



Language, Food and Culture: Implications for Language Development and Expansion in Nigeria

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ABSRTACT

This paper investigates the influence, impact and consequences of interconnection between language, food and culture in society, especially in Nigeria. The phenomena of language, food and culture are products of human interaction with the environment. The indigenous knowledge of the environment is concerned with science, technology, culture and domestication of plants and their ecological system. They form the experience of society transmitted through language from generation to generation. The plants and animals are critical elements in human environment as they serve as sources of domestication and cultivation of animals and crops plants as food. Equally, the domestication of animals as husbandry and for various uses as pets, burden, for war, sources of food has tremendous impact on language, culture and history. These domestications have tremendous influence on the rapid growth of civilization and human language. Their development was attributed to the domestication of wheat, rice, maize, potato and guinea corn respectively. However, domestications often consequentially lead to movements of human beings, in the process; the languages of the imigrants come in contact leading to linguistic diffusion and diversity. This thus makes multilingualism a linguistic reality in this geographical sphere as neighbours endeavour to learn the languages and varieties of languages of one another for various kinds of exigencies. The study also shows that organisational evolution and use of plants and animals as food and shelter in medicine, for telling time and periodising seasons as indicators of omen and ecology facilitate extensive lexicon for their transmission. Furthermore, the indigenous knowledge enhances the agencies of education and acculturation which in effect aids rapid transformation of society, the languages spoken in the society. And in the Nigerian case, it has contributed largely to the extensive expansion of English vocabulary in Nigeria as the names of the local foods are directly incorporated into English Language.

Keywords: Language, Food, Culture, Linguistic diffusion/diversity, Lexicon and transformation

INTRODUCTION

This paper periscopes the interplay among language, food and culture in the society. That is, the way they affect one another. The focus is on the influence of food on the language people speak all over the world and Nigeria in particular. We also show how the language people speak shape and determine their cultural heritage and how food influences the language people speak and their varieties.

The society is a place where groups of people live or exist and share common ideas, experiences, set beliefs and communicate with one another. Language is part of societal culture, so also is food. Language is central to culture because it is the means through which culture is learned and communicated. When a group begins to lose its language, its cultural tapestry starts to unravel. As infants eat the food of a particular culture to which they belong, and learn the language, they simultaneously acquire the language of the society to which they were born into. It is only human beings who have the capacity for language which allows them to communicate cultural ideas and symbolic meanings from one generation to the next and constantly create new cultural ideas. It is this capacity for language that separates humans from other primates.

Language is a vehicle through which people interact, share mutual understanding about their environment and communicate experiences with one another. Each group in the society has an identity which distinguishes them from other groups. That is, the people's way of life, set of beliefs and customs. One aspect of other cultural heritage or tradition is the type of food and plants they cultivate for their consumption. Food plays a vital role in our daily lives because without food we cannot survive. Language, culture and food are interwoven to the extent that one cannot do without the other. They have great influence on the society. According to Frances (2009), language can influence culture in different ways. It can influence the way a society perceives the world and creates community. It can also influence the way a society interacts with the world, and creates a distinct culture from the rest of the world.

The language a group of people speak goes a long way in determining how they view the external world, thereby determining their cultural heritage. Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf introduced arguments that the languages of Native Americans, make them to view the world differently from those speaking European languages. According to Whorf (cited in Yule, 2010), the Hopi perceive the world differently from other tribes (including the English speaking tribe). In the grammar of the Hopi, there is a distinction between animate and inanimate and among the set entities categorized as animate are clouds and stones. Whorf claimed that the Hopi believe that clouds and stones are living entities and that it is their language that leads them to such a belief. In Whorf's words, "we dissect nature along lines laid by our native languages".

FOOD

The term food is an aspect of cultural tradition. It plays an inextricable role in human lives. It is a source for pleasure, comfort and security. It is also a symbol of hospitality, social status, and religious significance. What we select to eat, how we prepare it, serve it, and even how we eat it are all factors that touch our individual cultural inheritance.

THE RELATIONSHIP AMONG LANGUAGE, FOOD AND CULTURE

The relationship among language, food and culture in a society is inextricable one. As noted earlier, language is the bedrock through which individual groups in the society are identified with their socio-cultural and socio-economic activities. On the other hand, language is the verbal expression of culture and culture is the idea, customs and belief of a social group or community. Language and culture are thus inseparable. So, culture is a specific set of ideas, beliefs, practices customs which distinguishes society from others. So, language is part of culture, and it plays a vital role in the society as it reflects culture. Brown (1994:165) describes language and culture as follows: A language is part of culture and culture is part of language. The two are interwoven; therefore, one cannot separate the two without losing the importance of both language and culture. And Olivia (2009), states that the language a group of people speak discloses a lot of information about them. Hence, Collins (2006:60) and Fishman (1991) clarify the relationship between language and culture in three ways:

Culture is partly created from its language: most culture of a people was verbally transmitted. The folks tales and wise sayings, its history, wisdom and ideals are all products of language. The taste and flavour or the beauty of culture is given through language. A language symbolizes its culture: A language tends to symbolize the status of the culture with which it is associated. For instance, Fishman (1991) gave an illustration of this, he says to speak German in the U.S.A during World War 1, and in Britain and French in the Second World War was unacceptable. Not that these allies are at war with the language, but rather the German language symbolizes the enemy. Language is the symbolic representation of a people. Since it comprises their historical and cultural heritage or background as well as their approach to life.

A language indexes its culture: The language that exists with its culture from the onset will best express that culture. That is, its vocabularies; idioms are the ones that best explain the cognitive and emotive level of that culture. On the other hand, the food we eat can also denote the identity of a particular culture. According to Chang (2008), people who have the same cultural identity share the same food habits, while people of different cultures share different assemblages of food variables. With this, we might say different cultures have different food variables or food choices. When people are linked by communication, there are lots of possibilities. Culture develops through language, people work and communicate together to meet their daily needs. This could be through agricultural practices and industries that provide the group with their basic needs and give them a chance of survival. Agriculture itself deals with the food we consume.

Customs are created through shared life experiences that we partake in which include celebration stories, music, and many other distinctive activities shared by a culture. For instance, the way the Yoruba people in Nigeria prepare their food is different from the way the Ijaw in Nigeria prepare theirs. In the Yoruba culture, the preparation of "yam" could be through pounding, which is called "iyan", and it will be eaten with the combination of soup, while the Ijaw will rather boil their yam only for consumption; though they pound too but not as done in Yoruba land. Most Yoruba people like to mix their soup with the eba (garri) while the Ijaw will separate the soup from the eba (baked garri). Another instance of this, in the Nigerian culture, is that food is traditionally eaten by hand, while in the western world or culture, they use fork, knives and spoons to eat their food. In the Northern part of

Nigeria, grains such as millet, corn and sorghum are boiled into porridge like dish that form the basis of their diets.

Different cultures have different names for their food which involves the use of languages. Therefore, language, the food we eat and culture have a great significance in the human society. Hence, Palmer (1976:21), says: "The words of a language often reflects not so much the reality of the world, but the interest of people who speak it".

Language can be viewed as a verbal expression of culture. It is used to maintain and convey culture and cultural ties. Language provides us with many of the categories we use for expression for our thoughts; it is therefore natural to assume that our thinking is influenced by the language we use. The values and customs in the country we grow up in, shape the way in which we think to a certain extent.

(Internet source)

To Larson and Smalley (1972:39)

Culture is the blueprint that guides the behaviour of people in a community and is incubated in family life. It governs our behaviour in groups, makes us sensitive to matters of status, and helps us know what other expect from us and what will happen if we do not live up to their expectation. Culture helps us know how far we can go as individuals, what our responsibility is to the group.

IMPLICATIONS ON WORLD LANGUAGES

So, when speakers of different languages interact closely, it is typical for their languages to influence one another. Languages normally develop gradually, accumulating dialectal differences. The influence of language can go deeper extending to exchange of even basic characteristics of language such as lexicology, morphology and grammar.

Frances (2009), further opines that language is composed of the word and grammatical constructs. He further states that the meanings of words can change over time, new technologies can come into play, and new slang can also be introduced. It is such that when languages come in contact, it will result in bi/multilingualism, emergence of different accents with distinct pronunciation patterns, and the emergence of different dialects of the same language which shows considerable variation in the choice of words (lexis) and grammatical patterns (syntax).

Udofot (2004:112) argues that although language transmits culture, culture is not co-terminus with language. He cited instances of many customs, institutions, food, items of dress and furniture found in England which can also be found in places like France, Italy, Nigeria and some other places. The institution of marriage, for instance, is common in many countries though with slight variations as far as rites are concerned, but there are certain items of dresses that are not peculiar to some even in the same country.

The influence of culture is so powerful on the language people speak so much so that culture at times simulate the kind of words to be used by men or women in a society. For instance, in Sidamo, spoken in Ethiopia, there are some words used only by men and some used only by women, so that the translation of milk would be 'ado' by men but 'gurda' by a woman. Another instance, is the Portugese language in which saying thank you is oborigado if you are a man and obrigada if used by a woman.

Culture also influences language in respect of the notion of time in some languages. For instance, in the Hopi language, spoken in Arizona, there were traditionally no terms equivalent to most of the time words and phrases (two hours, thirty minutes) because the terms express concepts from a culture operating on "clock time". Perhaps, for a similar reason, there was no term for a unit of seven days. There was no "week", nor was there a term for Saturday and Sunday combined as a unit of time. And there was no "weekend".

IMPLICATIONS ON NIGERIAN LANGUAGES

The difference in foods and cultures extends from one region of the world to another and accounts for different names or types of food eaten by different socio-cultural groups. It is as a result of this that we have what is referred to as the 'language of food' in different socio-cultural groups. In other words, the fact that some foods or types of dishes exist in some cultures accounts for names for them in those

cultures. Although some of these names may not have ‘universal’ meaning in the English language, the socio-cultural groups who use them know what they mean. This implies that if those foods do not exist in those cultures there will be no names for them. A very good example is the word ‘pounded yam’ (‘Iyan’), to an English man who has not seen it before, it may not make any sense to him since he cannot conceptualize how possible it is to pound yam. But almost all the tribes in Nigeria know what pounded yam means. In fact, an average Nigerian who likes the delicacy would start salivating and imaging the pounded yam with a soup of their choice once it is mentioned. In other words, language of food is culture specific. Other examples of food eaten by different socio-cultural groups in Nigeria includes: tuwo chinkafa eaten in the Northern part of Nigeria, what we call eba in Yoruba is referred to as garri in the South-Eastern and South-South regions of the same country, Nigeria.

We also have food names like fufu which the Ibo call akpu. What is called okro soup in the South West is most referred to as ‘draw’ soup by the Ibo and South-Southerners, whereas egusi soup is most referred to the same way by most socio-cultural groups in the country. The Yoruba have what is called ewedu and gbegiri soups, while those words are not present in the indigenous languages of other tribes. And other tribes have their own language of food that the Yoruba do not have. For instance, there is ‘garden egg’ soup in Benue state, there is banga soup in Delta state, the Ibo have oha soup, the Calabar have Afang, Edikaikong, the Hausa have Yakuwa, Kerikeshi, Kuka, Miya (these soups are usually greenish/dark in colour but are very tasty). The Hausa hardly use palm oil in their cooking, they mostly use vegetable oil, they also have Suya (a kind of barbecue meat). The Ibo have Ogbono soup, bitter leave soup (although this is also eaten by some other tribes), Okasi soup etc. It is important to mention here that, for the fact that some set of people in a particular socio-cultural do not like or eat a particular dish or food in their culture does not rule out the fact that the food does not exist in such culture. Furthermore, we drink or eat soaked garri in Yoruba land, whereas what we call eba is what the Ibo call garri such that they eat their own garri with soup. Yoruba have iru (locust beans) which is one of the condiments used in cooking some local soups, whereas the Benue people have okpee which is iru equivalent in Yoruba language culture. So, food language is culture specific. The cultural names given to these food items have no English equivalent; so, they are directly incorporated into English language thereby expanding the vocabulary of the language. These Nigerian cultural foods are additions to the foreign or European food items with their own language. Such food items include; Hungarian gulya soup, irish stew etc. macaroni, salads (whether fruit or vegetable salads), doughnut, cakes, tea. Even the most common staple food in the Nigeria of today, eaten by all and sundry has its origin traced to the European countries (although we now have various ways of cooking them which has made us have varieties like white rice, jollof rice, fried rice, etc which do not even occur in the English dictionary). So, the names of these foods (both the local and the foreign are now in the languages spoken in Nigeria). All the languages have no alternative names in English or in any of the foreign languages.

TABLE 1: FOODS TAKEN IN NIGERIA

Names of Food	Cultural Environment
Tuwo Chinkafa	Northern part of Nigeria (Hausa)
Fufu	South Western part of Nigeria (Yoruba)
Garri	South Eastern and South-South regions of Nigeria (Ibo and Ibibio, Ijaw and Edo)
Akpu	South-Eastern region (Ibo)
Draw Soup	South-Eastern and South-South regions (Ibo, Ibibio, Edo)
Ewedu Soup	South-Western part of Nigeria (Yoruba)
Gbegiri Soup	South-Western part of Nigeria (Yoruba)
Banga Soup	South -South region (Urhobo)
Oha	South-Eastern part (Ibo)
Afang	South-South region (Calabar)
Edikaikong	South-South region (Uyo, Calabar)
Yakuwa	Northern part of Nigeria (Hausa)
Kerikeshi	Northern part of Nigeria (Hausa)
Kuka	Northern part of Nigeria (Hausa)
Miya	Northern part of Nigeria (Hausa)

Suya	Northern part of Nigeria (Hausa)
Ogbono	South-Eastern Part (Ibo)
Okasi	South-Eastern Part (Ibo)

The foreign foods still maintain their names in the local languages, while the local foods equally retain their names in the foreign languages as we have in the following expressions:

- a. I prefer garri to fufu.
- b. He took amala with ewedu soup last night.
- c. Alhaji bought N100 tuwo for me.
- d. She likes cooking Akpu with Banga soup.
- e. My mother prefers pupuru and egusi soup for dinner.
- f. Let me have only edikaikong.

The underlined food words have no translation equivalents in English, so, it is a case of direct donation to English language spoken in Nigeria. In the process, the native foods expand the vocabulary of English as used in Nigeria. A foreigner in Nigeria who is interested in any of the delicacies will equally make use of the food words like:

Give me a plate of akpu with gbegiri soup. But my wife prefers amala with banga soup.

Also, those native or cultural names given to those foods consumed in the different cultural zones in Nigeria, do not, in most cases, have English equivalents as mentioned earlier. They are thus directly incorporated into English thus expanding the vocabulary set and the general expressions of the language. Even a foreigner (either native speaker of English or not in Nigeria, wishing to take any of the delicacies will produce sentences containing the food names similar to any of the above. This also gives it the local flavour that renders the language unique and a typical variety of English spoken in Nigeria otherwise known as Nigerian English (NE).

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown the interplay among language, food and culture. It has also proved that the interconnection of the three concepts has expanded and developed languages in the world and Nigeria in particular. It has also led to the evolution and development of what is termed Nigerian English and its varieties. It thus gives the deserving local flavour to the English language spoken in Nigeria. It has also led to the generation of the linguistic terminology that is called language of food.

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