Marwa, in the General Abacha regime, first introduced tricycles, also commonly referred to as 'keke',

as additional means of city commercial transportation complementing what already existed as taxis and 'okada' (motorcycle transportation) at the time in Lagos. This additional means of city commercial transport means was at the time given the name 'keke Marwa' (note that 'keke' though borrowed from Hausa is Yoruba for bicycle but indicating motorcycle or tricycle, to be precise). Thereafter, and by the time of President Olusegun Obasanjo the name was changed to 'keke NAPEP' - the NAPEP is an acronym for National Agency for Poverty Eradication Programme during the Obasanjo civilian regime which saw to the provision of tricycles all over the states of Nigeria as additional but cheaper alternative means of commercial transportation business meant to empower teeming unemployed youths.

In Lafia, keke operation started in 2012 under the then Governor Tanko Al-Makura, albeit its operation had begun during the previous regimes of Governors Abdullahi Adamu and Aliyu Akwe Doma respectively, but sparingly. Before 2012, the only prevalent means of transportation was by motorcycle which was commonly known as 'Going'. The model of motorcycle for the 'Going' were the Suzuki and Yamaha brands of the 'ladies' machine' for which women did not have to cross their legs akimbo but sat sideways with their legs closed. It is worthy to note that 2012 is instructive because this was the time that many inner-city roads and good road network would be opened and ongoing in Lafia. With the development of the construction access roads within Lafia metropolis, many motorcycle operators sold and replaced their motorcycles by joining the tricycle operation business which was more lucrative because of the convenience and comfort it gives to the passenger.

Statement of the Problem/Objectives

Given this outcome and against the backdrop that this tricycle operators are essentially members of the broad social group who have over time carved a unique language niche for themselves, it appears there are signs of different forms of language usage which seemingly mark their social identity. Thus, it will be safe to also state that commercial transport operators are certainly aware of the public assessment of their way of life. They know that that the society to which they belong is skeptical about their morals grounds and there is the tendency to brand their language as dirty talk, street language, garage slang, through which the influence of language in the understanding of who is a member of the commercial transport community is unmistakable.

Conceptual Review

This section of the paper will account for review of some basic concepts associated with the topic of the study. Therefore, below are the reviews of various conceptual aspects of the topic.

Sociolinguistics

Various conceptions have been made on the term sociolinguistics which is commonly known as a study of linguistics and sociolinguistics. Spolsky (32) conceives sociolinguistics as a branch of linguistics and sociology which examines the individual and social variation of language. A take from the definition is that sociolinguistics is a study of language in the context of two disciplines- linguistics and sociology. On the other hand, another take from the definition is that sociolinguistics is a study of the social variation of language. The belief here is that, just as there is a regional variation of language which gives information about the place of the speaker, social variation of language easily talks about the roles performed by a speaker within one community. On his part, Hudson (28) considers sociolinguistics as branch of sociology showing the relationship between language use and the social basis for such use. This gives a sense of how the study in sociolinguistics is about the effect of society on language.

According to Wardhaugh, sociolinguistics is the study of stylistics and social variation of language (24). While an aspect of this conception seems like the conception of Stolsky above, the ideal here is on the specific use of language by an individual, a given topic or area of human engagement often defined by its linguistics features. Thus, we see in this case the individual style, the subject style, the profession style as some of the goals of the study of sociolinguistics. To Hudson (54), sociolinguistics shows how groups in each society are separated by certain social variables like ethnicity, religion, status, gender, age, and level education. One sees in this conception the preoccupation of sociolinguistics in terms of different identities. Thus, it may be said that sociolinguistics is a study of language in relation to different social and human identities. Other perspectives to sociolinguistics observe it as a part of linguistics which is concerned with language as a social and cultural phenomenon (Trudgill 32). The thrust of Trudgill's view is in saying that language is affected or influenced by both social and cultural factors. The social and cultural factors can be likened to Hudson's position in the preceding sentence. This can be further understood, as Chaika (2) states that every social institution is maintained by language. People can use language to 'carry on love' and to 'carry out hate'; and through language people can reveal or conceal their personal identity, their character, and their background, often wholly unconscious that they are doing so.

Speech Community

Ways of speaking can vary from one culture to another, even in the most basic ways. Some of the basic ways are in terms of individual, social or group and regional, which help to define who speaks a language and in what way(s). The desire to identify the speaker(s) of language is basically the focal point in the concept of speech community. But, by no means is this an easy task as different scholars have done so with different perspectives. Lyons (62) has defined speech community as all the people who use a given language (or dialect). Hymes sees it as 'a community sharing rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech,

and rules for the interpretation of at least one linguistic variety' (54-55). Gumperz (114), on his part, conceives speech community as 'any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage'.

As it is, the foregoing conceptions of speech community show the basis for different views to be in terms of the focus on shared language use, frequency of interaction by a group of people and shared attitude, values regarding language forms and language use. Each of the definitions allows for the conception of speech community based on a set of people who have something in common linguistically, a language or dialect, interaction by means of speech, a given range of varieties and rules for using them (speech); a given range of attitudes to varieties and items.

Theoretical Framework

The ethnography of communication is symbolic and synonymous with earlier approach propounded by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf in the 20th century. This theory, i.e., ethnography of communication is symbolic as having both the anthropological and psychological backgrounds that associate it with the original notions held by Sapir and Whorf, which is that language is an influencer of a one's social thought, reality. Ethnography of communication is originally founded by Dell Hymes in 1962, it sees communication or language as a product of both social and cultural practices, beliefs. In other words, communication is based on the background of social, cultural practices and beliefs. The fundamental idea to this theory is that language is not a mere technical display of its underlying rules (grammatical principles) but a composite manifestation of all of rules, culture, and social aspect. The theory recognises that language is not in isolation all by itself and that it is not just characterised by only its internal structures but, as well, governed by numerous contexts of usage both individual and group. The term 'ethnography of communication' means the different features of an approach that are taken towards understanding a language from anthropological perspective. According to Hymes, language cannot be studied in isolation. It must be studied in the wider context of cultural and social aspects. Language is not limited to a mere technical set of grammatical rules. In fact, it has specific context, both in terms of the individual and the cultural norms and beliefs. They cannot be separated.

Ethnography of communication has two main purposes, according to Hymes:

- a. To directly investigate the use of language in contexts of situations to discern patterns proper to speech activity.
- b. To take as framework a community, exploring its unrestrained habits.

Ethnography is the written description of the social organization, social activities, symbolic and material resources, and interpretive practices characteristic of a particular group of people (Nwaobasi 55). 'Ethnographers ask themselves what is happening, and they try to provide accounts which show how the behavior that is being observed makes sense within

the community that is been observed. As Johnston (76) says, ethnography 'presupposes that the best explanations of human behaviour are particular and culturally relative' rather than general and universal. Such studies are also qualitative rather than quantitative.

Methodology

The method used in collecting data for this paper is the use of participant observation. This method employed documented and recorded expressions obtained from 'keke' operators both at motor parks and in transit that involved the formation and use of these forms, variables, and linguistic expressions. Through this, a lot of data in natural settings of verbal interaction was drawn. The unstructured conversations, chats and observations took note of the degree of awareness of new phrases, their origin, and the various socio-linguistic contexts of usage, style, and situation.

A total of 8 keke operators were sampled within the designated areas and the researcher also interacted with officials of the union and ticket collectors. The researcher carried out a random selection of the commercial avenues in the areas where the study covered. This study covers major parks in Lafia. The parks include college parks which covers (Poly, College, Shabu, Sabon Pegi, Azuba Bashayi), Akurba park, Mararaba park covering (Federal University), Emir's Palace, New Market, Tomato Market (covering Alamis).

Data Analysis

As earlier stated under methodology, a total of eight (8) keke operators were sampled and the data collected from them represent the data analysis under this section. The analysis of the data is as follows:

1. Bad Language

This is classified as vulgar, coarse, morally crude and lacking in cultivation.

Clear yansh for road

Meaning: Park properly. Your Keke is on the road not properly parked. The researcher observed that Keke operators often used this derogatory remark among themselves. Instead of telling a driver to park properly, it is very common to hear comments like "commot yansh for road, your bombom no park well".

2. Swear Words

Expressions of the nature are used to express strong emotions and attitudes.

Kawai!

Meaning: Just like that!

The keke riders have given this phrase another meaning to suit themselves within the context of their work environment. To them it means 'who are you?' It is a daring utterance used when an operator tries to showcase his driving expertise on the road, it is common to see his colleague calling him to order using the phrase 'Kawai!'

3. Pidginization

This is a reduced variety of a standard language with simplification of the grammar and a mixture of local vocabulary to meet the special needs of the contact groups.

1. *E no concern me*

Meaning: It is not my concern

That's invariably saying, "I don't care about what people say". This is a retort against gossip.

2. *I no look face*

Meaning: I am not scared of anyone. I am not afraid of anyone. I do not mind whose ox is gored. Sometimes when they default on the road, beat traffic, carry 'overload' or speed excessively and they are cautioned, one is bound to hear this response.

4. Borrowing

In this linguistic process, new words are taken or absorbed from another language.

a. *Mu ta banki*

Meaning: Always on speed. This is a name tagged to operators who drive speedily on the road. It is very usual to hear their members call them 'Mutabanki'. In some cases, they put such inscriptions on the body of their tricycle for easy recognition.

b. *So mai son ka*

Meaning: Love who loves you. This expression depicts sarcasm and is also used for identification and as a means of salutation.

5. Nominalization

In this category, a noun phrase is formed from another noun class or another lexical category such as adjective or verb.

i. *Confirmed fine boy.*

This phrase is used by a couple of operators as a means of identification. Their colleagues call them this adopted name, and, in most cases, they put the inscription on the body of their keke. In some cases where a passenger wants to employ the services of any of them, it is easier for the person to identify the keke operator by the name especially at the park.

ii. *Banco the Excellency*

Meaning: someone's nickname. It is common trend to see keke operators give themselves names and, in some cases, they are nicknamed by their colleagues. Sometimes these names emerge from an experience or event that took place in the line of operation. Usually most of them write these names on their keke for easy identification.

Findings

'Keke' operators use these choices of words and name affiliations to carve an identity for themselves. Words like: Confirmed fine boy, *Sarauta*, *Dan-auta* etc. It is evident that these names serve the purpose of self-identification. However, some of the names are used by the users to express their source of inspiration as well as aspirations. Some of the names are

either the real names of the drivers or their nicknames, while some are the names of things or people they hold in high esteem. Some samples of names convey aspiration of whom or what the drivers want to be like *Sarauta* meaning son of the king/royalty. Here, language serves the function of social identity and expression of aspirations. Some of the 'keke' operators who served as a subject for this study added that the names serve different purposes which include easy identification by their colleagues and customers, stylistic effect, security purposes – to mark their vehicles against theft.

Also, the researcher discovers that the job environment of the keke riders influences their behaviour and attitude. It is perceived not to be a profession for a calm and gentle person. Therefore, it is expected of every operator to exhibit these behaviours, know, and use their deviations and non-standard language as it helps them relate among themselves. The expression '*bird man*' code named by this group which means 'one that cannot easily be trapped as he is constantly in flight gives away the swiftness and speed with which they can get away from the scene of any wrongdoing and crime. On the positive side though, it also shows that they are time conscious, can meet with a client's timing and can beat deadlines in their duty.

No time to look time and *Ba wasa* which means *No play, no joke* are variables that show how resilient and hardworking this group of people are. Their doggedness in carrying out their duties cannot be comprised for anything. This expression tells the public that they are a group of serious people who do not joke or play with their business. Some other examples and expression highlight an attempt to share personal experiences, educational, immediate circumstances of the family, source of wealth, social reflections as well as some significant events that impacted on their lives. Some of the operators at some point in their lives went through diverse kinds of experiences from rejection by friends, ridicule, and deprivation, all manner of degradation and family crises. These experiences have defined their ideology to life and come to play in their choice of words and linguistic behaviours. Consider these examples:

- i. *So mai son ka* – meaning love who loves you.
- ii. *Ina ruwaranka* – meaning what is your business or concern.

Conclusion

The examination of the sociolinguistic study of language, social identity and behavioural patterns of Keke operators as treated in this paper shows that language use of people in this sector further reflects the functionality of language in serving the myriad needs and purposes of man in the society. It also demonstrates how society influences language and how language is influenced by the dominant culture in the society.

The samples with different admixtures of languages in use reflect the sociolinguistic reality of language contact which has come to characterize oral communication in Nigeria. Its usage and codification present an innovation in language use which may tilt towards a possible linguistic change as relates to this occupation, members of this speech community

and even the broader community as whole. This study therefore concludes that, with the trend in the codification of languages in the samples of data gathered, it is an indicator of a subtle linguistic variation in progress.

Recommendations

The study of sociolinguistics can benefit immensely by focusing on close groups such as the keke operators, as a language is likely to be enriched in its vocabulary as a result. Similarly, such a study can provide deeper understanding on the sociolinguistics of certain terms that are usually categorised into vulgar terms, taboos terms, sexist terms, vernacular terms, slangs, and so on.

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