

LINGUISTIC THEORIES AND THE TEACHING OF NIGERIAN LANGUAGES

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of linguistic theories in language teaching. The aim is to highlight the relevance of linguistics to language teaching. Using data from Nigerian languages, the study attempts to answer the following question: How do linguistic theories fit into language teaching and learning? The study accomplishes this feat with discussions of Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis; Classical Phoneme Theory; Morphophonemics; and their implications for language teaching. The paper concludes that linguistic theories can facilitate listening and speaking proficiency; and can be used to handle learning issues such as interference and transfer.

1.0. Introduction

“A striking phenomenon in applied linguistics is the length of time it takes for changes in general linguistic theory to show any applicability, if they ever do, to language teaching or other real-world endeavours for which an understanding of the nature of language is a prerequisite. (Henderson 2009)”

One probable reason for the minimal impact of linguistic theories on language teaching is the fact that language teaching encompasses more than the acquisition of sounds, as language learners are evaluated not only for oral skills, but also the ability to read and write. Another reason why language teaching and linguistics have not fully explored either's potential may be the fact that advances in linguistic theories have been largely sub-field specific, whereas language teaching has a holistic orientation towards language. This paper examines some linguistic theories with the aim of highlighting the benefits of their knowledge and use in the teaching of Nigerian languages.

The paper is divided into three sections. Section one is introduction, which provides a definition of terms and an overview of the paper. Section two focuses on phonological theories, morphophonemics and the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. It examines their application and adaptation in the language classroom, as well as the implications for language teaching. Section three provides the summary and conclusion.

2.0. Phonological Theories and Language Teaching

Phonology is the sub-field of linguistics that studies the sound systems of individual languages. It describes the way sounds function within a given language or across languages. An important aspect of phonology is determining which sounds are distinctive in a given language. Other aspects of phonology include the study of speech related phenomenon such as accent, tone, intonation, stress and syllable structure. There are several theories of phonology. Some of these theories are concerned primarily with sounds (e.g. classical phoneme theory); others are concerned with non-segmental phenomenon such as tone (e.g. Autosegmental Theory) and stress (e.g. Metrical Phonology Theory) while others cater for both sound segmental and non-segmental phenomena (e.g. Optimality Theory). Although, they have different origins, in respect to language acquisition all phonological theories are concerned with providing answers for three basic questions (cf. Gierut 1990). These questions are;

- How do sounds differ from one another?
- Which structural properties are used to distinguish meaning?
- How are the properties that distinguish meaning organised in morphemes?

The principles of phonological theory have been applied to the analysis of sign language, and studies in other sub-fields of linguistics such as morphology. However, its use in language teaching has been very minimal. In the following sub-section, the paper would examine a phonological theory that has been applied in language teaching and learning.

2.1. Classical Phoneme Theory

The classical phoneme theory, also referred to as structuralist phonemics or derogatorily as taxonomic phonology, deals exclusively with phonemes. A phoneme is the minimal distinctive unit of language. Proponents of the theory include Nikolai Trubetzkoy (1969) and Roman Jakobson (1962). The tenets of this theory are as follows;

- Phonological analysis should be undertaken solely and exhaustively by the setting up of phonemes.
- All analyses should be independent of and separate from analysis at other levels such as semantics, syntax and morphology.
- The phonemic system of a language and its representation in phonemic transcription should be demonstrably derived exclusively from phonetic data in utterances of the language.
- Sounds are indivisible segments.
- Segments have no inherent features.
- Segments have allophonic variants; but there are no shared allophones that overlap two or more phonemes.
- Every phone belongs to one and only one phoneme.

2.1.1. Classical Phoneme Theory in Language Education

In language education, the classical phoneme theory has fared better than other phonological theories. The reason is that it has a grammar correlate, which has been widely adopted in the field of education. This correlate is known as the *Structural Grammar Theory*. The theory is associated with structural linguistics - an approach to linguistics that flourished in Europe and the United States in the first half of the 20th century. This approach to language study is assumed to have started formally with the publication of the book *Cours de linguistique générale* (Saussure 1916). The underlying assumption of structural grammar is that there is a distinction between *Langue* and *Parole*. *Langue* is the linguistic system shared by a speech community i.e. the totality of language stored in the minds of language users, while *parole* refers to the concrete utterances of an individual language user. Structural Grammar Theory is characterised by the following;

- It employs a scientific approach to language study.
- It supports linguistic claims with objective and observable analysis of linguistic data.
- Every language is treated as a unique, coherent and integrated system, which should be studied on its merits without recourse to models established for well-studied languages.

2.1.2. Classical Phoneme Theory in the Language Classroom

In the language classroom, the classic phoneme theory finds its application in the *audio-lingual teaching method*. The audio-lingual also known as aural-oral method was “derived from the intensive training in spoken languages given to American military personnel during the Second

World War” (Crystal 2010:394). This teaching method consists of an analysis and selection of structural patterns of the target language. These are embedded in dialogues as structured drills and are first presented orally, and much later in the written form. The goal is to enable learners comprehend and produce the target language correctly. Hence, the method emphasizes the development of language skills in the order of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The learner is moved gradually from oral speech work into reading and finally into writing. The underlying principle is that speech holds primacy over writing. Indeed, all language users can speak/sign but not all can read and write.

The audio-lingual method is especially useful when the objective is to ensure that a learner is well grounded in the lexical, grammatical and phonological systems of the target language (Aje 2006). In relation to phonology, the method can be used for teaching and testing the differences in the phonemic and prosodic patterns of the subject language. For example; it can be used to teach aspects of spoken language such as rising and falling intonation in statements and questions; and the distinction between voiced and voiceless consonants. Although these differences are common to all language subjects in the curriculum, some distinctions are peculiar to particular Nigerian languages. For example, Hausa marks a distinction between long and short vowels but in Èdo the distinction is between oral and nasal vowels as illustrated below.

Èdo (cf. Omozuwa 2010:117)

[tà] “to tell”
 [tǎ] “to be tall”
 [isɛ̃] “Amen”
 [isɛ̃̃] “five”

Hausa (cf. Amfani 2007:131)

[fítòò] “ferrying”
 [fítòò] “whistling”
 [káárii] “addition”
 [kárii] “string”

The language teacher would find knowledge of the classic phoneme theory particularly useful in teaching second language learners, as well as native speakers whose dialects differ from the standard forms adopted for educational purposes.

2.1.3. Implications for Language Teaching

The Classic Phoneme Theory has the following implications for language teaching

- Language teaching should emphasize the primacy of speaking skills.

The classic phoneme theory emphasizes the distinctiveness of sounds. This has advantages for the acquisition of oral skills. These skills provide a solid foundation for the development of reading skills, which in turn facilitates teaching and learning. This advantage may be limited in some languages like English, where sounds do not exactly tally with the written form of the language. On the other hand, teachers of Nigerian languages will find this theory very beneficial, as the orthography of many Nigerian languages follow the one sound-one grapheme rule, where every sound is represented by a given grapheme.

- Proficiency can be achieved within a short time.

The wide spread use of the audio-lingual method and pilot studies (see Geirut 1990) suggest that learners are able to acquire high degrees of listening and speaking skills using few teaching materials (i.e. the corpus or native language speaker model). The implication for language teaching is that students can achieve listening and speaking proficiency presumably earlier in their learning experience.

- Language learning is a process of habit formation.

The practical application of the classic phoneme theory relies on the learners' ability to respond accurately to a given stimulus. Learners are exposed to corpus or models of the target language, and are expected to replicate the same by imitation. The idea is to make learners' comprehend and produce the target language without errors. However, human language goes beyond stimulus-response kind of interaction. Besides being productive, language is also creative. Consequently, the language teacher must ensure that the students' are able to apply what they have learnt from structured drills and classroom dialogues to real world interactive situations.

2.2. Morphophonemics and Language Teaching

Morphophonemics is study of the relationship between morphology and phonology. Morphology is the study of the grammatical structure of words, and the categories realised by them. The basic unit of description is the morpheme – the minimal meaningful unit of grammar. Thus, a morphological analysis will divide the word *students* into two morphemes: *student* and *-s* which indicates plurality. Phonology, on the other hand, is the study of the sound systems of individual languages. Its basic unit of description is the phoneme – the smallest distinctive sound unit in a language. For example; in English language /t/ and /a/ are phonemes because [tip] and [tap] mean different things. Similarly, they are the smallest units because they cannot be analysed into smaller units. Morphophonemics deals with the relationship between words (morphemes) and their representations (phonemes). It is concerned with the rules and alternations, and involves the investigation of phonological variations within morphemes. In relation to language teaching, morphophonemics can also be used to develop speaking skills; it can also be used to teach aspects of grammar such as Number, and Tense.

- Using Morphophonemics to Teach Number

Number is a grammatical category associated with nouns. It is used to mark the distinction between one and more than one. In many languages, this distinction is binary and marked as singular/plural. In English for example, plural is regularly marked by adding the morpheme {-s} to singular nouns. This morpheme is realised as three allomorphs {-s, -z, -iz} depending on the environment in which the plural marker occurs. {-s} is used with voiceless consonants, {-z} with voiced consonants and vowels; and {-iz} with alveolar and palato-alveolar fricatives and affricates as illustrated below.

Cups	[kʌps]	Cubs	[kʌpz]
Bets	[betz]	Beds	[bedz]
Boxes	[bɒksɪz]	Fishes	[fɪʃɪz]
Churches	[tʃɜ:tʃɪz]	Judges	[dʒʌdʒɪz]

In many Nigerian languages, number distinctions can be marked using plural morphemes, plural affixes, quantifiers and numerals. However, these languages also indicate number via strategies that are better understood with knowledge of morphophonemics. In Edo and Urhobo, for instance, vowel substitution can be used to show whether a noun is singular or plural. Consider the following examples

Edo (Omoruyi 1986:63)

	Singular	Plural	Gloss
/ɛ/ ~ /i/ as in	éghélé	íghélé	young man(men)
/o/ ~ /i/ as in	ògìè	ìgìè	king(s)
	òkpìà	ìkpìà	man(men)

/ɔ/ ~ /e/ as in	òdìònwèré òmwá	èdìònwèré èmwá	village head(s) person(s)
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Urhobo (Aziza 2007:291-292)

/e/ ~ /i/ as in	ékpù ékpèti	ìkpù ìkpèti	bag(s) box(es)
/u/ ~ /i/ as in	ùghòjọ́ ùwènvwì	ìghòjọ́ ìwènvwì	clock(s) house(s)

These examples show that the initial vowels /e, ε, u, o, ɔ/ in the singular noun forms become high front vowel /i/ or the non-low front vowels /e/ in the plural forms.

- Using Morphophonemics to Teach Tense

Tense is a grammatical category associated with verbs. It indicates the time of speaking relative to the actual time of the event. Common tense distinctions include present, past, continuous and future. In English language, for example, the simple past tense {-ed} is conditioned by a voicing rule. The morpheme is realised either as voiced /d/ or voiceless /t/ depending on the sounds with which it occurs. For example;

Shopped [ʃɒpt] Carved [kɑ:vɔd]

The Nigerian language teacher can also use the knowledge of morphophonemic rules to teach tense. In Igbo, for example, the simple past tense is formed by adding an rV suffix to the verb stem. The vowel (V) of the suffix is derived by copying the vowel of the verb i.e. *partial reduplication*.

Igbo (Nwachukwu 1984:92)

Há bì n'Abá	Há biri n'Abá
They live at Aba	They lived at Aba
Ó nọ́ yá	Ó nọ̀rọ́ yá
She/he is in	She/he was in
Índi nwaànyí má jọ̀jọ́jì	Índi nwaànyí màrà jọ̀jọ́jì
The women are dressed in George wrapper	The women were dressed in George wrapper

In Èdo on the other hand, the rV suffix has a base form –re, which is *phonologically conditioned*, by the preceding vowel of the verb stem. The vowel is realised as /e/ which is [-high, +tense] when it occurs in the environment of /ε, a, ɔ/ which are [-high, -tense]. In other environments, it is realised either as /i/ which is [+high, +tense]; /u/ which is [+high, +tense] or /o/ which is also [-high, +tense], the difference being that /u/ and /o/ are also [+labial]. For example;

Èdo (Yuka & Omoregbe 2011:10)

fì	'throw'	fìrì	'threw'
gbè	'dance'	gbérè	'danced'
dẹ̀	'buy'	dẹ̀rè	'bought'
gbà	'tie'	gbàré	'tied'
wu	'die'	wúrù	'died'
sò	'weep'	sórò	'wept'
kọ̀	'plant'	kọ̀rè	'planted'

- Morphophonemics as a tool for developing oral skills

In language teaching/learning, the goal is to achieve something akin to native speaker proficiency. A little knowledge linguistics would make this goal achievable for both teachers and learners. This knowledge is essential because languages do not employ sounds in isolation; “sounds tend to be modified by their environment (Pike 1947)”. This tendency is manifest in different ways. For example in Igbo and Yoruba, there is homorganic nasal assimilation – a rule which states that a nasal stop assimilates to the place of articulation of the following consonant. While Igbo employs this rule for nominal prefixes; Yoruba uses the rule for its aspectual verbal prefix *ń*-as illustrated below.

Igbo (Iloene 2007:178)

bido	[bido]	‘begin’	mbido	[mbido]	‘beginning’
tá	[tá]	‘hunt’	ntá	[ntá]	‘hunting’

Yoruba (Stahlke 1976:42)

tà	[tá]	‘sell’	ntà	[ntá]	‘selling’
jà	[jà]	‘fight’	njà	[njá]	‘fighting’

2.2.1. Implications for Language Teaching

Morphophonemics has the following implications for language teaching.

- Language is a rule-governed system

Morphophonemics deals with rules that characterise the morphology (words) and phonology (sounds) of language. It captures the interaction between these sub-fields of language, and makes it possible to understand the principles underlying sound-meaning relations with a limited number of rules. Thus, it simplifies the task of language teaching and learning.

- Language rules are not absolute

The language teacher must exercise caution in the use of morphophonemics. The reason is that every rule has an exception. This paper states that the plural morpheme is an example of conditioned variation. This may not always be the case, because there are words that have the same lexical form for both singular and plural. For example body part terms in English are usually inflected to indicate number as in *eye/eyes*; *lip/lips*; *ear/ears* etc., but in *Èdo* these words do not change forms like other nouns in the language. The word for *eye* and *eyes* is *àró*, but a learner who wrongly applies the vowel substitution rule would derive **èró* (which means *trick*) as the plural form of *àró*. Therefore, in the use of morphophonemics as a tool for developing oracy, the teacher should make learners aware of its limitations. This will curtail problems of language learning such as the over-generalisation of rules.

2.3. Cultural Relativity, Cultural Transmission and Language Teaching

Language can be defined as “a system of arbitrary vocal symbols which permits all people in a given culture or other people who have learned the systems of that culture to communicate or interact”. Several features distinguish human language from other systems of communication. One of such features is *cultural transmission*, which is the transmission of language from one generation to the next through membership of a society, as opposed to genetic inheritance which characterises animal systems of communication.

2.3.1. Cultural Relativity and Cultural Transmission

Cultural relativism is a sociological concept about norms and values. The principle of cultural relativism states that “judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation” ((Herskovits 1972:15). The underlying idea is that function and meaning of a trait are relative to specific social contexts. Thus, societies or cultures are to be analyzed objectively without using the values of one culture to judge the worth of another. In relation to language, cultural relativism can be understood in terms of one of the two principles of the *Sapir-Whorf Hypotheses*. The principle in question states that the distinctions encoded in one language are not found in any other. For example, the concept of time distinction (or grammatical tense) has morphological distinction in the English language as in *I see him* and *I saw him*. But, in Yoruba the distinction is marked in terms of when the sighting occurred either before or after the utterance. The Yoruba equivalent of the English examples is *Mo ri i* which could mean either “I see him or I saw him”.

Cultural relativism and cultural transmission can be seen as interwoven features of language. This is because the language a person learns is language as defined by culture. One way to examine this statement is by looking at the lexicon. Every language has a vocabulary which largely reflects the ideas, concepts associated with the culture of its speakers. For example, the concept food is common to all humans, but the terms for food are culture specific. This connection between cultural transmission and cultural relativism has several ramifications.

Firstly, it could be an impediment to language teaching and learning. It was assumed that if a language lacks words to express a given concept, the speakers of such language cannot grasp the concept. However, experience has shown that this assumption is unfounded. For example, people may never have seen the substance “snow”, but exposure to communication media such a television makes it possible to grasp the concept “snow”. Additionally, psycholinguistic research has shown that when people learn other languages, they are able to express concepts encoded in that language in a manner that is comparable to that of native speakers. For example, a Nigerian child who learns English or French language should be able to express present/past tense distinction of those languages as appropriately as he/she marks temporal distinctions in his/her mother tongue.

Secondly, there is the issue of understanding and memory. Culture influences language which is the vehicle for perception and communication. Research (e.g. McKoon & Ratcliff 1989) has shown that language influences the way we perceive and remember things. This is because people find it easier to differentiate concepts and ideas if they correspond to words available in their language.

2.3.2. Implications for Language Teaching

Cultural relativism and cultural transmission hold the following implications for language teaching;

- Linguistic Entry Behaviour (Input Competence)

The twin concepts outlined above determine an individual’s input competence, which forms the basis for all learning. This entry behaviour is one’s native language. Thus, there is need for the language teacher to be a native speaker of the language he/she teaches. This adds an edge to academic and professional training, as the native speaker-teacher will naturally have a higher input competence than the non-native speaker. Another way of checking the influence of cultural relativity and cultural transmission on language teaching/learning is by mastering the culture.

Language teaching methods are general but languages tend to have their specifics. Hence, the language teacher should know the culture of the subject language well enough to enable learners gain mastery of the language.

- Transfer and Interference

Interference refers to a situation where what is known prevents one from learning a similar but new thing. It is based on the idea that one set of language and culture skills can be transferred to another. Lado (1957) cited in Aje (2006:31) expresses the idea in the following terms.

Individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language – both productively and receptively when trying to understand the language and act in the culture as practiced by the natives.

Transfer is seen as both positive and negative. It is positive when it facilitates learning and negative when it impedes it. Negative transfer produces interference which manifests as errors in the learner's speech/writing. Ideally, a language teacher should know the linguistic and cultural factors that will enhance learning, and those that will impede it.

3. Summary and Conclusion

The paper discusses the relevance of linguistics to the Nigerian language teacher. Specifically, it outlines the applications of linguistic theories in the classroom. The theories examined include the classic phoneme theory, morphophonemics and the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. This paper explores their implications for language teaching/learning, and concludes that the knowledge of these theories can facilitate the task of teaching, as well as enhance the learning experience.

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