SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF GREETINGS IN ENGLISH AND YORUBA LANGUAGES AMONG SELECTED PEOPLE OF AGBOYI-KETU LCDA OF LAGOS STATE

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the social functions of greetings in English and Yoruba languages. Selected people within the Agboyi-Ketu LCDA were taken as sample population. The fact remained that as the people of a particular ethnic community differs in language, so also their cultural background when compared to others. Hence, language and culture are two inseparable phenomena. The study asserts that in any speech community, it is natural for people to be sensitive to, and to appreciate certain values that promote interpersonal verbal interaction. Since human interaction will becomes more difficult in the absence of language, social functions performed by the language becomes a phenomenon to analyze. Consequently the speech act approach is used because greeting rituals are speech act, i.e. language functions performed by our words.

Adegbija (1987), asserts that one basic premise of speech act is that utterances are not made in vacuum, instead they are designed to perform actions such as stating, directing, accusing, warning, persuading, instructing, etc, i.e. to do something. Language is one of the main instruments by which values, belief, system and cultural practices are communicated. It has been variously defined by scholars; Owoeye (1996) sees it as “an expressive and interpretive system of vocal symbols to relate to others.” Greetings constitute integral part of the language use and cultural values. The typologies of greetings discovered in the course of this study include appreciation (e.g. “thanks”), felicitation (e.g. “best of luck”), supplication (e.g. “God bless you”), apology (e.g. “sorry about that”), and condolences (e.g. “quite unfortunate”). Therefore, language, with which greeting forms an integral part, is the vehicle through which human mind, thought, perception and reasoning can be conveyed to others, irrespective of any peculiar factor. In order to complement the subject matter of this study, the concept of language and culture vis-à-vis similarities and differences between English and Yoruba greeting devices were briefly discussed. Although the researcher infers from the study of both languages, that Yoruba is relatively richer in its devices of greeting, recommendations for further study were made.

Keywords: Language, Greetings, Rhetorical devices, Yoruba and English.

INTRODUCTION

Language is one of the main instruments by which values, belief, system and cultural practices are communicated. It has been variously defined by scholars; Owoeye (1996) sees it as “an expressive and interpretive system of vocal symbols to relate to others.” Greetings constitute integral part of the language use and cultural values. The typologies of greetings discovered in the course of this study include appreciation (e.g. “thanks”), felicitation (e.g. “best of luck”), supplication (e.g. “God bless you”), apology (e.g. “sorry about that”), and condolences (e.g. “quite unfortunate”). Therefore, language,
which greeting forms an integral part, is the vehicle through which human mind, thought, perception and reasoning can be conveyed to others, irrespective of any peculiar factor.

STATEMENT OF THE STUDY

Since human interaction will become more difficult in the absence of language, social functions performed by the language becomes a phenomenon to analyze. Consequently the speech act approach is used because greeting rituals are speech act, i.e. language functions performed by our words. Adegbija (1987), asserts that one basic premise of speech act is that utterances are not made in vacuum, instead they are designed to perform actions such as stating, directing, accusing, warning, persuading, instructing, etc, i.e. to do something.

So, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

i. Does language really have social function?
ii. Is there any correlation between people’s language and culture?
iii. To what extent does the people’s culture affect the use of language?
iv. Is there any similarity between the social function of English and Yoruba language?
v. Is there any difference between the social function of English and Yoruba language?
vi. Does a person’s socio-economic background affect the way and manner a person uses language?

OBJECTIVES, METHODOLOGIES AND JUSTIFICATION

The primary aim of this study is to x-ray some social functions of greeting as applicable to English and Yoruba languages among selected people of Agboyi-Ketu LCDA of Lagos State. Interviews and participatory observation are two main methods employed for data elicitation. A close-ended type of oral questionnaire was designed to collect information from the respondents who are well educated. Some of them are teachers of English and Yoruba languages; experts who are versed in current issues and trend in social functions of languages.

FORMS OF GREETINGS IN ENGLISH AND YORÚ Bà

In English, the devices of greetings could contain interjections and ellipses as well as interrogative, imperative and declarative expressions. Greetings in Yoruba also employ the aforementioned devices of greetings in addition to euphemisms, proverbs, metaphors and honourification. Table 1 and 2 below illustrate some devices of greeting in English and Yoruba respectively:

Table 1: (English)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>Rhetorical devices</th>
<th>Illustrations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Interjections</td>
<td>Hi! Hello! Hallo!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ellipses</td>
<td>Best of luck! All the best!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Interrogative expressions</td>
<td>How are you? How do you do?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4 Imperative expressions  
Take it easy! Be careful!

5 Declarative expressions  
Nice to meet you! It’s quite unfortunate!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: (Yoruba)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>S/N</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 2 | Ellipses | Addresser: iyawo...n ko? (How is wife)  
Addresser: O wa... (She is ....) |
| 3 | Interrogative expression | Addresser: Ise yin n ko? (How is {your} work?)  
Addresser: Daadaa ni (It is fine)  
Addresser: Awon omo nko? (How are the children)  
Addresser: Won wa daadaa (They are fine) |
| 4 | Declarative | Kabiyesi Alayeluwa (The one whose authority is unquestionable) |
| 5 | Imperative | Gbera nle omoo `re (Rise up good child) |
| 6 | Euphemism | E ku amumora ti baba wa to pa’po da (I condole with you over our father who has changed his position) |
| 7 | Metaphor and Euphemism | Omi lo danu , agbe o fo (It is water that spilled, the keg is not broken) |
| 8 | Proverb | Yin iyawo o ni m’eni (May the back of the bride never get accustomed to the mat) |
| 9 | Honorification | Addresser: E kaarao baba (Good morning father)  
Addresser: Kaarao omoo mi. Se o ji daadaa (Good morning my child. I hope you have woken up well) |

**SOURCES, ANALYSIS AND DATA INTERPRETATION**

i. **Intuitive Knowledge**

The researcher is a typical speaker of both Yoruba and English language, so his innate knowledge both in competence and performance serve as one of the basic sources of data. Because language and culture of the speaker of the language cannot be separated, the researcher relies more on the social interaction of Yoruba speaker in relation to English language.

The researcher also subject the datum collected to post-verification and acceptability test since it may be unsafe to rely on intuitive knowledge alone.

ii. **Formal Sources**

Oral and written sources: Some of the materials were gotten from some native speakers of both languages who have stayed for thirty to forty years in the area under study. This was done by listening to speakers in places such as wedding ceremony, naming ceremony, burial ceremony, and house warming and graduation ceremony. Oral interview and observation were also carried out. The researcher also watched the people’s behaviours and participates in the predominant activities and special events of the people so as to capture the real picture of how the two languages play its social function. The researcher also collects data through listening to conversation between groups of both educated and non-educated.
Most of the people interviewed (interviewees) are polyglots, teachers in English and Yoruba languages, adults as well as elites who are neither religiously conservative nor culturally biased. Using the aforementioned tables, the data are analyzed as follows:

From the items 1-5 of each of the tables given, it is crystal shown that interjection and ellipses, interrogative, imperative and declarative expressions are common to both English and Yoruba languages. Interjection like “Hi!”, “Hello!”, {Item 1, table 1} constitute common devices of greeting English uses, especially as gap fillers and discourse initiators. In Yoruba greetings, interjections like “Bawo!” (How) {Item 1, table 2}, “Baba ke!”; roughly translated (Hi father) etc, are used by interlocutors in a greeting encounter at moments of excitement after the accomplishment of a task. Ellipses as illustrated by item 2 of each of the two tables {i.e. tables 1 and 2} enable the addresser to achieve precision, brevity and economy of words while demonstrating his faithfulness to the ritual of greetings.

In table 1 (item 2), the expressions “Best of luck!” and “All the best”, if fully rendered would become “I wish you the best of luck” and “I wish you all the best” respectively. In table 2 (item 2), the addresser, in a greeting encounter, asks about the welfare of the addressee’s wife i.e. “Iyawo n ko?” (How is wife?), and the addressee responds by saying “O wa…” (She is ...). There is the omission of the word “re” (your) in the questioned asked by the addresser. Similarly, there is the omission of the word “daadaa” (fine) in the response given by the addressee. Thus, if the interlocutors were to give a full rendition of the expressions in table 2 (item 2), the following would have resulted:

**Addresser:** “Iyawo re n ko?” (How is your wife?)
**Addressee:** “O wa daadaa” (She is fine).

The omitted words are recoverable from the context of situation, as the ellipsis in this context is stylistically motivated.

Item 3 of table 1 is an interrogative expression; so is item 3 of table 2. Interrogative expression constitutes a major rhetorical device of greetings in both English and Yoruba. Such expressions are employed to demonstrate the concern of the addresser about the well-being of the addressee. While the English person may not go beyond asking questions about the well-being of his interlocutor, the Yoruba person may go further to ask question about his interlocutor’s wife or husband, children, job, business etc, in the course of an exchange of greetings. This fact is exemplified with the following data in both languages:

**English:**
Two friends (Fred and Fish) who had not met for several months attended the birthday party of another friend (Smith) where they had an opportunity of meeting and exchanging greetings. Here is the dialogue that ensued:

**Fish:** Hi, Fred, it’s nice to meet you
**Fred:** How are you, Fish?
**Fish:** Fine ...

**Yoruba:**
Two friends (Ajayi and Ojo) who had not met for several months attended a wedding ceremony where they were privileged to meet and exchanged greetings. Here is the greeting ritual that ensued:

**Ajayi:** Ojo, bawo ni, o ma to’jo meta? (Ojo, how are you, it’s quite an age?)
Ojo: Haa! Ajayi! Iwo ni mo ri lai gba tikeeti yii (Oh! Ajayi, it’s great to see you without obtaining a ticket).
Ajayi: Iyawo nko? (How is your wife?)
Ojo: O wa ... (She is fine)
Ajayi: Awon omo nko? (How are the children?)
Ojo: Won wa ... (They are fine)
Ajayi: Ise nko? (How is your work?)
Ojo: O n lo ... (It’s going on ...)
Ojo: Iyawo ati awon omo tie naa nko? (What about your own wife and children?)
Ajayi: won wa (They are fine)
Ojo: Bawo ni ise re? (How is your job?)
Ajayi: O n lo (It is going on fine)

As we can see in the above data, the expression of phatic communion in Yoruba is more elaborate than in English because the language is relatively rich. Interrogative expressions enable interlocutors in greeting encounter to probe politely into the personal affairs of a neighbour, friend or acquaintance in Yoruba. If this is done in English at all, it is done with a great deal of caution, as the British culture would rather expect everyone to mind his/her own business.

Imperative expressions (item 4, table 1 and item 5 table 2) as a device of greeting are really not meant to give a command but to give a polite piece of advice or suggestion in the greeting rituals of English when for instance, somebody is hurt. The illocutionary force of the expression, “take it easy” or “be careful” in the context of greeting when the addressee is hurt is not a command but a piece of advice. The same thing applies to Yoruba speakers in similar context.

Imperative expression such as “(Se) pelepele” or “rora se” meaning ‘be careful’ is a polite piece of advice for the addressee to avoid being hurt again. However, in another context where a boy prostrates and greets an elderly person, the elderly person may respond with an imperative expression such as we have in table 2, item 5 (i.e., “Gbera nle, omoo ‘re”) (Rise up good child). In that context, the illocutionary force of the imperative expression is neither a command nor a piece of advice but permission. That is, the elder has permitted the addressee (the boy who prostrates in greeting an elder) to rise up.

Another device of greeting that is common to both English and Yoruba is declarative expression (item 5 table 1 and item 4, table 2). A declarative expression is simply a comment or statement of fact or a proposition. It is more or less an acknowledgement of what an interlocutor believes to be true of his addressee when exchanging greetings. Thus, the expression, ‘nice to meet you’ is a subtle reference to the fact that the speaker is probably meeting the addressee for the first time while the expression, “Kabiyesi, Alayeluwa” (the one whose authority cannot be questioned) subtly communicates the “finality” of the authority of a Yoruba monarch as acknowledged by one of his subjects paying him homage.

Apart from the aforementioned devices of greetings that are common to English and Yoruba, the Yoruba language earlier mentioned, also employs euphemisms, metaphors, proverbs and honourific pronouns as devices of greeting rituals as exemplified by item 7, 8 and 9 of table 2.

Item 7 of table 2 is a combination of euphemism and metaphor. When a little child dies, its parents are consoled with the expression “omi lo danu agbe o fo” (its water that spilled, the keg is not broken). The mother is metaphorically referred to as “the keg” with much water inside. Euphemisms have the effect of consoling the bereaved and alleviating the psychological stress that would have worsened their situation.
A newly married man is greeting in Yoruba with the proverb: “Eyin iyawo o ni mo eni” (may the back of the bride never get accustomed to the mat). In this example, there is a subtle reverence to marital fruitfulness- an implication of Yorùbá people’s implicit belief in harvest. We can infer from this that the primary aim of marriage as far as the Yoruba people are concerned is child bearing.

Item 9 of table 2 is an illustration of honourification as a device of greetings in Yoruba. The use of the honourific pronoun “e” by the addresser in our data while greeting an elderly person is an expression of politeness and an indication that a subordinate is greeting a superior. Honourification in Yoruba could be determined by differences in age or social status.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the Yoruba has more devices than the English language in its greeting rituals.

SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF GREETINGS

The social functions of greetings in English and Yoruba are more-or-less similar. Our informants from the two languages agree that greetings perform the following social functions: discourse initiation, discourse determination, gap filling, solidarity, index of security and acceptability of an encounter, politeness strategy, supplication and enhancement of friendly relations.

In both languages, discourse initiation and discourse termination are accomplished with the use of greeting as revealed by the following data:

**English: A dialogue between A and B**

A: Could you please show me the way to the school of languages?
B: Ok, go straight to the junction and turn to the left-hand side. The second building on your right hand is the school of languages building.
A: Thank you!

**Yoruba: A dialogue between C and D**

C: E pele o (Hello)
D: Oo (a general response to greeting)
C: Ojo wo lojaa Dawanu? (Which day is Dawanu Market?)
D: Ola ni (it is tomorrow)
C: E seun (Thanks)

From the English data above, we observe that words of greetings (Hello, Good morning) are employed to initiate a discourse between A and B. At the end of the discourse, we have a word of greetings (Thanks). The same applies to the Yoruba data where we have a dialogue between C and D. Consequently, greeting plays a vital role of initiating and terminating a discourse between interlocutors. Generally, it is rather absurd to engage an individual in a discourse without the ritual of greetings at the beginning and at the end of the discourse.

Greeting also plays a complementary role in the two languages. Man is a social animal; If a smooth relationship between him and his fellow men is to be sustained; and if friendly relation is to be enhanced, greeting rituals are more-or-less mandatory. Communication gap between individual is filled by words of greetings, as greetings oil the wheel of verbal interaction between interlocutors.

Greeting also functions as politeness strategy. According to Lakoff (1975:53) “To be polite is saying the socially correct things”, there is however, a slight difference between the attitude of native speakers of
English and native speakers of Yoruba regarding the politeness role of greetings. While the English person agrees that greeting is one of the indices of politeness, he does not share the Yoruba person’s belief that, if a person does not greet, he is definitely impolite. The popular opinion held among the Yoruba people is that a child that does greet lacks home training and as such, he is spoilt. However, my English informant considered it inappropriate to consider a child impolite and spoilt for the simple reason of not being faithful to the ritual of greetings.

Another social function of greetings is supplication. Greeting in many cases are accompanied with expression of the addressee’s good wishes for the addressee. Such good wishes are often communicated in form of prayers. This is much more elaborate in Yoruba than English as portrayed by the following data:

**Yoruba:** A young graduate going to another part of the country in search of job paid a visit to an elderly family friend just to say “bye bye”. The elderly person responds:

- “Ayunlo ayunbo lowo n y’enu” (the hand goes to the mouth regularly and returns).
- “Odidere kii ku s’oko ‘iwaje” (the parrot does not die while searching for food)
- “Waa lo waa bo la’laafia” (you will go and return in peace)

**English:** An elderly man in a similar context with the above data was greeted by an elderly person simply as “Best of luck!”

While the Yoruba data above contain a supplication conveyed in proverbs, the English data simply consist of a three-word expression of the speaker’s wish for the addressee.

Solidarity as a social function of greetings is perhaps most evident when there is a bereavement and neighbours express their condolences to the bereaved.

Greetings also serve as an index of security and acceptability of an encounter. For example, Mr. X, a tall stout man armed with a machete, suddenly meets Mrs. Y in a solitary and slightly dark place. Mrs. Y becomes frightened as soon as she apprehends the armed man (Mr. X). Nevertheless, Mr. X greets her with a smile. The greeting allays the fears of Mrs. Y and she feels secured in that solitary place. Thus, greeting serves as an index of security and acceptability of an encounter.

**FINDINGS/RESULTS**

In the outcome of this study, we observe that each language has its own peculiar structures in terms of phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantic. This perhaps accounts for the cause for elision of words in the process of translation.

Also, unlike English language, Yoruba elicits certain honourific pronouns such as “yin” (2nd person singular used for an elderly person), “won” (3rd person singular used for an elderly person), and “yin” (object position; 2nd person singular which could be translated as ‘you’. They are employed in order to show honour and respect to a more superior interlocutor.

Similarly, we infer that the Yoruba language has more devices than the English language in its greetings rituals. With this, we can evidently say that Yoruba plays more social functions in greeting than English language. (See table 1 and 2).

**SUGGESTIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS**

For further study, we suggest more places should be used as case study, as this work is mostly limited to an insignificant portion of Lagos State, Nigeria.
We equally suggest that, for subsequent studies, information should be sought and obtained from the rural settings of the areas, and not to be concentrated only on the urban and the sub-urban.

The Federal Government should come up with an attractive package that will ensure a bright future for researchers on language, irrespective of their domain. This will encourage more people to study indigenous languages thereby making to achieve national unity.

CONCLUSION

The social function of greetings in English and Yoruba languages are more-or-less similar and they include; discourse initiation and discourse termination, communication gaps filling, solidarity, index of security and acceptability of an encounter. Politeness strategy is however, viewed differently by native speakers of the two languages as earlier mentioned. Therefore, it is pertinent to note that, relatively, the Yoruba language is qualitatively richer than the English language in terms of its repertoire of greetings. The reason for this is not unconnected with the fact that the Yoruba’s devices of greetings include metaphors, euphemisms, proverbs, and honorific pronouns, which are not attested in the English greeting rituals.

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