

A Diachronic Study of Language Use as an Instrument of Language Change

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Abstract: *This paper aimed at investigating the instrumentality of language use in language change from the period between the Middle English to present. Language use refers to the communicative needs of language, whereas language change involves variations in sounds, meanings, word structures and sentence structure which took place over a period of time. In order to examine these changes that take place in language over time, the researchers examined the English Language, and African languages, especially Nigerian indigenous languages and the Nigerian English by observing and describing the changes. Findings revealed that language change is inevitable when a language is in use, and that these changes occur as language users, both as individuals and as a speech community try to express their thoughts and feelings in ways best soothing to them. Also, when languages come in contact with one another, new words are borrowed, old ones are dropped, coinages are made, and as languages are in use, old meanings are dropped for new ones, also, as more literary works are created, innovations are also made in language. In conclusion, language changes in all aspects: pronunciation, word forms and meanings, syntax and semantics. This language change caused by “internal” and “external factors” is as a result of language use; language is made for man, and not man for language.*

Introduction

Language use refers to the communicative meaning of language. According to Lahey, (1988), language use is typically thought of as having two aspects: function and context. Function refers to the reasons why people communicate. These are the goals of language. Some of these reasons are: transmitting ideas, sharing information, passing messages, telling stories to make people laugh, calming down an anxious person, expressing love, declaring an allegiance, teaching a skill, asking questions, threatening someone, expressing emotion and persuading. On the other

hand, context refers to how people both understand and choose from among alternative linguistic forms in order to reach the same (or different) goals (Harris, 2008). For example, if someone wants another to close a door – perhaps because there is draught and he is getting cold – one could say: “Shut the door!”, “Would you mind shutting the door, please?”, “Are you going to shut the door?”, “Were you born in a field?”, “Oh, it’s chilly in here”. Now, each may serve the purpose of getting the door closed but they clearly carry different interactional meanings. How they are responded to, may be influenced by such things as the social status of the participants, the degree of intimacy between them, shared knowledge, and so on. Evans, (2014) mentions that man uses language to buy groceries in the supermarket, to get a job, to hire or fire an employee, to buy train tickets, and to compose an email. We use it to make a telephone call, to invite someone out on a date, to propose marriage, to get married. He added that language allows us to make friends and enemies, to pass the time of the day, and so on. Language is ubiquitous, and we, humans are born to use it. Some of us use it to write diaries and poetry, but the primary form of language use is interpersonal, that is how we learn a language, and use it (Kashima, 2020).

As human language is used on a daily basis to communicate ideas, express interests and desires, seek and listen to advice, teach and learn, and even perform acts, changes take place in language. It is plausible that the variety of Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa our great grandparents spoke is not exactly the same variety we, the present generation speak. In this part of Africa during the time of our great grandparents, such words as mobile phones, text messaging, cellular data, and so on, were not in use as such technology was not in vogue at that time. The sounds of a language, its word order, grammar, pronunciation, meanings, and other components vary over time as well as spoken and/or written form. Some changes are sporadic, while others are gradual. Other factors of language change are possible if and only if the language is in use. This is to say that a dead language cannot change, implying that a dead language cannot have contact with other languages; it cannot borrow, it cannot form new words from the existing ones, and so on.

It is on the basis of this claim that this paper finds relevance. The researchers having observed that other factors of language change have been long overstretched with little or nothing on language use as a factor, and most importantly, the chief factor of language change, makes it bold to present this paper, which discusses language use as an instrument of language change diachronically. The research paper hence, concludes that external factors, that is the social factors, are the first determinants of language change, and not the internal factors as some scholars argue. The reason is that language is made to serve man's communication needs and not man to serve language, therefore, the society that uses a language, influence changes on the language either intentionally or unintentionally. Again, changes occur in virtually all components that make up a language: phonemes, phonetics, syntax, semantics, morphemes.

This paper, hence, sets to discuss, with historical evidence from English and Nigerian languages, how language use is instrumental in language change. The changes in this language will be limited to phonetic, phonological, lexical, spelling, syntactic and semantic change, and in the period from Middle Ages to present age.

Literature Review

Though, there are many literatures which treated language change, hardly has any work been done on language use as an instrument of language change. Some instruments of language

change, such as language contact, economy, language shift, cultural environment, expressiveness, geographic separation, movement and social prestige, have been well discussed, leaving the gap; ‘language use’, which this paper addresses. In this section therefore, literatures on language use, language change and diachronic study will be reviewed and discussed. Also, language use and language change in this review and discussion may, in most cases be interwoven as language use implies language change; the first results in the second, hence, language use is an implication of language change for indeed, only a dead language undergoes no change.

Language change is the phenomenon of variation of a language over time whether on phonological, morphological, semantic, or on other features of language. In such a new change, new words, new pronunciations, new meanings or even grammatical forms can be derived or borrowed whereas, old forms and meanings happen to be dropping out of use. Linguistic change can also be said to have taken place when a new linguistic element, used by a few speakers within a speech community is adopted by other members of the community and accepted as the norm (Jennifer, 1993; Nettle, 1999a; and Thomason, 2010). That language is a living entity in the process of constant change is a universally accepted fact. Change is one of the inevitable facts in the life of any language. Human languages which are actively being in use experience change over time. Any language that deviates from this norm is a dead language. There can never be a moment of true standstill in language, just as little as the ceaselessly flaming thought of men; by nature, it is a continuous process of development (von Humboldt, 1863 in Aitchison, 2001).

According to Sapir, (1921), language moves down time in a current of its own making. Nothing is perfectly static. Every word, every grammatical element, every locution, every sound and accent is a slowly changing configuration molded by the invisible and impersonal drift; that is the life of language. “Time changes all things: there is no reason why language should escape this universal law” (de Saussure in Aitchison, 2001). “Language, then, like everything else, gradually transforms itself over the centuries. There is nothing surprising in this. In a world where humans grow old, tadpoles change into frogs, and milk turns into cheese, it would be strange if language alone remained unaltered” (Aitchison, 2001). “Indeed changes seem to be inherent in the nature of language: there is no such thing as a perfectly stable human language” (Milroy, 1992). According to Romaine (2000; 144), one of the fundamental facts about language is that it keeps changing in time in a slow process. It is slow enough that the replacement of forms and rules is not overt and hardly noticeable within a generation. However, man is often aware that the generations before and after him use different forms and rules.

Language changes for a variety of reasons. According to Aitchison, (2010), focusing on language change as a manifestation of a social phenomenon of a speech community, proposed three socio-linguistic causes: fashion, foreign influence, and social need. On the functional view of language change, he had rightly said that “language alters as the needs of its users alter”. He explains that as a language is not used in exactly the same way, the unique way that man speaks also fuels language change. The vocabulary and phrases we use depend on where we live, our age, level of education, social status and so on. Younger generations, for example, often use different words and phrases from older generations. Some of these innovations in the speech spread through the population and slowly accepted by other members of the community which, in fact, has become

a reason of language change. Most times, it is thought that language also changes due to laziness of the speakers, for example, the shorten forms of English words such as isn't, won't, etc. The study of Yokose, (1997) shows the usage of shortcut words as one of the aspects of language change in Australian English. Deliberate decision by speech communities is also a cause of linguistic change and the most familiar of deliberate change are lexical such as teenage slang (Thomason, 2008). Language change also takes place through language acquisition (Croft, 2000). The variations that come from the process of language acquisition are internalized and propagated by the new generation and hence, a change may be invited in the language.

Language scholars argue that language change can be basically assigned to one of the two factors: either the change is caused by a structural aspect of the language (internal), or the change is caused by the social factor of the speakers (external factor). In contrast to the internal factor of language change, proponents of the externally motivated language change claim that the historical and social factors of the speech community are the sole reason for language change. Meillet, (1921) in Labov, (1994:24) supports the external factors of language change as he wrote: "the only variable to which we can turn to account for linguistic change is social change, one must determine which social structure corresponds to a given linguistic structure, and how, in a general manner, changes in social structure are translated into changes in linguistic structure."

According to Martinet, (1952a), functional view of language change such as phonological drive for symmetry plays a crucial role in language change. Lyons, (1968; 43), in his response to the notion that linguistic change necessarily involves 'corruption', explains that all living languages, 'it may be assumed', are of their nature efficient and viable systems of the communities that use them. As these needs change, language will tend to change, to meet the new conditions. If new terms are required, they will be incorporated in the vocabulary, whether by borrowing them from other languages or by forming them from existing elements in the vocabulary by the productive resources of the language; fresh distinctions may be drawn and old distinctions, lost. The same distinctions may come to be expressed by different means. He added that in denying that all changes in language are for the worse, it is not implicit that it must be for the better, rather, it is merely saying that any standard of evaluation applied to language change, must be based on a recognition of the various functions a language 'is called upon', to fulfill in the society which uses it. Welmers, (1970) seems to put more weight on internal factors regarding the influences on phonology and morphosyntax when he states: "...all we know about language history and language change demand that we seek explanations first on the basis of recognized processes of internal change." The seminal work of Labov, (1972) in the area of social factor of language (external factor) was the analysis on variation and change on Martha's Vineyard. He found that patterns of centralization in the diphthongs ay and aw could only be explained by examining the social context and particularly by making reference to the social characteristics of the speakers (their attitudes, affection, and aspirations) involved in the change. Ohala, (1974:268), in explaining sound change wrote: "One should first try all the phonetic explanations. Only if they don't work, should one seek an explanation in terms of social, psychological, or historical facts." Cohen, (1975) wrote on the internally motivated force thus: "Internal evolution is the passing from one system to another." According to him, internal evolution proceeds progressively, by modification and substitution of details. It is the sum of these details which, at the end of a certain period of time, constitutes a total change." Hawkins, (1976) work on the sound shift in the New Zealand English short vowels is a relevant example of purely internally based

explanation of sound change. Such a pattern of social distribution indicates that system-external forces have conditioned the development of the shift in the New Zealand English short front vowels in spite of the internal constraints observed by Hawkins, (1976). The external causation of Campbell and Muntzel, (1989) is worth the mention: the contact situation between speakers of Xinca and Spanish in Guatemala brought about the heavy use of glottalization. In further response to the causes of language change, Aitchison, (1991) used the term “political factor” to describe geographical separation, stating that when people move to a country and adopt a new language, the adopted language is learned imperfectly, then these slight imperfections are passed on to their children and to the people in their social circle, and eventually alter the language. “Changes in language may be systematic or sporadic. The addition of a vocabulary item to name a new product, for example, is a sporadic change that has little impact on the rest of the lexicon. Even some phonological changes are sporadic. For instance, many speakers of English pronounce the word ‘catch’ to rhyme with ‘wretch’, rather than with ‘hatch’. Systematic changes, as the term suggests, affect an entire system or subsystem of the language. A conditional systematic change is brought about by context or environment, whether linguistic or extra linguistic. For many speakers of English, the short ‘e’, vowel (as in ‘bed’) has, in some words, been replaced by a short ‘i’ vowel (as in ‘bit’), for these speakers, ‘pin’ and ‘pen’ are homophones (words pronounced the same).

However, in response to the argument on language change being internally or externally driven, the present researchers make a contribution in support of language change being externally driven. In the Middle English, the expression "How do you do" was used to mean "How are you thriving." This expression was used only by the upper class, in the Western World, as their way of greeting (among themselves). This use eventually became outdated with time such that in the millennium, the expression is hardly used, and the few who occasionally use it, informally, use it to mean "How are you", and instead of the original response which was "How do you do", the response rather is "I am fine". Another instance of external factors being the trigger of language change is the case of loaning. As people of diverse culture come in contact, their language equally come in contact. This leads to the dropping of some vocabularies in the borrowing language, and replacing them with those of the language they are in contact with. For instance: "ìchafù, ìyerìntì and mbùlòda" are borrowed words from English, and in order to make these words fully assimilate into Igbo, the recipient language, the rules of no consonant clusters, and non-occurrence of the velar nasal at word ending, are considered, and that is the reason why the words presented above follow the rules. Again, as new technologies, new ideas and innovations are made, the society or language community begin to provide words either by borrowing or forming new words from the already existing through blending, clipping, and so on, to represent these new ideas and technologies. It is through these changes which are triggered externally that changes in the grammar, phonetics, and other internal changes are now made, for truly, language changes for the society that uses it and not vice versa.

Language use is instrumental in language change; “human languages which are actively being in use experience change over time.” “Any language that deviates from this norm is a dead language” (von Humboldt, 1863 in Aitchison, 2001). Since dead languages do not go through changes (ibid); language use is therefore, the prerequisite for language change. It is also imperative that we look at diachronic linguistics.

Diachronic Linguistics was identified by Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure in 1916. It is the study of a language through different periods of history.

Sometimes, the term "historical linguistics" is used interchangeably with diachronic linguistics as a way of referring to the study of language at various points in time and at various historical stages (Akmajian, Demer, Farmer and Harnish, 2001). However, technically, diachronic linguistics and historical linguistics are not synonymous because only the latter includes research on old time synchrony for its own sake, without any focus on language change (Janda and Joseph, 2003). This means that before any historical study of language can be accepted as diachronic, it must do a study on the changes a language has undergone at various points in time, and historical periods. These changes can be sound shift, spelling and pronunciation, meaning, word order, and so on. For instance, the Great Vowel Shift is a major factor separating Middle English from Modern English as seen in the following forms: stone from stan, rope from rap, dark from derk, barn from bern and heart from herte.

Comparing the Early Modern English of the 'King James Bible' with today's English shows a difference in word order. For example, the King James Bible translates Matthew 6:28 as "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not". In a more recent translation, the last phrase is translated as "they do not toil", because English no longer places "not" after the verb in a sentence. Another instance of language change is in the use of the word "anymore", which used to only occur in negative sentences, such as "I don't eat pizza anymore". Now, in many areas of the country, it's being used in positive sentences, like "I've been eating a lot of pizza anymore." In this usage, 'anymore' means something like 'lately'. If that sounds odd to you, keep listening; you may be hearing it in your neighbourhood before long."

According to Sceptre, (2003, et al.), English, which was an obscure Germanic dialect, became a global language as it underwent changes. A major factor separating Middle English from Modern English is the 'Great vowel shift'. In Middle English, (for instance, in the time of Chaucer), the long vowels were generally pronounced very much like the Latin-derived Romance languages of Europe (e.g. 'sheep' would have been pronounced more like 'shape', 'me' as 'may', 'mine' as 'meen', 'shire' as 'sheer', 'mate' as 'meat', 'out' as 'oot', 'house' as 'hoose', 'flour' as 'floor', 'boot' as 'boat', 'mode' as 'mood', etc). Also, the spellings of some words changed to reflect the change in pronunciation (e.g. 'stone' from 'stan', 'rope' from 'rap', 'dark' from 'derk', 'barn' from 'bern', 'heart' from 'herte', etc. Borrowings from Latin and Greek, (often from Latin), contributed also, to the language change. Words like (genius, species, militia, radius, specimen, criteria, squalor, apparatus, focus, tedium, lens, antenna, paralysis, nausea, etc), were imported intact, (horrid, pathetic, illicit, pungent, frugal, anonymous, dislocate, explain, excavate, meditate, adapt, enthusiasm, absurdity, area, complex, biography, mythology, sarcasm, paradox, chaos, crisis, climax, etc), were borrowed and slightly altered. A whole category of words ending with the Greek-based suffixes '-ize and '-ism', were also introduced around this time. Also, several rather ostentatious French phrases also became naturalized in English at this juncture, including 'soi-disant', 'vis-à-vis', 'sang-froid', etc, as well

as more mundane French borrowings such as ‘crêpe’, ‘étiquette’, etc. The 17th Century penchant for classical language also influenced the spelling of words like ‘debt’ and ‘doubt’, which led to a silent ‘b’, added at this time out of deference to their Latin roots (‘debitum’ and ‘debitare’, respectively). For the same reason, ‘island’ gained its silent ‘s’, ‘scissors’; its ‘c’, ‘anchor’, ‘school’ and ‘herb’, their ‘h’, ‘people’; its ‘o’, and ‘victulas’ gained both a ‘c’ and a ‘u’. In the same way, Middle English ‘perfet’ and ‘verdit’ became ‘perfect’ and ‘verdict’. By the end of the 16th Century, English had finally become widely accepted as a language of learning, equal, if not superior to the classical languages. Vernacular language, once scorned as suitable for popular literature and little else- and still criticized throughout much of Europe as crude, limited and immature-had become recognized for its inherent qualities.

Other changes in spelling and pronunciation also occurred during this period. The Old English consonant ‘X-technically, a voiceless velar fricative, pronounced as in the ‘ch’ of ‘loch’ or ‘Bach’’, disappeared from English, and the Old English word ‘burX’ (place), for example, was replaced with ‘-burgh’, ‘-borough’, ‘-brough’, ‘-bury’, in many place names. In some cases, voiceless fricatives began to be pronounced like an ‘f’, (e.g. ‘laugh’, ‘cough’). Many other consonants ceased to be pronounced at all, (e.g. the final ‘b’ in words like ‘dumb’ and ‘comb’, the ‘l’ between some vowels and consonants, such as ‘half’, ‘walk’, ‘talk’, and ‘folk’, the initial ‘k’ or ‘g’ in words like ‘knee’, ‘knight’, ‘gnaw’, and ‘gnat’, etc. As late as the 18th Century, the ‘r’ after a vowel gradually lost its force, although the ‘r’ before a vowel remained unchanged (e.g. ‘render’, ‘terror’, etc.), unlike in American usage where the ‘r’ is fully pronounced.

According to Deutscher, (2006), the tricky question is “why are changes not brought up short and stopped in their tracks? At first sight, there seem to be all the reasons in the world why society should never let the changes through. “He sees the reason for tolerating change in the fact that we already are used to “synchronic variation”, to the extent that we are hardly aware of it. For example, when we hear the word “wicked”, we automatically interpret it as either “evil” or “wonderful”, depending on whether it is uttered by an elderly lady or a teenager. Deutscher, (2006) speculates that “in a hundred years’ time, when the original meaning of ‘wicked’ has all but been forgotten, people may wonder how it was ever possible for a word meaning ‘evil’ to change its sense to ‘wonderful’ so quickly”.

Making reference to Oyeka (2015), the need to avoid the use of taboo words in language leads to the creation of new words and phrases to express the same thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Although scholars are of the view that there is no linguistic reason why a word should be viewed as ‘clean’ and the other ‘dirty’, the society feels that there are certain words that should not be publicly mentioned either because they are offensive or disrespectful. In the Igbo Language, there are certain expressions that are not freely used by the elders in the midst of the young ones, but are freely used among elders. Thus, linguistically, there are no dirty words, but culturally, there are, and since language as an aspect of culture cannot be separated from culture, one has to consider the cultural implications of a word before using it. These innovations due to culture are equally language change. According to Fromkin et al (2007:444) in Oyeka (2015), there is no

grammatical reason why the word 'vagina' is clean whereas 'cunt' is dirty, or why 'prick' or 'cock' is taboo but 'penis' is acknowledged as referring to a part of the male anatomy, or why everyone defecates but only vulgar people shit. Akimajian (2010) in Oyeka (2015) notes that 'damn, heck, gee, or jeez' are used as euphemism for 'damn, hell, and Jesus' which are considered taboo words. Again, Fromkin et al (2007:443-444) give examples of taboo words which have been substitution with euphemisms: sex worker for harlots, contributions for taxes, chamber for prison, pass away/on for death, et cetera. In the Igbo Language, the following words are now used instead: eke (python) for 'ndiuweojii'(people in black) meaning 'the police', 'obioma' (one with a good heart) for 'duo duo' (stitch stitch) meaning 'mobile tailor', 'izuahia' (to trade) for 'igbaakwunakwuna' meaning 'prostitution', 'ofenabali' (flyer at night) for 'amoosu' (witch) meaning 'a witch', 'ike' (anus) for 'ohunsi' 'excremental cavity' meaning 'buttocks' et cetera.

For the reason that no language is complete in itself, new words are formed even from the colloquial languages. Nigerian English for example, has contributed to the lexicon of the English Language. According to Tuboson (2020) in Durosomo (2020), 29 new loanwords were added to the English dictionary although most of the words have been in use since 1970s and 1980s. Some of these words are: 'buka' borrowed from Hausa and Yoruba, refers to a roadside restaurant, mama put which got its name from what the buyers say...'mama put' as they point at the dish they want to buy, also meaning 's roadside restaurant', 'okada' the term used for motorcycle taxis, 'danfo' the name given to Lagos ubiquitous yellow buses, 'sef' first evidenced in Nigeria author Ben Okri's Nobel 'Flowers and Shadows' published in 1980, an adverb borrowed from Pidgin, is an emphatic marker added to the end of statements or rhetorical questions, often to express irritation or impatience as in this quotation from Adichie's 2013 novel 'Americanah': He could have given you reduced rent in one of his properties, even a free flat sef.

Result and Discussion

It is observed that language change occurs due to, but not restricted to the following reasons: fashion, foreign influence and social needs, all of which are in other words; language in use. Individuals, groups may choose to use language differently. For example, it is fashionable for a young University undergraduate to express an outstanding academic performance with the word 'wicked', as in 'Babes, that guy had a wicked smash... he made over 90% in all the courses, including the GS'. 'Wicked' which originally means 'evil' has been used in recent times to mean something unbelievably impressive. Hence, due to people's style, drift in meaning has taken place. Also, in literary works, scholars choose fashionable styles of writing. These innovations are further imitated by language users and soon becomes recognized and acceptable into the language as seen in Adichie's 2013 use of 'sef' cited in the literature. In addition, foreign influence equally brings about language change. This is seen in the case of loan words as cited in the literature. Through language contact, one language comes to influence another, and when this happens, language owners begin to look for a way of adding more vocabularies and to their language, and one of the ways of achieving this is to borrow words and grammatical expressions, into their language, meanings too may shift as seen in the case of the Nigerian English.

Lastly, though not least; social needs. Language is made for the society and not the society for language, therefore, at one point and another, the society is free to make a change in their language to suit their communication needs. As illustrated in the literature, certain words are taboos words and so are not to be used, especially in certain occasions. For instance, both on TV and in reality, the word 'fuck' is seen as offensive and so one is not expected to use it. Even in writing, when one may necessarily need to write it for a reason, he writes it deliberately missing the 'u' and replacing it with an asterisk as in 'f*ck' or he may choose to just write 'the fword'. Again, when discussing outside the bedroom closed doors or with one or people you are not in a romantic relationship with, it will be rather out of place to use the word 'sex', people would rather use its euphemic variant like 'get down on'.

It is worthy of note that although some words from the Nigerian English have been borrowed into the English Language, it is not to say that Nigerian languages are free from being endangered. Igbo Language for example is potentially endangered and will become endangered if nothing is done to develop, improve and preserve it. Its speakers are gradually dropping its regular use for the English Language, and if not watched, may become a problem in the nearest future.

Conclusion

From the literatures cited, it is evident that language use is instrumental in language change. Language changes in all aspects; pronunciation, word forms and meanings, syntax and semantics. This language change caused by “internal” and “external factors” is as a result of language use. The English spoken today is a product of change an obscure Germanic dialect underwent as a result of its everyday use. The more a language is used, the more changes it is prone to, as humans try to express their thoughts in many different and new ways other than the existing ways. In this process, new words are formed; different meanings are derived from existing words, sentences take different structures and different meanings. Was the Old English no longer in use (both in spoken and written form) to the present, the changes may not have occurred? Because English is a global language, it is more susceptible to change; many nations and speech communities use it on a daily basis, and as they do so, erroneous usages take place, and after a period of time, these errors become accepted by the speech community, and the erroneous constructions are transferred to the younger generation, who eventually learn the “formerly” erroneous variant of a language as their first language. And as a result of this, English has such variants as Nigerian English, Ghanaian English, Cameroonian English and other variants. When compared with Classical Latin, Classical Latin will likely undergo little or no change because it is no longer in use, except in ecclesiastical setting.

In conclusion, the study found that change is inevitable when a language is spoken and/or written. Although written language may change gradually, spoken language changes faster. Language is a medium of communication; this makes it impossible for any language spoken by a speech community to remain stagnant. The change may be perceived as either negative or

positive; however, following Lyons, (1968), any standard of evaluation applied to language change, must be based on recognition of the various functions a language is called upon to fulfill in the society which uses it. Hence, language use is quite instrumental in language change.

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