

LANGUAGE OF A SOCIETY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON HER LITERATURE

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Abstract

No society exists without a language and literature. Language therefore is human as it is only human beings who can give interpretations to the sound. Also language has exclusively been reserved for human beings who give convention and symbol to the language. The literature of a society is a clear product of the society which is expressed in language and arts. This paper focuses on the language of a society as it influences her literature. Language variation due to physical or social environments has made this possible. Experiences, events and even the history of a society can lead to the development of a hostile or aggressive language automatically this form of language manifests itself in the literature of the society.

Language without doubt, is an indispensable factor of the society. When we talk about society it cuts across every society. Although society varies from one to another, no society therefore, exists without a given language. The language we talk about has always been expressed by human beings who are higher animals. This is possible because of man's reasoning faculty that makes him to ascribe conventions and symbol to the language. The language of the society has always found itself in two forms such as the oral and written forms. Every society therefore exists in these two forms of the language.

The communicative art in any society anchors itself so much in the language be it in everyday activities or in the literary works. The major concern of this conference paper is on the peculiarity or uniqueness of the language in a given society as it influences the literature of the society or its literary works. Society, language and literature are fused together in such a way that separation of any of them might harm the society. Language and society complement one another while literature as we know is the product of the society which sees its expression in language and arts. Language therefore performs indefatigable function in literature.

The language of literature varies from time to time, from society to society. This reason is based on the societal experiences, events and even the history of the society. The black race which witnessed hostile, oppressive, humiliating and dehumanizing treatments from her colonial masters resolved mainly in using violent and militant literature language than America, Britain, France etc that did not witness slavery and

colonization. A harmed or wounded society develops an aggressive language to fight back and this obviously does not hide itself from the society's literature and literary works. This paper is bent to express that language expression of any society influences her literature based on experiences and events that find themselves in that society. It is as well the opinion of this paper to express that language tone in literature is due to the society. According to Okolo, B.A and Ezikeojiaku P.A (1999: 1) concluded;

"Popular attitudes towards language and communication range from the positive, it is language that makes us human, to the negative, language falsifies experiences. Thus we praise language one day for making human understanding and cooperation possible and damn it the next day for human misunderstanding"

Language System and the Society

Language as we know is highly systematic on many levels from the system of sounds to the organization of discourse. Language use as I have indicated earlier enough varies from person to person, area to area and from one situation to another. There is therefore variety at every level of language structure and such of this is unconscious. Despite language diversity, there are great many universal properties of languages, there are characteristics shared by all languages and there are characteristics peculiar to individual languages. Oral language is almost entirely unconscious so that it is not easy for speakers of a language to reflect on it. Although all languages change systematically as time passes, whether the speakers desire the changes or not. Often speakers are not even aware of these changes.

In language, there are two aspects of language behaviour that are very important from a social point of view: First the function of language in establishing social relationships and second the role played by the language in conveying information about the speaker. In analysing this fact we can obviously observe that these aspects of language behaviour are reflections of the fact that there is a close interrelationship between languages and society. In a discussion between two people separated by social class or geographical background use different languages. A speaker from a middle class obviously uses the type of language associated with men of his type or a man from the southern or northern part of Nigeria probably uses the kind of language spoken by people from that part of the country. In most cases this could be regarded as dialect but the established fact is that there is an absolute relationship between languages and society.

Hughes, P (2005: 198) concluded:

Now, in attempting to decide which language someone is speaking; we could say that if two speakers cannot understand one another, then, they are speaking different languages. Similarly, if they can understand each other, we can say that they are speaking dialects of the same language.

In other words, language change or difference does not always take place in the direction of the prestige norm. On the contrary all sorts of other attitudes towards language have to be taken into consideration. Language therefore can be a very

important factor in group identification and group solidarity. At this point it appears very clear that there is great societal influence on language and the way in which environment is reflected in language and the environment here refers to first the physical environment in which a society lives and the social environment can also be reflected in language and these can often have an effect on the structure of the vocabulary. Osmond, T (1999: 250) concluded;

“A society’s kinship system is generally reflected in its kinship vocabulary and this is one reason why anthropologists tend to be interested in this particular aspect of language”.

Literature and the Society

Literature actually is the product of the society. Literature stands to be the mirror that reflects the society’s experiences, events and the past life of the people in a given society. Literature can not stand on its own without a society from where it operates. Literature and society have mutual influence on one another. i.e. the society influences the literature and as well as literature influences the society. In this regard then, literature tends to project the norms, values, culture, tradition and even the aspirations of the society. Obi N (2009: 62) saw literature “as a mode of expression. It is not just subject that expresses something but rather, it is the way, manner or method in which something is said or written”

Obinna (1994) saw literature “as a well articulated story of a given society which carries along realities and imaginations” p4. Obi N. (2009: 63) maintained; “Literature is language well used for understanding of the audience according to the message passed across. It comprises three and these parts are referred to as literary genres”.

The branches or aspects of literature called genres are: prose, drama and poetry. These genres have specialized or unique features of expressing literary works or arts, and all of them target expressing what happens in the society. Literature therefore, be it oral or written has vital roles to perform in the society such as applauding the society for the good things it has and condemning the society for what it has refused to achieve.

Literature in most societies especially in African society has always been at war in condemning, criticizing, evaluating and satirizing the African society that has refused rapid development of the land. The African literature for instance has been applying its violent approach in attacking most obnoxious cultural practices in Africa and as well as condemning African leaders who have not achieved much in Africa since after independence rather they are seen to be consumers instead of producers, non achievers instead of achievers, looters instead of being judicious etc. Be it the playwright, the prose and poetic writers, they are people of the same motive, with the intention of seeing the African society being an Eldorado or paradise. They have the intention of seeing the society being free from evil and full of development. Literary artists have often been regarded as men of vision, reformers, crusaders, chroniclers of events, teachers and the people’s spokesman. Through literature, we can look back to seeing how the society has fared and assessing the level of development in the society.

The Place of Language in Literature

Literature and literary works have always been expressed in a given language. The issue here therefore is that language is always in use for the expression of the literature of a given society. The language in use for the expression of literature varies from society to society, from individual to individual and from time to time. The reason for this variation in language is not difficult to be understood. The application of language in literary works depends purely on the degree of events and experiences in the society and the level of perception of the writer or the critic. The language we are talking about could be categorized under the following militant or violent language, adoration or glorification language etc. for instance; violent language in literature is not exclusively reserved for the African society whose literature is a protest or militant literature. In France, some literary writers used violent language in expressing their works during monarchical form of government and during the French revolution of 1789. Hugo, V (1874: 74) said:

"No pity, kill them, you know the blues that are there? My general, they wrote battalion of Red-bonnet on the flag. These are ferocious soldiers, kill them all. The prisoners, kill them; they are about eighty, kill all".

This militant language tone in one of Victor Hugo's literary works is circumstantial. This militant language in Hugo's work was motivated by the French great revolution of 1789 which led to the loss of lives and property in the land on both the rulers and the ruled. Keestloot, L (1995:150) presented Diop's poem

You that plead, you that cry you that will die one day without knowing why. You that fight and our for the pleasure of others. You that do not have joy and happiness in your eyes. You my brother that has fears and anger on your face. Stand up and cry NO!

This is another literary work in a militant language from David Diop an African who is a militant poet on the contrary, we have other literary artists who use more milled language in their works for example Umez (2006: 57) in his poem presented;

Mother, I remember the milk from you that formed my bones through and through my veins still flow...here counting your footprints on the intricate web of time. I remember, mother.

In the case of Umez's literary work, his language is not a violent one rather it's a language of adoration to a good mother. Language application in literary works therefore depends on circumstance, event and the point of perception by the writer.

Conclusion

It is evident that every society has a language and literature. The literature of any society is expressed in a given language which depends on events and even on the point of perception of the events by the society. The language use in any given society has been influenced by some factors which this paper was able to capture. These factors include the physical environment in which a society lives and the social environments which can also be reflected in language structure or use. The effects of these factors on

language use usually manifest in literature because the literary writer, writes from a given society from where he perceives what happens in the society.

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