Language, Culture and Communication: The Ibibio Worldview

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Abstract

Language, culture and communication are complementary elements/features in all societies. The Ibibio society which is the focus of this article describes the people as well as the language. The Ibibios are found in the South-South Geopolitical zone of Nigeria. They number about four million people and speak the language-Ibibio-which belongs to the Lower Cross languages, a sub-family of the Benue Congo Phylum. The Ibibio worldview highlights the beliefs, the ideologies, values and the thought-pattern of the people. Using the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis with some modifications, we have shown that the worldview of a people is not determined only by the structure of a language. In addition, especially for the African (Ibibio) society, the worldview extends beyond the members of the society at a given point in time to those who are dead instead of the unborn. The data for this work were elicited through oral interview and participant observation using Ibibio proverbs among others in order to posit answers to the objectives stated in this article.

Key words: Language; Culture; Communication; Worldview; Generation past and present

"History is a pact between the dead, the living and the yet unborn".

-- Edmund Burke

INTRODUCTION

Language is as old as man and as McWhorter in Kottack (2004, p. 158) observes: Language arose with Homo sapiens in Africa, extends from the philogenetic separation of homo (2.3-2.4 million years ago) and pan (5-6 millions years ago) at the very beginning of genus homo (Wikipedia the free encyclopedia). What then is human language? Language as a phenomenon has varied definitions. Our definition of language will reflect the concept of culture and communication in any speech community, or society. The reason is that "language" is seen as a defining feature of human behaviour Crystal (1993, p. 194). Hall in Okon and Ansa (2009a, p. 125) sees "Language as an institution for communication". In addition, Okon, Ekpe, Ansa and Udoinyang (2009b, p. 312) assert that as an institution, "language is all embracing and other issues in the society are subsumed in it". Its embodiment of other issues includes the culture, the act, and arts of communication.

Culture is communication and communication is culture. Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2007, p. 17) state, "There is not one aspect of human life that is not touched and altered by culture". "Culture is a group's worldview which shows how a particular society organizes the world over time." In a similar vein, Wardhaugh (2006, p. 221) quotes Goodenough thus, "a society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they accept for anyone of themselves". In agreement with the above assertion, Okon (2007, p. 3) asserts that, "Culture is the knowledge that someone has by virtue of his/her being a member of a particular

society". To sum up then, there is no society without a culture and language must and does perform its function as a vehicle for cultural transmission. Culture in essence calls for the knowledge of the "history, religion, values, social organization and language" in order for one to be able to live successfully in any society because these are the elements of culture.

As already stated, communication and culture work in tandemand as Samovar *et al.*, note (2007, p. 12), "Communication is your ability to share your beliefs, values, ideas and feelings which is the basis of human contact". Communication is symbolic in that human beings use symbols both verbal and nonverbal to share their internal states. The use of symbols enables culture to be passed on from generation to generation. In any culture, one is able to generate, receive, store and manipulate symbols. A symbol is a symbol because a group of people agree to consider them as such. In others words, although all cultures use symbols, they usually assign their own meanings to the symbols.

There are many issues involved in the act of communication which makes it systemic. For instance, as Littlejohn in Samovar *et al.* puts it "communication always occurs in context, and the nature of communication depends in large measure on this context". Other features that are considered include setting, environment, words, actions, dress, language and topic selection are all adapted to the context. Besides context, the following principles also make for acceptable communication: location, occasion, time and number of people.

From the foregoing, we need to show the relationship among language, culture and communication.

1. LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION

The role of language in any society is paramount since it enables the members of that society to interact with each other. As already stated, without language, there will be no culture and vice versa. It is worthy of note that language and culture must find their existence/survival within a society. These two concepts can only survive if they are transmittedfrom one generation to another which is communication. As Okon (2007, p. 4) notes, for these complementary elements to co-exist, language, the carrier of culture is the willing vehicle to the transmission (communication) of the ways of life of a people in a society. This existential issue brings to mind our earlier quotation. "History is a pact between the dead, the living and the yet unborn". History, one of the essential elements of culture affirms the pact as shown in the past – the dead, the present – the living and the unborn – the future. The cyclic nature of language, culture and communication are constantly re-enacted in every society/speech community.

2. OBJECTIVES

As a research work, we need to provide answers to the questions below in order to show the eternal link between language, culture and communication:

● How do different people/speakers use a given language?

● How is language used to express or reinforce thought in a given culture?

● How do we make sense of the world in any culture?

● What is right and what is wrong in a community/culture?

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A research work needs a theoretical framework on which such a project can anchor on. The research on the survival of language, culture and communication can be based on different disciplines. Such disciplines as anthropology which studies language in its social and cultural context across space and overtime. It also aims to discover the various worldviews and patterns of thought in a culture (Kottack, 2004, p. 75). Another discipline is ethnography which gives an account of a particular community, society and culture as it studies local behavior, beliefs, customs, social life, economic activities, politics and religion. These theories have merits but we would prefer the linguistic framework as enunciated by Sapir-Whorf. The reason is that though this framework has a directbearing on our topic, it needs a modification for it to be amenable to this work.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis argues that, "The relationship between language and culture is that the structure of a language determines the way in which speakers of that language view the world". The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is categorized into two subclasses. The weak also known as linguistic relativity asserts that, "The structure of our language, with its predetermined categories, must have an influence on how we perceive the world". The strong version known as linguistic determinism states "language determines thought" meaning that we can only think in the categories provided by our language (Yule, 2007, p. 218).

Though this frame work, is amenable to this work it should be noted that, it is not only the structure of our languages that influences as well as determine our worldview. In relation to this paper: Language, culture and communication extend beyond the members of the society at that point in time but to those who are dead and the unborn generation. This modification will help us to understand Thoreau when he states, "All the past is here". For us to be able to answer the questions set out already, we need to know that our interpretation of our worldview goes beyond the structure of language but includes the symbols, dress, arts and artifact of the particular society.

To conclude this section, we agree with Wardhaugh (2006, p. 228) when he asserts thus:

> Every natural language not only provides its speakers with a language for talking about every other language, that is, a meta language, but also provides them with an entirely adequate system for making any kinds of observations that they need to made about the world.

4. CLASSIFICATION OF IBIBIO

The Ibibio are found in Akwa Ibom State in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. More specifically, "the area lies between latitudes 4º25' and 5º45' and longitudes 7º16' and 8º55'E (Inyang, 1991, p. 1). With a population of about 4,000,000 (4 million) speakers living in Akwa Ibom, Cross River and in other states of the Federation, they are described as the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria (Essien, 1990). Ibibio identifies a people and their language. Ibibio belongs to the Benue-Congo family. A further sub-classification shows Ibibio as belonging to the Lower Cross. Ibibio and other genetically related languages have been classed under what Essien (1990) refers to as Ibibiod, a term which in essence, captures the common origin/ history, culture of the language and the people (Urua, 2007). Sofar, we have discussed the Ibibio, the language and its classification, we now would look at the Ibibio worldview.

The importance of worldview in the study of language, culture and communication cannot be overstated. A culture's worldview helps its members make sense of their reality. According to Haviland, Prins, Walrath and McBride in Samovar *et al.* (2007, p. 72) state, the worldview contributes:

> The collective body of ideas that members of a culture generally share concerning the ultimate shape and substance of their reality.

In addition, Samovar *et al.* assert that "it is a culture's worldview that members of each culture use in constructing, populating and anticipating social worlds". These "social worlds" are linked directly to social perception. World is an "inside view" of the way things are colored, (sic) shaped, and arranged according to personal cultural perceptions (Hoebel & Frost, cited in Samovar *et al.*, 2007, pp. 72-73). To sum up, Dana notes.

> Worldview provides some of the unexamined underpinnings for perception and the nature of reality as experienced by individuals who share a common culture. The worldview of a culture functions to make sense of life experiences that might otherwise be construed as chaotic, random and meaningless. Worldview is imposed by collective wisdom as a basis for sanctioned actions that enable survival and adaptation.

In essence, every social group has a worldview – a set of more or less systematized beliefs and values in terms of which the group evaluates and attaches meaning to the reality that surrounds it.

From all the discussions on language, culture, communication and worldview generally, we now want to highlight how the Ibibio culture affects the Ibibio worldview and is transmitted from generation to generation in particular. We begin the next section by considering Ibibio proverbs.

5. ANALYSIS OF IBIBIO PROVERBS, RELIGION AND SOME NAMES AS SOME ELEMENTS IN THE IBIBIO WORLDVIEW

5.1 Proverbs

The art of using proverbs in speech is characteristic of people all over the world and the Ibibio are no exception to this art (Okon, 2004, p. 107). In every culture, proverbs are communicated in colourful and vivid language to show the values for members to follow. For examples:

1) Ubok mʌm, ubok mʌm etuud ukpa, in togetherness, any obstacle can be removed. "Ukpa" Iroko is a kind of tree. The worldview is reflected in the environment through the use of one of the trees – Iroko – in the forest to show how heavy the tree is. In spite of its weight as it is in reality, the Ibibio believe that when people love and appreciate each other, together they can move the trunk of the Ukpa (Iroko) tree. This same vie is also illustrated below.

2) Ubok Otʌk edem, edem otʌk ubok.

The hand is needed to scrub the back clean just as the back equally needs to scrub the hand clean. The world view here is that help is reciprocal. As a group, they can overcome any obstacle; if you need others to help you, you equally need to help others too.

3) Eto idaaha ikpon ikap-pa akai.

A tree cannot make a forest or no man is an island. This proverb uses language to explore the African poetic landscape with its flora and fauna. This is achieved through the use of words like "eto" tree and akai-forest. The tree symbolizes man and this proverb further strengthens the concept of togetherness.

Another worldview or reality in life among the Ibibio is that of forewarning. The proverb below shows this belief:

4) Edue ukod akpa iton.

Be watchful lest you fall (die). This proverb brings language into the province of symbolism. The symbolism is that of warning. The warning calls for carefulness, otherwise death will be the end result. Most if not all cultures have this world view – "to be fore-warned is to be fore-armed".

In Ibibio culture, there are proverbs which deal with work ethics, the following proverbs will best illustrate the worldview.

5) Owo akpaniko ikpaaha bion.

An honest man will always find work to do.

6) Bia ayin unwene itaaha ikan.

The labours of man will bear fruit.

7) Ubok anam enyin ama.

What the hand does the eye likes.

As already observed the Ibibio worldview emphasizes the code of being honest at work which in turn results in

more work and appreciation. The Ibibio worldview uses indigenous food item like bia-"yam" which is believed to be a product of the hard work of man.

The Ibibio culture has the proverb-riddle which combines the properties of proverb and riddles. As Umoh (2007, p. 9) notes, the components of the proverb-riddle comprise: Question, answer, tone and rhythm. The following proverb-riddle reflect the worldview of the Ibibio.

8) a. Oduok nton ke nton akeene.

b. asua ayin owo inieeghe ake omo.

a. He who throws the ash, is the one that the ash follows.

b. He who hates another person's child does not have his own.

This proverb shows the worldview where whatever one does will surely boomerang. It calls to mind the global belief in the law of karma or retribution. The proverb provides insight into the life style, the beliefs, the environment and the fauna of the Ibibio. We argue that proverbs are short statements that portray the intellectual and communicative contents among the speakers in a speech community (Okon, 2004, p. 106) and in this instance, the Ibibio.

5.2 Religion as a Worldview

As already stated, our worldview originates in our culture and is transmitted via language as one of the channels of communication. Worldview is intricately intertwined with religious beliefs and practices and the link between religion and worldview is found in every culture. Samovar *et al.* (2007, p. 75) quote Coogan thus, "A belief in the existence of a reality greater than the human has served as a definer and creator of cultures". Religion provides people of the world with advice, values and guidance. Religion also sanctions a wide range of human conduct by providing the notions of right and wrong.

The Ibibio traditional belief system consists of:
● The belief in god (Abasi Ibom)
● The belief in divinities/deities
● The practice of magic, medicine and juju.

The belief structure is shown in Figure 1:
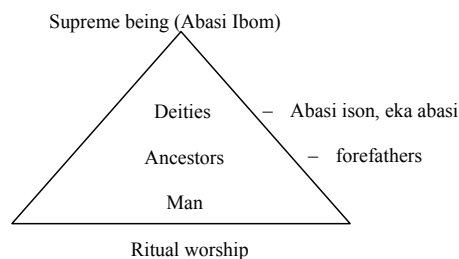
Figure 1
Traditional Ibibio Religious System

The worldview of the Ibibio is shown in the religious belief and practices in Ibibio culture. Religion unites the people. The belief in the a supreme being guides the people on what is right and what is wrong, as is the belief in the benevolent and malevolent spirits. The process of appeal to the gods through prayers, religious rituals for good health, rich harvest etc. creates a bond as well as helps the people to understand their origin. The diviners and healers in the society are the custodians of the tradition and culture of the people.

These people were/are knowledgeable in traditional roots and herbs for healing. We want to conclude this section in the words of McGuire in Samovar *et al.* (2007, p. 77).

The social functions of religion are no less important than, the psychological functions.

> A traditional religion reinforces group norms, provides moral sanctions for individual conduct and furnishes the substratum of common purpose and values upon which the equilibrium of the community depends.

5.3 Names

Ibibio names and indeed, names generally in Africa, tell a lot about the history of the people. For as Awonoor (1975, p. 3) notes,

> … the sum total of a people's way of life is coherently developed in their material and spiritual cultures in their tools, and implements, in their institutions and concepts of God and man, concept that exist in an order that can be really interpreted and examined.

From the foregoing, we can deduce that the history of a people can therefore, be elucidated through names either as place names or personal names. The name system in Ibibio-land gives an insight into Ibibio language and culture (Ansa & Okon, 2004, p. 183). Ibibio name have religious geo-political, social-cultural and philosophical significance.

5.3.1 The Religious Significance

In order to show that our forefathers had knowledge of a supreme being who created and sustained the universe, they gave such names as

Abasi-Akara	-	God rules
Nkpoikana Abasi	-	Nothing is greater than God
Eno-Abasi	-	Gift from God
Abasi-Andian	-	God has added

These names reflect the supremacy of God (Abasi Ibom). In Ibibio culture and worldview, there are names to reveal the attributes of God, man's dependence on God, names to reflect clan gods or deities for example: Ekandem, Abasi Okure and Abasi-atai among others.

5.3.2 Geo-Political Significance

In Ibibio society culture, personal names are used to record geographic information such as the seasons, trees animals, environment, physical landscape and housing pattern etc..

Seasons: Ndaeyo (dry season), Ukwo (rainy season).
Trees: Ukim (cotton tree), Ukpa (Iroko) etc.

Geographical Classification: Ndon (homestead), Ikot (bush).

Housing Pattern: Iboto (thatch), Essien (Outside/veranda).

Ibibio Calendar: Isua (year), Usen (day).

Ibibio Environment: Inim (parrot).

Elements: Utin (sun), Ikan (fire), Inyan (river).

Political Significance: Mboho–(togetherness), Ikemesid (oneness).

Socio-Cultural: Udua (Market); Inwan (Farm); Uden (paddle), Abia (expert); Akan (famine).

5.3.3 Metaphysical and Philosophical Names

Mbon (1994, p. 48) asserts that "the people's philosophy of life and belief in the supernatural world, in the existence, omnipresence and providence of Abasi Ibom find concrete expression in many of the personal names which parents give to their children at birth or later in life". Some examples from Mbon are reproduced below:

Obot	-	nature or creation.
Ndueso	-	what offence have I committed?
Nnamso	-	what wrong have I done?
Uwem-edi-imo-		life is wealth.
Ekpono-udim	-	many are respected.
Ikpọn ifọnọ	-	loneliness/solitude is bad.

Uwem-edi-imo expresses the philosophy that life is the greatest and the most valuable wealth anyone may possess.

Ekpono-udim and Ikpọn ifọnọ express opposites in the names that still philosophize on life through names: the more the merrier, and or, majority's might.

CONCLUSION

Language, culture and communication are intertwined as language is used to tell members of a speech community/society what to expect from life, and therefore, it minimizes confusion as it helps us to predict the future. We have shown that the Ibibio worldview promotes individual and group survival, adaptation and growth. These aspects have been portrayed/illustrated through the use/application of proverbs, religion and names using the Ibibio language. As the great Greek philosopher says:

Man know thy self.

We say: Man know thy culture.

Man know thy worldview.

Man know thy language.

For language is the primary means of preserving and transmitting culture.

Speak your language, do not let it die.

By doing this,

You preserve your culture and identity.

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