

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION OF TERMINOLOGIES USED FOR LANGUAGE STATUS

By

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Abstract

Language is a product of its society. It is unique in nature but shared in application. It is unique in the sense that it gets born in the society with a given speech community as its product, where a child in that speech community has the ability to learn it by birth. It is also shared in application because other people who are non-native to such a given speech community aspire to learn it, and they do so with a certain level of competence, or as argued by linguists, performance. It is the uniqueness and diverse applications of language that the linguistic sub-fields such as sociolinguistics set out to investigate. This paper thereby attempts a conceptual exploration of the given terms in the title.

Introduction

Before going into details of whether a language is primary, secondary, foreign, official or semi-official, it is important to briefly look at the main concept itself, which is language. Various linguists have given many definitions of the term language, but for this paper, we shall consider just a few of these definitions:

According to Sapir (8), “Language is purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols”. In their outline of linguistic analysis, Bloch and Trager (5) cited in Lyons (3), view language as “a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group co-operates”. Similarly, Hall (158), in his essay on language, considers language as “the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols”. Generally speaking, language could be seen as both *phatic* and *phonic* medium through which humans communicate meaningful thoughts, ideas, desires, etc. to each other.

Primary Language

Primary language in the linguistic circle may be seen as first language (L1). It is the language one is first exposed to in life. It is often said by linguists that primary language is the language a person acquires at a critical period and that the person is most proficient at, without necessarily being culturally affiliated to the linguistic community of that language. Thus, it often forms the basis for sociolinguistic identity even without native affiliation.

However, while the description above may not have been comprehensively established to clear all questions about the term primary language, it is hoped that the

following disambiguation will give a clear view of the term when considering other concepts that operate on close relationship with the term primary language. Such mappings include, but are not limited to, native language, first language and mother tongue. Let us take turn about them:

Native Language

Native language is sometimes used synonymously to mother tongue, first language or arterial language. It is used in most cases to refer to the language a person “acquires in early childhood because it is spoken in the family and/or it is the language of the region where the child lives” (Nordquist, online). The term native language is used to indicate a language that a person is as proficient at as a native individual of that language’s community, or that he is as proficient as the average person who speaks no other language but that language (Nordquist, www.thoughtco.com/native-language). It follows therefore that if, for example, a Hausa-based speaking school advertises that all its teachers are native speakers of Hausa language, we could raise complaints if we later discover that although the teachers do have some vague childhood memories of the time when they talked to their mothers in Hausa, but they, however, grew up in a Yoruba-speaking community and are now fluent in Yoruba rather than in Hausa language.

However, in some countries where native languages are characterised on the basis of ethno-cultural lineages, the term native language as construed could mean the language of one’s ethnic group rather than one’s first language. A comprehensive discussion of such categorisation can easily be found in Alan Davies’ text, *The Native Speaker: Myth and Reality*. Davies here creates the native speaker from different perspectives, arguing that the native language is both myth and reality. The book is purely a linguistic review whereby

linguists and applied linguists turn to for reference. The book argues in a way that primary or native language is a myth where the native speaker is himself a myth; that is, a person who acquires the language from birth or that he shares ethnic affiliation with the language even if he does not speak it the most. This is the case where native language begins to answer the name of heritage language. In his definition of heritage language (which assumes universal recognition), Valdes sees **heritage** language as:

the language someone learns at home as a child which is a minority language in society, but because of growing up in a dominant language, the speaker seems to be more competent in the latter and feels more comfortable to communicate in that language (375).

The other aspect being reality; that is, native speaker as a reality. This means a native language must not necessarily be the person's ethnic language. It means the language one is first exposed to and that he speaks it the most even if there is no ethnic affiliation. This view justifies the analogy made by some linguists that when, for example, a Nigerian by birth (i.e. having Nigerian parents) but born and bred in Britain, and therefore speaks English the most, even without ethnic affiliation to it. Such a person may be prompted to identify English as his 'native language', and that is native speaker as a reality. This can hence be likened to the situation of first or primary language.

First Language

First language (L1) is the language one first knows how to express himself best in it than in any other language. The situation of first language covers whether the language is indigenous to one or not, in so far it is the language one is first exposed to in his early life and that he maintains the contact and usage through adulthood. This therefore likens first

language to primary language, because the two share intrinsic conceptual connection. First language is mostly used linguistically in direct opposite to second language.

Whereas the first language technically presents a situation of “acquisition” as upheld by many linguists, second language presents a situation of “learning”. That is why in this paper, we reservedly restrict ourselves to the diction of first language, primary language, native language or mother tongue as acquired while second language, on the other hand, as being learnt. This is built on the basis that scholars generally agree upon the fact that a language, whether first, native, primary or mother tongue gains access into one’s cognitive domain at a very “critical period”; which is said to be right from the child’s birth through his adolescence and, for most adulthood.

Mother Tongue

The term mother tongue (MT) denotes not only the language one acquires from one’s mother, but also the dominant and home language. This demonstrates the fact that mother tongue does not only refer to the “first language according to the time of acquisition, but the first with regard to its importance and the speaker’s ability to master its linguistic and communicative aspects” (Nordquist, www.thoughtco.com/mother-tongue-language).

In fact, in his 2005 analytical review of the term mother tongue, Pokorn puts that “the vagueness of the term has led some researchers to claim...that different connotative meanings of the term ‘mother tongue’ vary according to the intended usage of the word and that differences in understanding the term can have far-reaching effects on political influences” (quoted in Nordquist, on mother tongue, net). In view of the above, the term mother tongue, though may have been coined from mother’s language due to the perceptive frequency of the time shared between a mother and her child, but as construed, is not interpreted to mean the

language of one's mother. This is because in many societies, Nigeria inclusive, the wife moves in with the husband, and of course, they may have different native languages each. In this kind of situation, the child may have one of the two possibilities: either growing up with only one mother tongue (in which case the father's first and dominant language prevails) or growing up with two languages, having a proportionate native-like proficiency in both (i.e. the interplay of both the mother and the father's first languages). This evidently points to the fact that a child may grow up with two mother tongues, meaning a bilingual child.

To justify this claim further, we would like to draw an example from one individual who is a cross-bred of Hausa and Gwandara parentage (both from paternal and maternal sides respectively). While growing up, he acquired Hausa from his father's town, and at the same time acquiring Gwandara language from his mother's town in the neighbouring environment where the two languages are spoken separately. He is therefore proficient in both languages; i.e. he can speak both languages with approximately the same proportion of competence. This means that neither Hausa nor Gwandara is a second language to him, but the two could boldly be called his mother tongues. This is the case where sociolinguists would call such an individual bilingual.

More so, it could also be that a child acquiring one language from his mother or parents at home and learning another language in school or through social contact with other children in the environment: such as a Yoruba child by birth living in Kaduna with his Yoruba parents; it is most likely that the child is exposed to Yoruba by his parents at home, but outside home he is exposed to the general language of the city, which is Hausa among other children. Such a child may grow up with proficiency in both languages. That is the situation described above.

Nevertheless, in some cultures mother tongue is directly linked to the cultural and historical backgrounds rather than giving it just linguistic consideration. Tulasiewicz and Adams, in their 2005 treatment of culture and mother tongue, observe that:

It is the language community of the mother tongue, the language spoken in a region, which enables the process of enculturation, the growing of an individual into a particular system of linguistic perception of the world and participation in the centuries [sic] old history of linguistic production (quoted in Nordquist, on mother tongue, www.thoughtco.com/mother-tongue-language).

To conclude our discussion of the term mother tongue in this paper, the researchers are tempted to redraw the mother tongue summary featured in one of Bloomfield's most widely read and popular text, *Language*. While defining mother tongue from different angles, it is summarised as follows:

Mother Tongue defined-

- Based on origin: the language(s) one learns first (the language(s) in which one has established the first long-lasting verbal contacts), i.e. like native language;
- Based on internal identification: the language(s) one identifies with/as a speaker of;
- Based on external identification: the language(s) one is identified with/as a speaker of by others;
- Based on competence: the language(s) one knows best;
- Based on function: the language(s) one uses most.

Second Language

Second language (L2) is any language learned after the acquisition of the first language or mother tongue. Some researchers have established the proposition concerning the defining differences between a first language and second language to be the age proportion at which a person learns the languages each. In fact, some linguists, including the linguist and neurologist Eric Lenneberg used second language to mean a language consciously learned after puberty. In most cases, people hardly attain the same level of competence in L1 and L2. This is what the critical period hypothesis (CPH) discovered (Vanhove, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/article/).

Linguists have however observed that in learning an L2, the age of six and seven seems to be the cut-off point for bilinguals to achieve a native-like proficiency. After that age, L2 learners could get near-native-likeness but their performance in the target language would exhibit some errors enough to set them apart from the L1 group of that language. This inability of the L2 learners to achieve a native-like proficiency is said to be in relation to the age of onset (AO) by applied linguists. “The age of 6 or 8 does seem to be an important period in distinguishing between near-native and native-like ultimate attainment. More specifically, it may be suggested that AO interacts with frequency and intensity of language use” (Hyltenstam 364). This, in effect, posits that there is a constant L1-L2 interference (what linguists have always been concerned with in their treatment of learner interference theory) which often haunts the L2 learners.

Official or Semi-Official Language

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of the Current English*, an official language is that language which is given a special legal status in a given nation.

Clearly, a nation's official language is the language that attains a prestigious position in that nation; it is used in all formal and official spheres of that nation, such as court, governmental administration, education, inter and intra-governmental affairs and diplomacy. Note that an official language may be one of the indigenous languages developed and legalised to the official status even if it is not the language of the majority. For instance, the Maori language in New Zealand has the official status under the Maori Language Act of 1987 even though it is spoken by less than five percent of the New Zealand's total population.

Again, Hindi has been spelled out in the National Constitution of India since independence to be the principal official language despite all arguments by member indigenous languages, such as Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi, etc. to attain such a national official language status. Mandarin is also playing the same role in China.

Meanwhile, an official language may also be a formerly foreign language which has now gained acceptance in the society, and which has been legalised by law to be the official language or what may be referred to as semi-official or secondary official language. Now, Nigeria is a major example of this situation. English language is absolutely playing an official role with all the status of national recognition, without any competition. But in other former British colonies such as India, there is no outright saying that English has assumed an absolute official role since it is used side by side with Hindi as declared in the constitution of Indian people. Here, we may observe the situation of semi-official language in this context.

Foreign Language

A foreign language, according to *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (online), is a language indigenous to another country. It also adds that foreign language is a language not spoken in the native country of the person referred to; i.e. an English speaker living in Japan, for

instance, can rightly say that Japanese is a foreign language to him. However, for the most, the two possibilities established above cannot exhaust the concept of foreign language, as some further explanations are needed.

This is because sometimes the model is applied in ways that appear misleading and confusing. For example, some children, on very rare occasions, acquire more than one language from birth or at a very tender age (i.e. at the so-called critical period); they automatically become bilingual or multilingual. These children can be said to have two or more mother tongues, since they can exhibit levels of proficiency in each of the languages almost equally. Neither or none of the languages is foreign to such children even if one of the languages is foreign for the vast majority of the people in the children's birth country.

Basically, a distinction has to be drawn again between foreign language and second language. It is to be noted that while second language is being learned and used in a country where it is widely spoken, foreign language is learned and used, for most, in the country where it is not often spoken. French and Arabic may therefore be called foreign languages in the context of their use in Nigeria.

Moreover, the term foreign language also differs from auxiliary language. By linguists' account, an auxiliary language may be local minority or any of the indigenous languages which has reached some levels closer to that of lingua franca and that performs an auxiliary function of being medium of exchange among diverse ethno-lingual communities, but which does not have legal recognition as official or national language. However, this is also different from the term vernacular. A clear distinction is hereby necessary as a way of disambiguating the aforementioned terms.

Vernacular

According to *Merriam Webster's Encyclopaedic Dictionary* (online version), the term vernacular was brought into the English language as early as 1601 from Latin *vernaculus*, “native”, which had been in figurative use in classical Latin as “national” and “domestic”, having originally been derived from *vernus* and *verna*, a male or female slave respectively, born in the house rather than abroad. The figurative meaning was later broadened from the diminutive extended words, *vernaculus* and *vernacular*; Varro (the classical Latin grammarian) *vocabula vernacula* terms “de la langue nationale” or “Vocabulary of the National Language” as opposed to foreign words (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vernacular).

In general term, vernacular is the native language of a population in a country or in an area defined on some other bases, such as locality, community, society or the most appropriate term, speech community. Many of great or most influential languages of today were at one point in time considered vernaculars. English for example, was termed vernacular in its olden days during the Norman conquest of the British isle. Because the language of the colonisers, French (which was more or less Latin) was given an official status (as language of the court and politics), thus enjoying all the prestige of superiority over the indigenous language, English was only spoken among the commoners, thus relegated to the vernacular status.

Similarly, in general linguistics, a vernacular is also opposed to *lingua franca*, which is a third-party language in which persons speaking different vernaculars not understood by each other may use as communicative vehicle that has ‘unifying force’. For instance, in Western Europe until the 17th century, most scholarly works had been written in Latin which

was the then lingua franca, while works written in Romance languages were said to be in the vernacular. In the same vein, the role English is currently playing in Nigeria, apart from being official language, is no doubt that of the lingua franca. This is because it is the language which easily brings together diverse ethno-lingual and multi-regional nationalities from within Nigeria under one linguistic umbrella to communicate with perfect understanding among themselves. In fact, it is this realisation that makes us to refer to our indigenous languages as vernacular when spoken (in place of English) in formal situations such as the schools, offices and other formal occasions.

Another good example is the Hindu culture. In the Indian peninsula, traditional religious or scholarly works were written in Sanskrit (long after its use as a spoken language) or in Tamil, in Tamil country. As further explained in *Collins Dictionary and Thesaurus* (online version), Sanskrit was a lingua franca among the non-Indo-European languages of the Indian sub- continent, and became more as a spoken language that was most respectably orthographic with its generated name *Prakrits*, and had spread across different regions. It was not until the 12th century with the rise of the Bhakti movement that religious works began to be created in other languages: Hindi, Kannada, Telugu and a host of others which were initially considered vernaculars.

Finally on vernacular, from the socio-linguistic point of view, the term vernacular has been applied to several concepts. However, those varying concepts can be deduced to match the saying that vernacular is an informal register. According to variation theory pioneered by William Labov (in Mesthrie 77-85), language is a large set of styles or registers from which the speaker selects according to the social settings of the moment. The vernacular is “the least self-conscious style of people in a relaxed conversation”; that is, casual varieties used spontaneously rather than self-consciously (informal talk used in intimate situations). This

view has even escalated to mean that vernacular is a non-standard dialect, as opposed to standard (though abhorred by Labov). The parameters of this concept have been construed to be defined as dialects which are to be identified as complexes of factors, such as “social class, religion, ethnicity, situation, and so forth”. It is also added, based on this theory, that the standards are written whereas the non-standards are only spoken with “socially disfavoured” structures. An example of a vernacular theory given here is “African American vernacular English” (Wolfram and Natalie 13-16).

Auxiliary Language

The term auxiliary language is a language which is not the primary or native language of a community. It may refer to:

- an international auxiliary language, i.e. a planned artificial language constructed for international communication, such as Esperanto;
- a local minority language such as Latin, Sanskrit, or old Church Slavonic used in religion services;
- a professional trade or otherwise secret language such as Kallawaya among Andean herbalists;
- an initiation language such as Damin in Australia;
- a language of ethnic identity, such as eskayan in the Philippines (Word Finder, www.findwords.info/term/auxiliary/language)

However, while we have been busy trying to disambiguate the terms under study, it is pertinent to note that meaning is one tricky phenomenon. It is not surprising, of course, when

Bloomfield observes that “the statement of meanings is therefore the weak point in language study, and will remain so until human knowledge advances very far beyond its present state” (144).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Bloomfield’s position above justifies the facts on the diverse behavioural conceptions on the term meaning. Since time immemorial, linguists and semanticists have been battling with the term *meaning*, theorising and postulating upon what should constitute a universally-accepted model of explicating meaning, but until today no theory has been able to claim that perfection. That is why a word or term today has far-reaching entries of explication. It may mean this or that, or yet another thing, bringing context into use. So, when we gave different perspective meanings of a term in this paper, we did so bearing in mind the different interpretative, scholarly construed or contextually explored explanation of the term in question.

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