



Language Dynamics as an Interpersonal Phenomenon

The African Experience

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Abstract

This study uses secondary data to explore language dynamics in interpersonal communication for interpersonal relationships in Africa. Specifically, it looks at how the African society thrives in the use of this form of communication for the preservation of its culture and values and concludes that for these reasons interpersonal communication will continue to remain an intrinsic part of the African life and society.

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1. Introduction

Human relationship is a function of interactions between parties. Interpersonal relationship is a relationship between two persons. This form of relationship exists in all spheres of life. In the family which is the smallest unit of the society begins the interpersonal relationship. The husband who later becomes the father establishes the interpersonal relationship with the wife before the birth of the children who then learn the process of interaction first with the mother and then with the father and other members of the family.

Primarily, human communication starts from intrapersonally communication and graduates into interpersonal communication. However, as a pattern of communication, interpersonal communication allows for interactions between two persons in the communication encounter to exchange and share ideas, feelings, thoughts, experiences and world views. Interpersonal communication is also a communication process that enables the encoding and decoding of messages between encoder and decoder for mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence. Odoemenan, Afunanya and Onus (2021) noted the impact of language on human peaceful co-existence and averred that “since the origin of humanity, all cases of wars have always been traced to language use. Hence, when language is used such that the parties feel threatened, they tend to retaliate using yet another form of language to express their disgust towards the sender” (p.17).

Interpersonal communication, like any other form of communication, has seven basic elements which include stimulus, the encoder, decoder, message, the medium, noise and feedback.

Stimulus simply means the motivating force that triggers the desire to engage in communication experience. Stimulus can also be seen as the idea that prompts such an interpersonal communication. Interpersonal communication carries the most powerful communication stimulus because of the proximity between the communicators; the sender and the receiver.

The encoder is the source, the transmitter, the initiator and the sender in the interpersonal communication encounter. In every communication, someone must initiate the conversation. The initiator may want to share painful, joyful,

doubtful experiences with another or may want to find out something bothering him or her. According to Okesipe and Okolo (2013, p.5), “interpersonal communication is a dyadic communication that usually involves two people in an informal setting. It is the face-to-face, one-on-one communication involving two people who are close”

On the other hand, in an interpersonal communication encounter, two persons are usually involved. One is the sender, the initiator of the conversation while the second person is the listener who is the decoder. The decoder receives the message from the sender (initiator) and reacts to the message that has been received. The receiver upon receiving the message also shares his experiences with the sender who then becomes the receiver. Interpersonal communication is a form of face-to-face interaction or communication, which allows the experiences shared to have greater impacts even more than the mass media messages. Ogbulogo (2004, pp.14-15) captures it succinctly thus, ‘interpersonal communication involves two people. It may be face-to-face by letter writing or by telephone conversation. It is very effective in business and social relationships because it ensures immediate feedback. It is also reinforced by gestures, body language and paralanguage’

In interpersonal communication, the message is shared. What is the message? It is the feelings, ideas, and thought of the initiator of the conversation. Both the initiator (sender) and the receiver share their feelings in the communication encounter. It is the shared feelings (messages) that influence behaviour and initial perception, position and pre-conceived belief of any of the parties in the communication encounter. The import is that in an interpersonal communication, any of the parties can be influenced irrespective of who initiates the conversation. For instance, an initiator of interpersonal communication may want to share a feeling about the failure of his country’s political system and may also want to use the opportunity to persuade his listener (receiver) not to support the government in power only for the receiver to convince him (sender) why the government needs their support.

One of the impacts of communication is to share values. Oftentimes, people communicate to share their values with others. Amongst other forms or

patterns of communication, interpersonal communication allows people to share their values with their communication partners. Ngonso and Egielewa (2018) write:

“ Communication of values is the sharing of ideas, thoughts, feelings and emotions among individuals. In every communication experience, there is usually a sharing of what the communicator believes is right or wrong. What is right is dependent on one’s values. In communication philosophy, it is believed that the primary access to the realm of values is through acts of feeling and preference that are directed upon objects and persons bearing the values.

In interpersonal communication, the medium is also the channel. This is the language used in the face-to-face communication encounter. The unique nature of interpersonal communication is that the parties in the communication encounter use a common language that is understood by the parties involved. However, noise may occur due to several factors such as one party not being interested in the conversation, lack of comprehension of the topic, or external factors such as incoming phone calls, distraction by an intruder or horn from incoming vehicles or children crying in an attempt to attract their parents’ attention. In interpersonal communication, feedback is *a sine qua non* in every communication experience. The canon of interpersonal communication is feedback. In the case of interpersonal communication, feedback is instantaneous. It is the instantaneous reaction that makes interpersonal communication an interactive experience. The parties in the interpersonal communication encounter share their thoughts and feelings in real-time. Feedback can lead to arguments, quarrel, and fight and can also lead to resolutions of problems, understanding, reconciliation and peace. In any case, it is the language used in the communication environment that determines if arguments, quarrels, and fights or understanding, peace, love and unity hence good relationship would be achieved.

While the above understanding of interpersonal communication seems somewhat generic, it is important to make a distinction about how this applies to the African context. In Africa, interpersonal communication is referred to

as “direct communication” in the sense that it involves the meeting of two persons involving the use of typical African mannerisms accompanied by raised voices. Thus, it is typical for Africans to address themselves in loud tones and pitch which in western cultures may be described as “shouting” (Communication, 2015). This kind of interpersonal communication is normally done with what Anedo (2011) terms the “good face”. “Good face” in interpersonal communication means that such conversation must begin and end with a smiling face of reception and warmth. Otherwise, interpersonal communication won’t be said to have taken place.

To properly discuss the subject matter of this study, this article will first attempt to define the main properties of Interpersonal Communication which include the main theme of shared values. Secondly, the different nuances of interpersonal communication from an African context especially Nigeria will be discussed with an emphasis on how language permeates the different levels of such communication.

2. Language Dynamics in Interpersonal Communication

Language in the context of this study, implies the way words are used in a one-on-one communication encounter in the African context. Odoemenan et al (2021, p.18) see “language as a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, desires, and emotions through a system of voluntarily produced symbols”. Okesipe and Okolo (2013, p.30) look at language as a system of signs and symbols through which the community communicates. The scholars also list eight characteristics of language which include: arbitrariness, conventionality, displacement, cultural transmission, creativity/productivity, semanticity, structure dependence, and vocal-auditory channel. Ogbulogo (2004, p.24) added duality, genetic transmission, pattern congruity, constancy, total feedback, versatility and specialization. But the interest in this study is not to go into the details of the above but is rather concerned with the functions of language since this study is focused on

the impacts of interpersonal communication on interpersonal relationships. Thus, Okesipe and Okolo and Ogbulogo (2004) listed the functions of language in communication and these will be examined in line with interpersonal communication for interpersonal relationships: the African society experience.

- i. Referential function- this explains the idea that language in the communication context is used to refer to things and situations. In the African communication environment. Speakers use the language to refer to things and events. In fact, in Africa the more the speaker explains his or her experiences with another person the more he or she attracts the partner to himself or herself.

African society is made up of different languages. Primarily, African languages are used by the people to transmit ideas, knowledge and values from generation to generation. Africans used their language to relate their past with the present and predict the future. In their daily communication encounter, they can describe their daily life experiences and share their feelings through the use of descriptive words. Africans like to paint their world with descriptive words. Egbe (2004, p.293) writes: “situation often arises when the speaker has to paint the world of his imagination with words. He could present objects, create episodes and state of affairs, which exploit to the fullest, the resources of his language.” It is in this light that, Cheo et al (2021) assert that indigenous languages are indispensable cultural legacies.

- ii. Expressive function- this is the use of language to express one's feelings. Africans are very articulate and expressive people. Africans like narrating their experiences.

Egbe (2004) writes:

“ It should be stressed once more that linguistic competence or the effectiveness of expression... can be attained only when the stock of words at the disposal of the people approximates closely to the objects, actions, and situations obtained in the world that they live in. It is this that

account for the ability to capture moods and situations intimately and accurately. They easily reconstruct the past, project into the future and determine clearly, the relationship between events in all spheres of human endeavours.

- iii. Aesthetic function-this is the use of language for beauty for the sake of pleasure derived from it. African society is known for its poetic orientation. Songs, proverbs and folklore are essential parts of the African communication system. Africans communicate with one another using any of these channels.
- iv. Regulatory function-this is the use of language to regulate one's action. Africans share anything that helps them protect themselves against danger. A typical African hunter when he encounters danger in the forest will like to share his experience in an interpersonal communication with another hunter, the nearby fisherman or farmer and all the people living in the same neighbourhood.
- v. Phatic function- this deals with the use of language for social interaction in society. African culture, norms and values are usually communicated in the form of greetings and responses. Africans have a culture of greeting before conversations. A typical African greets first before starting a conversation. Sometimes they go further to have a handshake before a real conversation starts.
- vi. Social bond- language is used to create social bonds. Africans' interpersonal communication is usually a show of social bonds. Often, Africans in their interpersonal conversation do not welcome a third party because of the social bond associated with interpersonal communication in the African setting.
- vii. Metalinguistic function- this is the act that interrogates an intent. Africans ask questions in their interpersonal

communication experience to probe an intent. For instance, at first sight of a person in a compound, the speaker may ask, who are you looking for? Sometimes the question may just be rhetorical when the speaker is with a partner discussing an issue.

- viii. Informative role of language- language is a medium through which information is shared. Through interpersonal communication, Africans share information with one another. It could be information about business, health, family, community tasks, forthcoming cultural or religious festivals and pending danger.
- ix. Directive role of language- language is used to influence behaviour. It is important to note that partners in interpersonal communication can only build a strong interpersonal relationship on the grounds that both of them share the same values. This means that their conversation influences each other.
- x. Ideational role of language-this is the role of language when language is used to control the force of nature. This may represent a form of extra-mundane communication, such as rituals, incantations, libations, and prayers. Africans establish a strong bond with their friends or other neighbours through libation, incantation and even prayers. Those who share in the value allow for incantation and libation. In African society when a friend visits his friend as part of welcoming the person, the host could present local gin which may first be offered to the gods as a libation before it is shared.
- xi. The performing role of language- language is used to perform a certain function. In African society, language could be used to acquit a friend of accusation and praise a friend for his or her achievement. It could also be used to reprimand a fellow for unacceptable behaviour.

In this study, oral communication is the focus of the study. Oral communication encourages the free expression of feelings, thoughts, and ideas. Ogbulogo (2004) opines that oral communication is expressed by word of mouth. It encourages feedback which is necessary for the improvement of the communication process. Oral communication enables clarification, simplification and understanding of the message. Okesipe and Okolo (2013) write, “oral communication is vocal because it uses voice”. In discussing the advantages of oral communication these scholars assert that oral communication gives room for immediate feedback, which is an opportunity for the communicator to modify his/her message in response to the feedback received from the other participant. The researchers also argued that oral communication saves time because it gives room for other communication processes such as the use of non-verbal cues to support the voice conversation. They also noted that oral communication gives room for clarity and quickens decision-making. In an African setting, interpersonal communication mostly takes the oral communication form. African families build their intimacy through oral communication, viz interpersonal communication which allows parties in the communication encounter to share deep feelings thoughts and experiences such as their marital experiences, business experiences, religious experiences, social experiences, political thoughts, self-promotion and achievements, hate speeches, rumours, gossips, and fear.

Depending on the level of intimacy, Africans may resort to the use of slang and language constructs which defies the standard English grammar rules. However, in Africa, interpersonal communication experience is usually in the local language other than English or French depending on the official language of the country. Egielewa and Balogun (2021) argue that interpersonal communication becomes difficult when a foreign language such as French is used for such communication. In the real sense, it is really "foreign" in the sense that the communicators are not able to express themselves in the deepest sense of the context. The dialogic philosophy of communication illustrates the philosophy of language as a feasible communication model that is applied universally (Ngonso & Egielewa, 2018). However, social interactions are influenced positively by the kind of

language used and the meanings assigned to the language in the communication experience. Adejisola (2009) in his explanation of the functions of language seems to toe the same line as he avers, “language may be used to address burning issues, to declare war, to incite, provoke, oppose ideas, intentions and actions, to influence personalities, to scatter, condemn, blackmail, insult, destroy, falsify, despise, abuse and to generate violence, to entertain, appeal, inspire, comfort, amuse, appreciate, build, enlighten, educate, settle disputes, establish a cordial relationship and make peace with people.” This presupposes that language constructs our social reality as Mbukwe and Afutendem (2022.p.60) write, “language helps us to understand the way societies operate, given the fact that it is a social practice and not a phenomenon external to society.”

Odoemenan et al (2021) retort, there are different levels of language (*literally and metaphorically*), and each of these levels could determine the communicative functions that language plays. For instance, literary meaning refers to the surface meaning while the language used in a metaphorical sense is characterized by connotations, allusions, referents, nuances and underlying sub-terranean meanings. In Africa, a language with other meanings is usually avoided. This is the reason why people in traditional African society live in peace. However, connotations, allusions, referents, nuances and underlying sub-terranean meanings are not the same as proverbs and folklore which in African society are used to explain concepts or for didactic purposes.

3. African social groupings and interpersonal communication

Africa has unique social groupings that promote interpersonal relationships. A typical African community is stratified. We have from top to bottom hierarchical system. In this system, the council of chiefs, superintended by the village head, is on the top of the pyramid, closely followed by the elders' council, and various age groups (they are groups born around the same period and inducted by a special ceremony). The village heads are the symbols of authority in their respective communities. They live exemplary life by having

a good interpersonal relationships with members of their families through effective interpersonal communication. Egbe (2004) opine that “communication at the grassroots level often emphasized the methods used, which include the activities of town crier, the meetings of the village heads, the activities of age groups and the role of the marketplace.” Egbe (2004) notes that these groups make communication effective because they allow information to flow to households (families) in the villages and such communication at the grass root level promotes family solidarity, upliftment and achievement within the context of the village. African families are usually the first place where interpersonal communication exists and intimacy culture/interpersonal relationship is established. Ebinuwele and Uchenunu (2022) commenting on the family role in nation-building said that the family is the basement upon which character is formed and shaped as well as a place for value orientation.

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The rural African communication system thrives on interpersonal communication. However, recently due to the impact of globalisation and ease of digital access to information, African rural dwellers now also look up to the broadcast media for information at critical times such as COVID-19 and the health crisis period (Ngonso & Chuckwu, 2021; Egielewa, 2022). Other than the health disaster period, a typical African may seek information

through the mass media (Egielewa et al, 2023). However, information in the mass media particularly, television may only reinforce the pre-existing belief of an African that has been rooted in interpersonal communication through various inter-group interactions and influence (Uchenunu & Ngonso, 2021). Interpersonal communication exists strongly at each level or group in African society which makes it easier for sharing values amongst members of each group. Africans believe so much in moral values and share the same in their interpersonal communication. Africans become more attached to one another because the parties share the same moral and ethical values. Africans draw their friendship line to transform, protect, preserve, safeguard and maintain high moral standards through the interpersonal communication (Ngonso, 2022). Similarly, Egbe (2004, p. 286) notes that “relationships between neighbours and relations are based on strong moral ethics and this is usually reflected in the moral undertones in the day-to-day discussions.”

Age group is another power sub-group in African society that promotes good interpersonal relationships through interpersonal communication. At the age group level, members recognized themselves as friends and can easily develop interpersonal communication culture. This is very common in Africa, their intimacy is usually known by the common name they call each other. For example, in the Obolo in Rivers and Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, age group members call themselves *Ogu*, the Igbos in the Eastern part of Nigeria call it *Nwukem*, the Uzairue in Edo North, Nigeria call it *Otu*, in Efik and Ibibio it is called *Da*. Today’s African youths and teenagers who are born and bred in the cities may not understand this African interpersonal communication culture but are likely to be influenced by social media and Western communication culture (Ngonso, 2019), Egielewa and Ate (2020) have found out that social media distort the effectiveness of interpersonal communication the way Africans understand interpersonal communication that is usually tied to African culture and value systems. In Africa, age groupings affect the relationship between a younger person and the older one. The younger person is expected to keep quiet when an elderly person is talking but he/she is also expected to supply answers to any question asked by the elder. Interpersonal communication between an elder and a younger person is usually a

demonstration of the virtue of humility on the part of the younger person and a display of wisdom on the part of the older person.

4. Conclusion

After having examined the concept of interpersonal communication in its generic understanding and how that is understood and applied in the context of Africa which reflects in the different strata of a typical African society, we can conclude that African interpersonal communication has become the most basic form of communicating through which shared values and the African culture are preserved, propagated and even promoted. However, due to the advent of new technologies propelled by globalisation, western media culture is fast penetrating this most treasured form of communication in Africa and changing in many ways the unique African form of interpersonal communication and migrating it to a digitally-mediated communication both for the old and young but disproportionately by the young. Nonetheless, it doesn't seem that Africans are ready to let go of interpersonal communication despite the inroad globalisation has made in Africa. Africans still see interpersonal communication as intrinsic to their core life and values.

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6. Short biography

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