

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION IN NGWA-IGBO

By

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Abstract

The word Ngwa refers to a group of the Igbo people that speak Ngwa as a dialect of the Igbo language and the geo-political area known as Ngwa Area. The Ngwa people are found in Abia State, Nigeria, in these seven Local Government Areas of: Isiala Ngwa North, Isiala Ngwa South, Obingwa, Osisioma, Aba North, Aba South, and Ugwuagbo. Non-verbal communication is the type of communication that does not require the use of words. A major objective of this paper is to demonstrate that non-verbal communication as a part of the linguistic skill of the speakers of the Ngwa dialect of Igbo and to show that it is a modification of what should have been said by words. The primary source of data in this paper was gotten through the interview of two fluent native speakers of the Ngwa dialect aged 50-60 years. Also, use were made of the library texts and the internet. The framework on which this paper was carried out is the Language documentation framework. The choice for this framework is because it aims to gather and preserve long lasting corpora while a language is still being spoken, so that such information could be used for language or cultural preservation and revitalization. Some of the findings of this paper are: that non-verbal communication is a subtle mode of communication that intensifies an information, that non-verbal communication is an effective mode of communication in Ngwa- Igbo, that non-verbal communication can be used to convey information about an emotional state and that non-verbal communication provides an instant feedback about an information that is received.

Keywords: *communication, language, language documentation, Ngwa land, non-verbal communication, and Universal grammar.*

1.0 Introduction

Normally, communication in the human language is usually by oral transmission of information. But, within the system of communication amongst human beings, use is also made of the non-verbal mode of communication. This type of communication involves the use of: gestures, symbols, distance, colours, dressings, shapes of the lips, non-vocals and so on, to effectively convey information. Works abound on the treatment of non-verbal communication. Wardhaugh (1985, p. 51), Bonvillain (1993, p. 47), Tannen (1995, p. 96), and sifianou (1997, p. 77), all agree that non-verbal communication is a language skill which is used to show that an individual has attained a high level of linguistic competence in the use of his language which does not require direct verbal, complete language structure. Thus, to them much talking indicates poverty of mind. It is within this background that this paper is considered, in order to present the various types of non-verbal communication in Ngwa land. In the subsections that follow, the following will be considered: a

review of literature on communication, language, Language documentation, Ngwa land, Universal grammar, methodology and a typology of non-verbal communication in Ngwa land.

1.1 Conceptual Framework

From a psychological point of view, Cherry (1957, p. 6), refers to communication as: “the discriminatory response of an organism to stimulus”. In other words, there is always an underlying factor that triggers or initiates communication on both ends of the sender and the receiver. Crystal (1997b, p. 72), this means that in any communication situation, there are two sets of persons: the sender and the receiver. This also means that communication involves a signaling system which is an agreed code of communication. Onyekwere and Nkoro (2007, p. 216) assert that: “Communication ... is the process of transmitting facts, ideas, and emotions from a source to a receiver using signals which are meaningful and relevant to the immediate environment”. This means that as much as communication is concerned it involves a sender and receiver, the signaling code (language), for the transmission of the information from a sender to a receiver must be understood by both parties for the transferred message to be effective. Onyekwere and Nkoro also noted that communication activities are not confined to man alone. Animals communicate with one another. They also added that sometimes animals like: birds, gorillas, dogs, cats, bees, lions and so on communicate through a variety of means. Crabs they argue wave their claws at one another, bees communicate through a complicated series of dances in order to signify the whereabouts of a source of nectar, dogs bark to signify danger, a strange thing or to ward off an enemy, birds crow to signify time or chirp to show their excitement over a thing and so on. So animals have a means with which they relate one to another.

Onukaogu, A. A., C. O Egbuta, N. Kalu and E. Onyerionwu (2011, p. 271), note that: “Communication can be seen as a social transaction which involves getting one’s idea across; it means making one’s self to be understood by the person or persons to whom the message is addressed”. This implies that communication is a social phenomenon that involves the passage of a message from one person to another in a society. Onukaogu et al, go on to mention that some of the things that can be communicated from one person to another are: information, knowledge data, experiences, ideas, emotions, opinions, feelings, skills, attitudes, world views and so on. thus there are very many things that can be shared through communication. In human language, three modes of communication exist. These are the:

- a. **Oral Mode:** This mode of communication involves the use of the articulatory organs in the oral cavity to produce sounds of a language that are both understood by the sender and receiver for the transmission of information from one person to another. Oral communication is the oldest form of communication. The oral method of communication, often requires face –to-face interaction between a speaker and a listener. However, some other methods that are used in this mode of communication are: the telephone, radio, television, and public address systems and conversations. This method of communication requires that the environment must be devoid of distractions, personal discomfort, and noise. The sender of an information (message), is expected to use clear language, a clear strong and acceptable intonation. (Onyekwere and Nkoro 2007, p. 222-3).
- b. **Written mode:** This requires the graphic representation of information using the agreed upon convention and the letters of the alphabet of a language. Writing can be done on the surface of objects like: the slate and blackboard which require writing with chalk or a board marker or the

paper which requires writing with the pencil or pen. A written information can be in the form of: minutes, notes, letters, memoranda, communique, sign posts, road signs, text messages, notices, circulars, press releases, text books and so on.

- c. **Non-Verbal Mode:** The non-verbal type of communication, is that which does not require the use of words. In its unique form, message is passed on from a source to receiver by the use of signs. Some of the ways by which non-verbal communication can be executed are the : eye contact, posture, gesture, mouth, body, distance, hair style, sitting position, shape of the lips, dressing and so on. In this paper, the concern is with the non-verbal mode of communication and the data is drawn from Ngwa-Igbo of Abia State.

1.1.1 Ngwa-Igbo

The Ngwa people are found in Abia State, in the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Of the seventeen Local Government Areas in the state, seven belong to the Ngwa people. These Local Government Areas are: Isiala Ngwa North, Isiala Ngwa South, Obingwa, Osisioma, Aba North, Aba South and Ugwunagbọ. According to Nwankwo (2009, p.18), “the Ngwa homeland measures about 512.8 square miles, and it has one of the most beautiful and fertile table lands of the Igbo nation in Nigeria”. This means that the Ngwa land is very conducive for agricultural purposes. Research has shown that the Ngwa land is bounded in the west by the Imo River, which separates the Ngwa people from Asa Nteke in the Southwest, and their Mbaise kith and kin in the West. Northwards are neighbouring Ohuhu, Umuahia and Bende clans of the old Bende. The Ndokis, Anaangs and Ibibios respectively make up the Southeastern and Eastern neighbours of the Ngwa people.

The exact date of settlement of the Ngwa people in their present location is not known, but a popular legend has it that the Ngwa people were a large group of Igbos who left Umuneoha, a place in Owerri in search of cultivable arable land and better trading and exchange opportunities. (Nwankwo 2009, p. 18-19). As this group of Owerri Igbos paused to rest a while near the bank of the Imo River, a section of the group decided to boil their yams and the other chose to roast its own. The group that boiled its yams, ate theirs and hurriedly crossed the river that was quickly overflowing its banks. The section that roasted its yam could not cross the river because of the overflow of the river. This section formed the Mbaise Igbos, while those that crossed the river towards Okpualangwa, are called *Nɛdi 8ɛ Nɛgwa ɛ*, meaning: ‘the quick, smart or lucky ones’. Their relations who decided to roast their yams, they called *O 8 ɛ hu 8 ɛ hu 8 ɛ*, meaning: ‘persons who roast yam’. To the Ngwa man, every other part of Igbo land that is not Ngwa land is referred to as: *Ala Ohuhu*, meaning: “land of the roasting ones or strangers”, and the persons as: *Ndi Ohuhu*, meaning: persons who roast or in recent times more commonly used to mean strangers. (Nwankwo, 2009, p. 18-34). Ngwa is classified by Williamson (1989, p. 21-27), as a dialect of Igbo under the New – Benue Congo, itself a sub – branch of the Niger – Congo languages. For the purpose of this paper, one shall stop here with respect to the comment on the Ngwa people and their land.

1.2 Language

In language text books, there are many definitions of the term *language*. Every human being uses one form (oral, written or non-verbal) of language or the other as a tool of social interaction. Below are a few definitions of language with the bid to help one better understand the line of thought of this paper. Sapir (1921, p. 8), writes that language is a “... purely human and non-instinctive method of communication of ideas, emotions and desires ...”. What this means is that, language is a feature

of human being which is acquired over a period of time in order for man to meaningfully interact with other persons in his community. Cameron (1990, p. 3), refers to language as: cultural edifices whose norms are laid down in things like grammars, style books, and other glossaries- all of which have historically been compiled by men and conservative men at that". From this declaration by Cameron, it is obvious that language is a cultural norm of a group of people that are preserved in documents like dictionaries by men who are conservative in nature or make principles that favour them. Cameron's definition of language is feministic in approach though to her, material objects, or ways of doing things by a particular group of people are embodiments or samples of the language of a people. The cultural edifices mentioned by Cameron are the objects of non-verbal communication which a native speaker must be able to decode their semantic representation if he must be considered a competent native speaker.

Ndimele (2001, p. 1), considers language: "as a semiotic system because it entails the use of certain agreed-upon symbols or signals to convey meaning from one person to another within a given speech community". This means that language is mainly constituted of signs that are understood by the users according to the accepted language principles by the people. Essien (2010, p. 12), notes that: "Language is the thing with which we can best imagine, create, aspire, desire, feel and express our soul, enlarge our mental horizon and fulfill all that man is capable of". Thus, language is a device by which mental conceptions and physical or oral expressions can be effected.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

Language documentation is descriptive linguistic approach with major objective of preserving all aspects of a language, while it is still in use for recoverability purposes, so that if the language dies off, or it is shaken by other languages with which it comes in contact, its original form can be reclaimed from the archived information on it. From the internet source, "language is a subfield of linguistics which describes the grammar and use of human languages". This means that Language documentation gives a detailed account of all the language behavior of a particular language. Linguistic behaviour here will include: the oral (spoken), written (graphic) and non-verbal (semiotic/sign) forms of a particular language and all the rules (grammar/principles) governing its operation. Another internet source, notes that "Language documentation, also known as Documentary linguistics, is the subfield that deals with creating multipurpose records of languages through audio and video recording of speakers and signers with annotation, translation, or reservation and distribution of resulting materials". This suggests that information gotten by this approach to the study of language can be used by other fields of study, such as language translation, reconstruction, language teaching, cultural preservation, archiving of facts relevant to a particular group of people, to recover endangered languages from extinction, the general preservation of a language and so on.

Austin (2008, p. 1) notes that Documentary linguistics is "Concerned with the method of compiling a representative and lasting multipurpose record of a natural language or one of its varieties". What this means is that is that information gathered on a language by documentation can be archived for a long term research on the documented language. It also means that language documentation helps to maintain and enhance the development of languages in the current information and communication technologies. Since Language documentation allows the involvement of native speakers this means the corpora will provide for the explicit accountability of a collected data with

a high degree of correctness or accuracy: Thus; Language documentation can be used for the following purposes:

- a. for historical reconstruction
- b. for the preservation of oral literature and folklore
- c. for the preservation of poetics in a language
- d. for the preservation of the anthropological aspects of a language namely: culture, kinship, interaction, styles of: (cloth, dance, hair do, shoes and so on).
- e. for educational purposes
- f. for language reconstruction
- g. to illustrate linguistic theories with real-life observations of languages in use and
 - h. for the preservation of the specific features of a language and so on. (researchgate.net/public (2020), and <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki>).

1.3.1 Universal grammar.

Advances in the study of human language have shown that certain linguistic behaviours or features can be said to be common to all languages of the world. For example, all languages of the world have form classes such as: noun, verb, adverb, adjective, pronouns, conjunctions, preposition and interjections. The language parametric difference will be on how each language marks its form or grammatical categories with specified constraints in order to avoid the generation of ill-formed constructions. (Chomsky, 1965, p. 35-38), Lyons, (1981, p.211), O’Grady et al (2001, p. 519), Ndimele, (2004, p. 8-9), and Carnie (2007, p. 15). With relation to non-verbal language, it is a universal phenomenon that is operational in all languages of the world, though with parametric differences. For instance, it is universal in non-verbal communication to signal silence by placing the index finger across the lips, but it is not universal in non-verbal communication to signal warning by the presentation of a dry and wet stick to a traitor. In this paper, the attempt is made to present as much as possible, various non-verbal communications and their meanings in Ngwa-Igbo context.

1.4 Methodology

The primary source of data for this were gotten from two selected Ngwa-Igbo native speakers of the age 50-60 years, who were personally interviewed and listened to as they spoke. They also mentioned the contexts under which certain non-verbal communications could be used in Ngwa-Igbo contexts. For the secondary source, use was made of the library texts and the internet. As a native speaker of the dialect, I also made use of my intuition to assess some of the semantic interpretations of the non-verbal communication in Ngwa context. In the subsection that follows, types of non-verbal communication in the Ngwa-Igbo are presented.

1.5 Non-Verbal communications in Ngwa Land

Recall that non-verbal communication has been described as that communication which does not require the use of words. Non-verbal communication is a modification of what should have been said by words. Some are here under presented.

1.5.1 Tying of a Wrapper on the waist

The act of tying wrapper on the waist by an Ngwa man or woman is a silent way of informing people that such a person is bereaved, and that the deceased is yet to be buried. If it is woman whose

deceased husband is not yet buried, and she is seen outside the home with a wrapper tied around her waist, it is a quiet appeal to the populace to pardon her presence outside the home before the burial of her husband.

1.5.2 Presentation of a Dry and a Fresh Stick

When a dry and fresh stick is given to a person, it is a non-verbal way of telling the person that the sticks are presented to, that if any evil befalls the presenter of the sticks, that he will be held responsible. This act stems from a background of several threats or wrong doings to the presenter by the receiver of the dry and fresh sticks.

1.5.3 Placement of a Life Palmfrond on a Piece of Land

When palmfronds are placed on a piece of land, this is a non-verbal mode of telling the public that the land is in a dispute. It also means that the contending parties should not dare to do anything on the land until the dispute is resolved.

1.5.4 Silence

Silence, is a universal mode of non-verbal communication. Silence in Ngwa-Igbo contexts, could be used to indicate agreement or consent on an issue. It could also be used to show hatred or dislike over a thing. The use of silence over an issue or a situation in Ngwa-Igbo is ambiguous. The interpretation of it is dependent on the context of application.

1.5.5 Palm Tree Climbing Rope

When a man presents the palm tree climbing rope to a fellow man in Ngwa land, it means that the presenter of the climbing rope wishes the receiver a great success and pledges not to cause harm to the recipient.

1.5.6 Nodding and shaking of Head

The nodding of the head at the end of a discussion or when asked a question, is an indication that the person who has nodded his head is in consonance with the decision that was taken, or that the response to the question posed is in the positive. When the head is shaken over a decision or an answer to a question, it communicates to the audience a disagreement.

1.5.7 Smiles and Frowns

A smile is a universal, non-verbal method of communication. Smiles, as silent communicating techniques are used to show acceptance. When a person receives a smile from a sender, he/she feels relaxed. It allays fear in the receiver. It gives comfort and hope to the receiver. It is a language of love and encouragement from sender to receiver. One must mention that some smiles could be deceptive. When an unusual smile is passed across to someone, it is better to check the background of the sender in order to discern the true meaning of that smile as a non-verbal communication. In contrast, a frown is non-verbal device that is used to ward off people. When a frown is sent out, people recheck their intention, withdraw, or get the signal that they are not wanted or desired. A frown is a non-verbal tool for communicating rejection, disdain and hate.

1.5.8 Wearing of Beads on the Neck and Wrist

In Ngwa land, when a young girl wears beads on her waist, wrist and ankles, it communicates that such a young girl is mature and that she is ready to accept prospective spouse. The act of wearing by a young lady can also denote that there is festivity that would require a dance by the young ladies.

1.5.9 White Cloth

Everywhere in the world, a piece of white cloth passes the message of purity to the observer. In Ngwa land, on the first night after a couple's marriage, a piece of white cloth is laid on the bed on which they are to lie. If the cloth comes out after their first intercourse with stains of blood, it means that the bride was a virgin, but where the white cloth comes out unstained with blood, the conclusion is that the bride is not a virgin. Thus, in Ngwa land the white cloth is used as litmus to test and communicate to the populace the purity of a bride.

1.5.10 The rubbing of camwood

The camwood has a reddish orange colour. When a woman bathes or rubs the camwood on her body, it passes a non-spoken information to the people in her environment that she has just put to bed and so needs to look fresh or to hide the paleness associated with the loss of blood during child birth or sickness.

1.5.11 The Burying of Someone at the Entrance of a Compound

When a person is buried at the entrance of a compound in Ngwa land, this silently tells everyone that the deceased died in a horrible way such as: accident or by a gruesome murder. Therefore, the members of the family are also praying that such a death should not occur in their family again.

1.5.12 Libation

In Ngwa land, when libations are poured by an elderly person on the ground with pieces of kolanut being thrown around on the ground, it is a non-verbal act of appeasing the spirits of the ancestors for offences committed by the living ones. It could also be to invoke the spirit of the dead (ancestors) to go for protection or vengeance.

1.5.13 The Presentation of Kolanut

In Ngwa land, when a visitors are presented a kolanut, it is a non-spoken way of telling them that they are accepted and that they could declare the purpose of their visit. When a visitor is not presented with a kolanut it could mean that he/she is not welcomed or that the family is obviously poor the extent that a kolanut cannot be afforded. When a kolanut has four cloves, it means that the receiver is highly favoured. It is a mark of goodluck.

1.5.14 Honey, Bitter Kola, Salt, and Alligator Pepper

At a marriage ceremony in Ngwa land, the presentation of honey is a non-verbal act of telling the couple that marriage could be as sweet as honey. The presentation of bitter kola silently tells the couple too, that marriage could be bitter, and that sometimes that expectations may be bashed. Salt in a marriage ceremony passes the message that marriage is a contract that must be preserved for the peace and unity of the home. The alligator pepper indicates that marriage is a strong contract that involves many people.

1.5.15 Cutlass and Hoe

Hoe and cutlass are farm implements. When they are being carried in a basket toward a farm land, it communicates to the people that the carrier of the implements is set to do some farm work which could be to plant, to weed the farm or to harvest.

1.5.16 The return of dowry

In Ngwa land when the family of a woman returns the dowry of their daughter, it means that the marriage between the man and the woman has ceased. The woman is free to get married to another man. But if the woman only verbally declares that she is no longer interested in the marriage and moves out of the home, and, if in the course of time she bears a child or children while her dowry is yet to be returned to her initial husband, the born child or children, by the law of Ngwa land belong to her first husband because the contract has not been formally terminated. This illustrates the fact certain non-verbal acts of communication have more relevance than spoken words.

1.5.17 The Placement of Money in a Calabash

When a female child is born in Ngwa and some money is put in the calabash for her by a male person or the parents of a male child, this is a silent way of telling the parents of the female child that when their daughter grows up, she will be married to the man or to the person on whose behalf the money was put into the calabash.

1.5.18 The Shaving of Hair or Wearing of Black Cloth

When a man or woman in Ngwa land, shave their hair, this is a non-verbal act of telling people that their spouse is dead and that the deceased has been buried. The wearing of black cloth is another symbolic way of communicating the same information to the public.

1.5.19 The Throwing of a Broken Tooth on the Roof of a House

In Ngwa land, when the milk tooth of child falls off, they do not throw it away anywhere they like. Traditionally, the fallen tooth is thrown on the top of the roof of a house so that the new tooth will come out quick and fine as it is believed by the Ngwa people.

1.5.20 The Use of the Index Finger Across the Two Lips and the Covering of the Mouth with the Two Hands

Generally, when the index finger is placed across the lips, it means that the person (s) to whom the message was sent should keep quiet. In addition to this in Ngwa land, when the two palms are used to cover the mouth, it means that receiver of the signal should not divulge a secret or that a person (young or old) that is about to be fed with some food is repelled, or that the person is not ready to accept the food presented to him.

1.5.21 The Tying of the Fronds of a Palmwine Tree

In Ngwa land, when the fronds of a palmwine tree are tied at entrance of a compound, it means that a damsel in that place has been publicly engaged in marriage to a man, but that the final marriage rites have not been fulfilled. The tying of the fronds also advises other intending suitors to keep off.

1.5.22 The Carrying of a Person's Property by Local Task Force

In Ngwa land, when local task masters confiscate the property of a person, such as: bicycle, basin, tripod pot, a box of cloth or any important property in a household, it is a pointer that a person in that house has committed an offence which attracts a fine. The property can only be recovered if the fine is paid. An offence that could attract the carrying of a person's property include such acts as: non-participation in the weeding of local roads or path ways, being absent from a meeting without an excuse or permission, or the use of fowl words at a person and so on.

1.5.23 The Gathering of Flies on a Wall

When flies gather together in a large number in Ngwa context, this is an indirect way of telling the occupants of that building that someone very close to them will soon die or fall seriously ill. Members of the family, who recognize this non-verbal communication will tell the whole family to join them to appease the gods or to find who in particular the evil may fall upon. If it is ignored, the tragedy will definitely come to pass.

1.5.24 The Gathering of Bees on a Wall

In Ngwa land, it is not normal for bees to form their hives in homes occupied by human beings. When this happens, it is a non-verbal way of notifying the occupants of the house that a tragedy is about to happen, which may be sickness, death, quarrel or any other type of abnormality that will cause the persons pain and tears. This too, requires appeasement of the gods in order to ward off the impending evil.

1.5.25 The Sound of an Unseen Fly

In Ngwa land, when a person suddenly begins to hear the sound of an unseen fly, this is a non-verbal communication to the person who is hearing the sound that he is under attack by an evil one that could make him or her to run mad. Under this situation, the person who is hearing the sound of the unseen fly will be asked to bathe with salt water and to rub his whole body with palm kernel oil for many days, in order to avert the evil.

1.5.26 The Hand Shake

The hand shake in Ngwa land is a very spectacular act by men of showing acceptance and recognition. One must mention here that in Ngwa land, women are not given a hand shake. It is only a men's thing in the Ngwa tradition, but rather women are hugged.

1.5.27 The Placement of a Stick at an Entrance

In Ngwa land, when a long stick is placed at the entrance of a house, this communicates to the audience that they are barred from entering the particular place in question until the stick is removed.

1.6 Conclusion

Attempting to document some non-verbal communication acts in Ngwa-Igbo has been quite an interesting exercise. Some of the findings of this paper are: that non-verbal communication is a modification of what should have been said by words. That non-verbal communication can be used to convey the emotional state of a person. It was discovered that non-verbal communication is part of the cultural norm of the Ngwa people. The paper also shows that non-verbal communication is an effective way of passing on information to people. The work in this paper, illustrates that the

use of non-verbal communication is part of the linguistic competence of the users of the Ngwa dialect of Igbo. The acquisition of non-verbal communication is therefore, necessary for them to function properly in the sociolinguistic milieu of the Ngwa environment. It was also found that non-verbal communication provides an instant feedback about an information that is received. Finally, it must be mentioned that in the paper it was found that much talking indicates poverty of the mind. This, in other words means that non-verbal communication is an alternative to the oral mode of communication. The paper also demonstrates that non-verbal communication is a subtle mode of communication that intensifies an information that is passed on. The work on this paper is an attempt to document some of the non-verbal communication skills in Ngwa land so that reference can always be made to it. This paper is not exhaustive on all that should be discussed on non-verbal communication in Ngwa-Igbo. The paper rather, recommends further research on this mode of communication in Ngwa contexts as it is an obligatory part of their linguistic skill.

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