



The Status of Yorùbá Dialects in Communicative Competence and Language Proficiency

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the status of Yorùbá dialects in communicative competence and language proficiency. Dialectal identities are quite strong among the Yorùbá people; they form an integral part of sociolinguistic behaviour in any of the Yorùbá communities. So, during speech acts or communication, the centralised version of the language will invariably depict the native speaker's version as deviating from the so-called standardised rules of speaking. But such dialectal identities and expressions actually mirror the people's mind, most covertly when deciding the topics that are appropriate to a particular speech event. This is the essence of communicative competence. It is however discovered in this paper that such proficiency could not be enhanced among the Yorùbá people unless skilled dialectal knowledge is allowed to thrive. The Yorùbá people appear to have rather strong views on the appropriateness of their dialects in different situations. The work is conceptualised within the framework of Chomsky's 'states' of mind where the adult native speaker's knowledge is fully developed static competence. Our corpora are largely taken from various dialectal renditions and written texts. Oral and structured interviews were also conducted among Yorùbá language students and among Yoruba native speakers. This was decided in order to reduce introspection in diverse forms.

Résumé

Cet article tente d'analyser la situation des dialectes Yorùbá en matière de communication et de pratique linguistique. Les différences dialectales sont assez prononcées chez les Yorùbá. Celles-ci sont une partie intégrante du comportement sociolinguistique au sein de ces communautés. Ainsi, dans le cadre des actes de parole ou de communication, l'on prendra toujours comme référence la version

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centralisée de la langue, en considérant que la version linguistique du locuteur natif est non conforme aux soi-disant règles standardisées de la langue concernée. Pourtant, ces identités et expressions dialectales reflètent l'esprit des populations concernées, en ce qui concerne la détermination des sujets appropriés à un acte de parole donné. Cela constitue l'essence même de la compétence communicative. Toutefois, cet article nous apprend qu'une telle compétence ne peut être mise en valeur chez les Yorùbá, à moins que l'on favorise la connaissance dialectale spécialisée. Les Yorùbá semblent avoir des opinions tranchées quant à l'adaptation de leur dialecte à différentes situations. Ceci est conceptualisé dans le cadre de 'states' of mind ("Etats" d'esprit) de Chomsky, dans lequel la connaissance du locuteur natif adulte constitue une compétence statique qui a été soumise à une certaine évolution. Nos sources proviennent, en grande partie, de diverses interprétations dialectiques, mais également de textes écrits. Des entretiens oraux et structurés ont également été menés au sein de groupes d'étudiants de langue Yorùbá et de locuteurs natifs Yoruba. Cette décision avait pour but de réduire toute forme d'introspection.

Introduction

Among the theoretical claims which Chomsky (1965:3–5) tries to establish is the fact that speakers of language are endowed with a kind of 'linguistic blueprint' in their heads; a system that enables them to distinguish what they know about language from what they do while speaking or listening. Chomsky proposes to term these linguistic abilities as 'Competence and Performance'. Competence is the 'speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language' while performance is the 'actual use of language in concrete situations' (Chomsky 1965:4). Moreover, formulating detailed descriptions of particular languages are but efforts geared towards developing a theory of language structure. Radford (1988:2) technically calls such structures 'grammars'. According to him, 'a grammar of a particular language will take the familiar form of a set of rules or principles which tell you how to "speak" and understand the language...' Dialects however are subdivisions of languages, and because they are varieties of language used by groups smaller than the total community of speakers of the language (Francis 1983: 1), they can be considered as parts by both the theories of Language Structure and Language Use; that is, Communicative Competence on the one hand, and that of Language Proficiency on the other. This is also in line with the view of Fishman (1972:17), who writes that 'language is a superordinate designation; dialect is a subordinate designation'. If dialects are traditionally recognised as varieties or subdivisions of languages, and if communicative competence and language proficiency are part of the factors involved in the knowledge of language, dialectal roles would be richly embedded and reveal. Recent literature on Yorùbá dialects is on

the increase because it helps scholars of the language re-appraise the existing theories and hypotheses on the grammar of the so-called standard Yorùbá language. In this paper, we review the status of Yorùbá dialects and examine how skilled dialectal knowledge could enhance communicative competence as well as language proficiency.

Theorising the knowledge of dialects

It is a palpable fact that language is uniquely human. And according to Traugott and Pratt (1980:1) 'the more we discover, the more mysterious and complex language appears to be'. One of such language complexities is its variability. Ethnic origin, sex, age, socio-economic status as well as education shape the lines of language variation. In some cases like the Yorùbá race in Nigeria and other parts of the world, rich culturally shared attitudes largely contribute to the language varieties. The aspects of mutual intelligibility and cultural development in language variation are recognised by Robins (1964:15). He says:

...structurally, the languages of people at different levels of cultural development are inherently different. Their vocabularies, of course, at anytime reflect fairly closely the state of the material and more abstract culture of the speakers; but languages are capable of infinite adjustment to the circumstances of cultural development...

An attempt to measure the degree of such inherent differences usually brings about variations in languages; and is eventually responsible for the existence of dialects. For instance, before the advent of the colonialists into the Yorùbáland, the Oyo Empire under the supremacy of the Alaafin of Oyo was firmly established. Similarly, the Oyo variety of the Yorùbá language was the favoured and prestigious variety. Speakers of this variety were socially approved as the 'powers that be'. It was still the case, as Oyelaran (1978:624–51) and Adetugbo (1982:207–24) have shown, that more than twenty-six varieties of the language existed at the time. Awobuluyi's (1998:2) recent classification of the Yorùbá dialects is even more detailed. Where Oyelaran and Adetugbo recognised three and four dialect subgroups respectively, Awobuluyi identifies five different Yorùbá dialect groupings. Since 1960s, however, many of these Yorùbá dialectal varieties function as indicators of people's identity and social status. A considerable number of the varieties have also become widely acceptable in Yorùbáland. Most radio and television programmes are now aired in different Yorùbá dialects, for example, greeting and exchange of pleasantries in Ijèsà, Oyo, Ife, Igbomina dialects on Osun Radio, Nigeria. In some television and radio stations, news is broadcast in these dialects too. If every language has

aeons of changes, irretrievably lost to knowledge, we could as well affirm that only those that are retrievable enjoy dialectal attestations.

Following the principles of mutual intelligibility again, the various processes of change graduated into the dynamics of language variability, Yorùbá dialects inclusive. Since dialect is an abstraction of the same sort as language, it falls into successively larger groups of dialects, the largest groups being the language itself. More importantly linguistic theories try to emphasise that observable differences of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and speech acts are to be mixed and explicitly recognised within a linguistic domain before a variety of such a language could be said to be proficient. We overtly observe that in the case of Yorùbá language and its various varieties, the establishment of writing systems and standards of correctness (efforts towards attaining the so-called standard Yorùbá language, which Bamgbose [1966:2] describes as ‘Koine’) retard the focus of such linguistic theory. Nevertheless, the Oyo dialect, which is in itself a variety of the Yorùbá language, is the core of the standardisation.

Dialectal roles in language use

If language, according to linguists, is uniquely human, then human beings are born to talk by making use of intuitions. In sociolinguistics, language as an instrument of communication, and the various structures that control it, are focused. Traugott and Pratt (1980:310–11) list about eight factors that form the basis of this language role. These factors are: (i) type of speaker, (ii) type of addressee, (iii) topic of speech, (iv) genre, (v) medium, (vi) situation, (vii) degree of formality, (viii) type of speech act. We are mostly concerned with the first factor – variations through sex, age, education, socio-economic status, ethnic origin, etc. The reason is that they usually come into play whenever dialectal roles are examined in language use. Chomsky (1977:40) distinguished two types of competence: grammatical and pragmatic. If our competence is meant to express meanings in ways that are native-like, it could thus be formulated to enhance competence among various speakers of dialect. Linguistic theories traditionally and customarily select the speech of community dwellers as representing ‘the dialect’. This prompted Chambers and Trudgill (1980:3–5) to vehemently disagree with the assertion that a dialect is substandard, low-status, often rustic form of language generally associated with the peasantry, the working class or other groups lacking in prestige ... a form of language spoken in more isolated parts of the world, which have no written form.

This opinion clearly negates the motivations for dialect study; it also underlines the ignorance and prejudice which cloud the subject. So,

competence tends to focus on meanings in ways which are native-like, and are expressed 'in more isolated parts of the world'. This is just dialectal enhancement.

Moreover, in Chomsky's grammatical competence, 'native speaker' is reflected in two types of intuitions. The first one is referred to as intuitions about sentence well formedness, while the second, intuitions about sentence structure. These are reflections of our understanding of the roles of dialects in language use. For instance, members of a community with a specified dialect could decide the plausibility and grammaticality of any of their utterances. They do not bother about the reactions of other people outside their community as long as they speak and get messages across to one another. It is only when non-members compare such utterance with theirs' and cannot decipher or decode the messages that we talk of linguistic standardisation. To the native speakers, any such principles of standardisation outside what he or she speaks negate his or her intuitions about sentence well-formedness. The Ìjèsà, Ònkò, and Ifè dialects of Yorùbá, to mention a few, reflect on this perspective and are represented by the following tokens:

	Ìjèsà Dialect	Standard Yoruba	English
1.	/usu/	isu	yam
2.	/ulé/	ilé	house
3.	/mo mí suse /	Mo sisé	I am working
Ònkò Dialect			
4.	/itʂe nʂe tsòro itʂe/	Isé nàà sòro se	The task is difficult.
5.	/nʂe tse e /	Nnkan se o	Something must be wrong with you
Ifè Dialect			
6.	/òdòdó nàà rè mí/	Òdòdó nàà wù mí	I admire the flower.

In Ìjèsà dialect, for instance, the short back close rounded vowel /u/ features very prominently in initial positions of their words as in (1) and (2) above – /usu/, /ulé/. The standard Yorùbá disallows its usage, it features /i/ short front close spread vowel instead – /isu/, /ilé/. Again, in (3) above, /mí/ is the marker for the progressive aspect in Ìjèsà dialect – as against /n/ used in standard Yorùbá. Some other Yorùbá dialects also use /mí/ as the progressive marker. The Ònkò dialect also features palato-alveolar affricate sound /tʂ/ in their words as in (4) and (5) above; whereas it is the use of alveolar fricative sound /s/ that is found in the standard Yorùbá. The Ifè

dialect again prefers using /rè/ (admire) to /wù/ (admire) that is commonly used in the standard version of the language as shown in (6) above. There are many examples.

Radford (1988:4) stresses that 'these intuitions about sentences span four different aspects of language'. We can therefore generalise by stating that the speakers of these dialects have phonological, morphological, syntactic as well as semantic competence which are reflected in their intuitions about the well-formedness and structure of sentences in their various dialects. This being the case, we would also strongly affirm that whenever the well-formedness in these dialects is being re-ordered to suit the dictate of linguistic standardisation (as the case of the Yorùbá dialects), the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language which is explicitly fundamental to the theories of language structure and language use, is being denied. This, we will call linguistic prejudice.

Yorùbá dialects via communicative competence

We adopt the assertion of Wolfson (1983:61) on the sociolinguistic perspective of communicative competence. He asserts that communicative competence entails

knowing when it is appropriate to open a conversation and how, what topics are appropriate to particular speech-events, which forms of address are to be used, to whom and in which situations, and how such speech acts as greetings, compliments, apologies, invitations and complements are to be given, interpreted and responded to.

Although communicative competence captures other concepts that aid human understanding of the hypothesis of language structure and use, grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, vocabularies, semantics, etc, Wolfson's assertion above reveals in its entirety the focus of communicative competence. Again, following Chomsky's mentalist analysis of 'language as a mirror of the mind', the most overt and even covert means through which the Yorùbá people mirror their mind is through the use of their dialects. Through it, their means of communication, social identities and sacred cultural beliefs and practices are revealed. For instance, a Yorùbá man will first and foremost see himself as an Ìjèsà man or Ìjèbú man or Òyó man or Ìgbóminá indigene, etc, before honouring the generalised identity – a Yorùbá man. Up till today, an Òndó man would not call himself a Yorùbá. He is Òndó. He only conceives of Òyó/Òsun as such. No wonder there were fierce internecine wars in all parts of Yorùbáland before the advent of the colonialist. Such dialectal identity affects their communicative competence, a term which we

believe summarily refers to the rules of speaking. It forms an integral part of sociolinguistic behaviour in any speech community.

When dialect mirrors people's mind 'negatively' during any speech act, the rules of speaking of such people are being revealed. For instance, courtesy demands politeness among the Yorùbá people especially when somebody is invited to contribute to an on-going debate. Here they will say

7. Òyó E bá wa dá sí òrò yii (please contribute to this debate)
 Sábe Ìwo kò gbénu sí òrò náà, ó yá iwo náà, gbénu sí òrò náà.
 (Why don't you too put your mouth in his debate, you should)
8. Ifè É láá bá ni dá sòrò ín.
 (You too should contribute to this debate)

Although the Sabee people do not intend to be abusive following their own manner of invitation; yet to others, it is not appropriate. Similarly, the Ìjèsà people are known to be fond of raining curses on an opponent during any feud, misunderstanding or disagreement:

9. Ìjèsà Lùkúlùkú lá a pa
 (Smallpox shall kill you)

Although Ìjèsà people usually de-emphasise the efficacy of such curses as a mere sign of anger (the opponent can even be their own son or kinsmen), yet to others the efficacies and potencies of curses remain effective under whatever circumstances. In addition, among the Yorùbá people during speech acts like greetings, the use of honorific language is very prominent. This is majorly demonstrated in their pronouns:

10. Bábá mi e fún mi lówó.
 (My father, give me some money)
11. E káábò mómó wa.
 (Welcome, our mother)

Linguistically speaking, the vowel /e/ in the examples above should represent the second person plural pronoun, whereas it only functions as honorific constituent in the sentences. In contrast however, researchers have shown that the Ijesa dialect does not mark the use of honorific expressions:

12. y Mo kí i yín kábíyèsí oba wa Gabriel Owa Obòkun
13. Ìjèsà Mo kí o kábíyèsí oba Gabriel Owa Obòkun
 (Royal greetings to you our king Gabriel the Owa Obokun)

Although such Ijesa greetings literally render all regards, honours and exaltations to the king, yet the other Yorùbá people would prefer the use of honorific pronoun marker: *yín* instead of *o*. In contradiction to the Ònkò speakers who are fond of using /ts/ consonant, the Ìbàdàn dialect is known for the sole use of /s/ sound; they always substitute it for /s/ sound:

14. Omo Ìbàdàn kí ni 'so'?'
 Eran 'sìkìn' ni a je lánáá.
 (Ìbàdàn sons, what is the show?
 We ate chicken meat yesterday)

These behavioural patterns are peculiar to each compact dialectal community. Yet, they are only following their own specified rules of speaking which is the essence of communicative competence. So, Wolfson's criteria reflect and mirror the minds of the Yorùbá people through their dialects.

Yorùbá dialects via language proficiency

In order to describe the usage of Chomsky's competence (pragmatic and grammatical) in the act of communication, a psycholinguistic perspective needs to be examined. We gain the crux of such analysis in the concept of language proficiency. Language Proficiency is performance-oriented and it takes into cognisance the ability to use language. Since language proficiency differs from the concept of communicative competence in terms of performance, the Yorùbá dialectal roles in it will be reviewed through data analysis. Following Richards (1985:146), language proficiency is 'defined not with references to knowledge, or competence, but with reference to performance, that is, to how language is used. It is defined with reference to specific situations, purposes, tasks and communicative activities such as using conversation for face to face social interaction, listening to a lecture, or reading a college textbook'. We will adopt Richards's definitions of language proficiency by examining the dialect attitudes of some Yorùbá students in a tertiary institution. This, we believe, will determine the status of the Yorùbá dialects in language proficiency.

Data

Corpora for the analysis are drawn from the results of both open (ethnographic) and structured questionnaire interviews conducted with Yorùbá language students at the Department of African Languages and Literatures, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Since a speaker's attitudes towards his or her dialect enhance proficiency, we can discover their dialect choice in specific socio-linguistic situations; that is, the variety that functions best in a given situation.

Analysis

Several factors are taken into consideration when determining a person's speaking proficiency, but we emphasise functions, contents and accuracy in accessing the dialect proficiency of these students. We discovered that the dialect proficiency among these Yorùbá language students achieves the basic functions of language in a number of different linguistic settings. We administered questionnaires to a total number of one hundred and twenty seven undergraduates. Questions like 'Can you speak your dialect?' were asked to assess their fluency. To assess their comprehension, we asked, 'Do you understand your dialect?' In determining their vocabulary, questions like 'To what extent do you speak your dialect with your friends or colleagues, parents or relatives, husband or wife or fiancé or marital friends, etc?' were asked. Other questions asked included 'Do you like your dialect?'. 'To what extent do you speak your dialect in school?'; 'If you are being interviewed on radio or television programme conducted in Yorùbá, would you like to speak your dialect?'; and so on.

Findings

The assessment of the speaking proficiency in the Yorùbá dialects among these undergraduate students varies according to the type of subskills involved. It is observed that the level of fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, etc, of each of them contributed to our understanding of the role of dialect in language proficiency. In the first instance, we should not be unmindful of the fact that these are Yorùbá language students, that is, they are much more familiar with the standardized version of the language. Yet this does not, in the least, hinder their dialectal fluency. Nearly all of them (except eight) claimed that they could fluently speak their dialects. Whereas all of them claimed that they do understand their dialects, these eight students could not speak their dialects fluently yet when others spoke, they understood. It is, however, deduced that the speaking proficiency of these students is highly influenced by formal settings. They appeared to have strong views on the appropriateness of their dialects in different situations. They are conscious of the specific socio-linguistic situations, that is, the awareness that one variety of the language rather than another is used for certain functions and or on certain occasions. So, the factors like functions, contents, and accuracy come into play. These formal settings embrace the language of specialised information, that is, the language of higher education or specialised formal training. This gives credence to the officially 'imposed' standard Yorùbá. Where the relationships are most formal, they are less likely to speak dialects.

Moreover, we discovered that in the most informal relations, these students most often speak their dialects, most especially when dealing with kinsmen, parents or marital friends, etc, at home. These formal and informal settings are the type of sub-skills that varied the proficiency of these students. Our discovery is in line with Richards (1985) who claims that language proficiency is 'defined with reference to specific situation, purpose, task ...social interaction, listening to lecture...' The Yorùbá dialects play prominent roles in the acquisition of language proficiency among these students; their dialects are part of the component of communication; the type of communicative settings they find themselves will only dictate their level of proficiency.

Pedagogical implications

We opine that every dialectal variety of Yorùbá is in itself the legitimate form of the language. This is because each of the varieties contributes, in one form or the other, to the well-formedness of the language. And following Chomsky, if a native speaker's grammatical competence is reflected in intuition forming the basis of the communicative competence, then the status of the dialectal variability should be considered in language teaching and learning. Perceptions of the roles of dialect in language use depict that only native speakers can decide only on the grammaticality of their utterances. For instance, no matter how proficient, non-natives like Europeans find it linguistically difficult to pronounce correctly the implosive sound /gb/ as in /gbogbo/ (all) found in Yorùbá. As a result, words like /gbogbo/ (all), /ìgbò/ (a tribe in Nigeria) are wrongly pronounced /bobo/ and /ìbò/. Europeans find it difficult because they use a pulmonic egressive instead of glottalic ingressive airstream. The implication of this is that both the so-called standard and dialect grammars are now co-existing. So, there is the need for a more structured approach to Yorùbá language teaching and learning.

Moreover, dialects act as one of the components of language proficiency. The end result of language acquisition by children is to be able to use it, especially in adulthood. We find that the Yorùbá people are conscious of the specific sociolinguistic situations by choosing the variety that functions best in a given situation. Dialect usage is frequently and fluently utilised in non-formalised settings. This they observe in consonance with the dictate of the linguistic prejudice of the so-called standard Yorùbá. Still, each dialect is a distinct, prestigious and legitimate form of the Yorùbá language. Both the standardised form and the so-called dialects should be viewed as 'a lect within the cluster'.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to explore and illustrate the linguistic positions of Yorùbá dialects in relation to the thematic approach of both communicative competence and language proficiency. The study believes that the native-speakers' linguistic intuitions enhance their communicative competence in expressing meanings given to their various dialectal utterances. Perfecting such utterances according to the context of standardisation will only negate their intuitions about sentence well-formedness. Again, since language proficiency is performance-oriented, the dialect choice of Yorùbá people in specific socio-linguistic situation is usually carefully chosen to function best in any given situation.

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