

## Saying X: The Pragmatics of a Nigerian Context

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### Abstract

The study investigates the pragmatic motivations of linguistic choices contained in selected mobile-phone text messages written by Nigerians. As an effort towards cross-cultural pragmatics, the study examines “Nigerianisms” in the use of English. Bach and Harnish’s concept of mutual contextual beliefs (MCBs) is mainly relied upon as a theoretical framework, although insights from other scholars of pragmatics and sociolinguistics give the study a more illuminating theoretical base. The study reveals “that in saying x (producing different utterances), Nigerians may violate the norms of the English language and alienate even the native speakers who are bereaved of the social realism that underpin the Nigerian speakers’ communicative strategies. This practice is informed by the existential experiences which constitute the socio-cultural and diachronic Nigerian context.

**Key words:** Pragmatics; Mutual contextual beliefs; Sociolinguistics; Discourse

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### INTRODUCTION

The study presents English as a product of colonialism which Nigeria experienced during the British rule. At various stages after colonialism, the language changes due to social dynamics in Nigeria; socially realistic phenomena inform “nativized” varieties of English, and

this trend operates as a continuum. Our concern is mainly to probe the informants of the encoding and decoding of utterances in region-based natural human communication, relying mainly on pragmatic tools. The paper contends that it is logical to make a Constative (a Declarative speech act) on the pragmatics of saying x in the Nigerian context, using The Projection Principle (Cf. Jolayemi, 2000). The Principle states that via micro-structures (selected samples), messages in the macro-structure of a text could be procured”. In this regard, the way English is used in the nine text messages which constitute our corpora, reflect how the language is used by the Nigerian speech community.

Indeed, English colonized Nigeria, and to decolonize it, Nigerians use “nativized” varieties which may not be intelligible to the native speakers of English. Bach and Harnish (1979) contend that MCBs (Mutual Contextual Beliefs) are needed by participants of discourse for effective communication to take place between S (Speaker) and H (Hearer). We have observed that Nigerian English is viewed in various frames: taboo, non-standard English, ethnic stigmatizations and language choices informed by incompetence in the formal properties of English (incompetence in “use”). We argue that it is “social competence” (which is very crucial to discourse), that generates “Regional Englishes”, rather than “linguistic incompetence”.

### 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

We briefly review pragmatic theories that are relevant to the study namely: Austin (1962), Searle (1969), Grice (1975) Bach and Harnish (Ibid.). Besides reviewing these theories, we review Adegbija (1982) as well as sociolinguistic issues that serve as anchorage to the thrust of the paper:

#### ● Pragmatics

The word “pragmatics” is from the Greek word “pragma”

which means “deed” or “action”. Pragmatics emerged as a reaction against the hitherto purely-formalist approach to language study; an approach which de-emphasizes contextual factors that generate texts. Scholars have defined pragmatics in different perspectives, but the various definitions explain pragmatics as the study of language use according to various situational variables.

● **Austin (1962)**

Austin (1962) argues “that the goal of the pragmatic analyst is to find out the total speech acts performed in the total speech situation”. A major feat of Austin’s theory is that it generated widespread interest in “doing things with words. Austin makes a distinction between performatives and constatives. Constatives are statements that have the property of being either true or false, whereas performatives are utterances which count as actions. Austin posits “that performatives can either be felicitous or infelicitous, and should be performed under certain felicitous conditions; certain words have to be uttered in certain circumstances, all participants of the discourse must exercise such procedures correctly and completely, the particular persons and circumstances in a given situation must be appropriate for the particular procedure, and their thoughts and feelings should be germane to the situations. He classifies speech acts into locutionary act (performing an act OF saying something), illocutionary act (performing an act IN saying something) and perlocutionary act (performing an act BY saying something).

● **Searle (1969)**

Searle’s seminal book, “Speech acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language”, which was developed in subsequent works, is a speech act proposal. Searle explains “that the act of communication is rule-governed”. He classifies rules into regulative and constitutive rules. Regulative rules regulate antecedently or independently, existing forms of behaviours. They operate as imperatives and constitute the basis for appraising behaviours. Constitutive rules are integrative in nature. For example, participating in a football match presupposes obeying the rules of the game.

● **Grice (1975)**

Grice proposes the Cooperative Principle guided by maxims: Maxim of Quality (This controls the amount of information that is just enough and sufficient; no more no less), Maxim of Quantity (This does not permit false utterances), Maxim of Relevance (It states that the utterance must be relevant to the topic under discussion) and Maxim of Manner (This relates to how a speaker makes his contribution). Grice’s theory emphasizes adjacency pairs (turn-taking) in discourse. Grice evolves the notions of Conventional and Conversational implicatures. Conventional Implicatures are lexeme-dependent while Conversational Implicatures are generated when the Cooperative Principles of conversation are violated.

● **Bach and Harnish (1979)**

The pragmatic theory of Bach and Harnish is inference and intention-based. They argue “that for speakers to perform illocutionary acts, their hearers must understand what such acts mean; whether the acts are within or without the bounds of literalness”. They also contend that mutual contextual beliefs between S (Speaker) and H (Hearer) as well as their world knowledge facilitate the inferential process. Their terminology, Speech Act Schemata (SAS), explains different illocutionary strategies in terms of literal or non-literal utterances in discourse.

● **Adegbija (1982)**

Adegbija claims “that his approach fills the gaps in previous pragmatic theories, being a balanced and unified approach to pragmatics”. Basic concepts in this approach are the Master Speech Act and the Pragmasociolinguistic concepts. The Master Speech Act which is a super-ordinate layer for interpreting utterance meaning captures the totality of variables for the interpretation of utterances. At this secondary level of utterance interpretation, the synchronic and diachronic contexts of utterances are examined. The Pragmasociolinguistic concept encapsulates the pragmatic, social and linguistic aspects of context which underpin utterances in discourse.

● **Sociolinguistics**

Sociolinguistics is the study of language and society. In this regard, various social variables which produce and interpret language are of sociolinguistic interest. Bronislaw and Archibald (2004) submit “that ethnography of communication analysis identifies discrete components of speech and the constraints that realized them: setting or locale, scene or situation, participants, ends (outcomes or goals), act sequences, keys, instrumentalities, norms, interaction interpretation and genres”. The dimensions the English language takes in the communications of Nigerian illocutors is therefore not arbitrary. Indeed, Fowler (1981) opines “that linguistic structure is not arbitrary, but is motivated and determined by the functions it performs.”

Leech (1983) notes “that he did not attempt cross-cultural comparison of communicative behaviour, but he acknowledges that research into the area would be fascinating. He observes that the transfer of the norms of one community into another may well lead to pragmatic failure, and to the judgment that the speaker is in some way being impolite or uncooperative. Indeed, this paper is a response to the yearnings for cross cultural pragmatics, as it attempts an elucidation of how the Nigerian socio-cultural realities affect the usage of English in the country.

Wierzbicka (1991) which is a study on cross-cultural pragmatics observes that norms of societies affect their language use. Thus, by bringing the notion, “Geoimplicatures” into this study, we attempt to investigate the communicative behaviours of the Nigerian speakers of English, and this is invariably, a research in cross-cultural and intra-cultural pragmatics. Coined

from “geographical” and “implicature” we use the term “Geoimplicatures” to refer to the pragmatics-driven linguistic habits of Nigerian speakers of English.

Language is a tool for social interaction (discourse) and this is why context phenomena cannot be excluded from it. Wang (2013, p.39) cites “that discourse is a text, a discursive practice and a social practice with linguistic patterns that can be investigated. The study of language in social contexts termed sociolinguistics focuses on the relationship between linguistic behaviours and social situations and functions. Conventions connected with social situations affect communicative interactions. This is typical of both written and spoken discourse. The study views linguistic behaviours from the perspective of Geoimplicatures; we analyze the speech behaviours of Nigerians using English as a common medium of communication from a pragmatic point of view, and have made critical comments on cross-cultural pragmatics (inter-regional differences in the speech behaviours of participants of discourse).

Lucas (2002, p.33) observes “that communication depicts a process by which meanings (often times abstract or subtle) are exchanged among individuals, groups or organizations through a system of mutually shared words, signs and symbols”. Scholars acknowledge that Social Identity Theory recognizes the fact that social stereotypes (the process of ascribing characteristics to individuals based on group membership) help people to systematize their world since more importantly, when people affirm their stereotypes, such features become identities”; Geoimplicatures are “Nigerianisms” in the use of English. We strongly hold that there is the phenomenon known as NE (Nigerian English) within the ambit of WE (World Englishes); elements categorized as Geoimplicatures, are Nigerian identities in the use of English. This study contends that every geographical region in the world has its Geoimplicatures.

## 2. METHODS OF SELECTION OF DATA

We select text message from their macro-structures and treated them as basic units for analysis (micro-structures). We present the micro-structures with quotation marks to show that although they are not produced as conversational units, they are nevertheless, exact words of the writers. We select only nine samples, and each of them is labeled “Utterance”; in all, we have Utterances 1-9 (henceforth U.1 to U.9). We observe that the selected corpora appear insufficient for making constatives on the usage of the English in Nigeria. However, as stated earlier, we have relied basically on Jolayemi (Ibid.) who cites that the Projection Principle makes it possible to procure messages from larger structures via selected linguistic units; the Principle also justifies the exclusion of certain linguistic elements from each of the selected

text messages. We also employ other parameters in our selection of data. They include the quality of pragmatic features, topicality of issues and linguistic quality in the sampled utterances (cf. Emuchay, 1999).

## 3. ANALYTICAL PROCEDURES

We do not attempt a strictly conventional pragmatic-analyst approach to texts; we do not consider separately for example, locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts performed in discrete contexts: pragmatic, social and linguistic. We simply make an evaluation of the samples of utterances relying heavily on Adegbija’s approach to pragmatics, and insights from sociolinguistics, so as to give our comments theoretical base. The analyses hinge specifically on the “Pragmasociolinguistic” (pragmatic, social and linguistic aspects of context) concept mentioned earlier on in our Literature Review. The concept accounts for the synchronic, interpersonal, historical and socio-cultural issues which determine utterance meanings in discourse.

### Example 1

*“I heard that security men are needed in a company at Ibadan, so, being an Ex- serviceman, I stand the chance of being employed. Ex-service men are needed for such jobs more than other retirees. You know we are used to arms and ammunitions, having fought wars for the country.”*

The encoder has shared knowledge with his decoder, that in Nigeria, the expression “Ex-servicemen” connotes “only retirees who were in the armed forces” e.g. the Nigerian Police, the Nigerian Military and the Nigerian Air Force. It is this mutual contextual belief that facilitates the inferential process. Denotatively, the expression “Ex-servicemen” should not mean armed forces retirees only. It should include retirees from the public service. Using it to mean what it means in U.1 is Nigerian, as the meaning is not operative in other regions of the world. Some Nigerians say to their interlocutors, “Why are you so authoritative? Are you an ex-service man?” to mean particularly that the decoder is a retired military personnel. One way to look at language use in society, is to see it in terms of making choices. Whereas monolinguals will make choices that are based on the conventions of their immediate environment, the discussants in a diglossic community will be subjected to additional choices; thus, it is a regional choice to restrict the meaning of “ex-servicemen” to retired armed forces men and retired military men in particular.

### Example 2

*“We need to train our children in the way of the Lord, because immorality results in unwanted pregnancy.”*

In the Nigerian context, “immorality” refers to “fornication” or “adultery”. Other forms of immoralities are called varied names: corrupt practices, evils, sins, “bad things”, and so on. The English lexicon does not state that fornication or adultery is the sole meaning of the term

“immorality”; one expects Nigerian discussants to use the expression to mean “immoral acts” (actions that are not moral or fall short of morality). “Immorality” has various categories if speakers are to go by the dictionary meaning; any conduct that is not moral, should be regarded as immorality, thus, fornication and adultery become examples of immorality rather than being the denotative meanings as used by Nigerian speakers of English. The practice of ascribing meaning to certain expressions is a social system, and operates on a continuum, since each society has its unique existential experience(s).

#### Example 3

*“The car he bought is carry-go”*

Nigerians use the expression “carry-go” to mean a product that is reliable, sophisticated, very good, very expensive, worth-buying, prestigious, versatile, and so on. Although the constituents of the expression are derived from English, the native speakers of English do not know what this expression means. Even people from other English speaking African countries may not know the meaning. Our position in this paper is that to know the meaning of Geoimplicatures or regional choices of expressions, the decoder needs to be part of the diachronic or socio-cultural context; shared knowledge of social realities which underpin the usage of English in Nigeria and other regions of the world, is a prerequisite for decoding the meaning of utterances. Omorogbe (2006) cites that “Structuralists emphasize the supremacy of society and its ability to mould, influence and direct the behaviours of its members. Within this framework, society is seen as squeezing man into a predetermined form, thus determining his entire personality. Man’s freedom is social norms-based. The implication of regional choices of usage and interpretation of utterances is that speech acts carry illocutionary forces that are region-based.

#### Example 4

*“In that shopping complex, there is a business centre”*

Nigerian speakers of English use the expression “business centre” to make reference to a place for photocopy of documents and other materials, or a place where lamination, binding of projects and other similar services, are commercialized. The encoder of U.4 implies that other places for commercial services are not business centres unless their services include the ones we mentioned above. This is an example of the nativization of English in Ngeria (Nigerianism). We posit that illocutionary forces of conventional ad conversational implicatures are region-based, because they are bedeviled by Geoimplicatures. Omorogbe (Ibid.) contends “that language also plays a major role in the process by which man internalizes the norms of the society”. This is because society shapes human language. Our language is not chosen by ourselves, but imposed upon us by the particular social group that is in charge

of our socialization. Society is therefore instrumental in our construction of the world and interpretation of our existential experiences.

#### Example 5

*“It is good to know the will of God at thirty years of age, so that children can come in early enough”*

“God’s will” presupposes conducts that please Him. However, in Nigeria, as can be seen in U.5, Nigerians, particularly Christians, use the expression “the will of God” to denote “the will of God in Marriage”. In the text, the adverbial element, “so that children can come in early enough” is a suggestive linguistic context. However, we note that through mutual contextual beliefs, a decoder decodes the expression even in a linguistic patterning that does not covertly imply that the utterance is related to marriage context. Socialization, the process of acquiring the norms of the society into which a person is born, facilitates the acquisition of social characteristics as well as reasoning paradigms which constitute the social dialectics of the environment. The roles of society in the life of man are numerous, and this study underscores how the Nigerian society reinvents English.

#### Example 6

*I am coming. Give me two more hours. I am on my way to church”*

The encoder of U.6 is actually going, not coming, yet says “I am coming”. However, he expects his decoder to understand what the utterance means in Nigeria. Nigerianisms abound morphologically and syntactically besides being lexico-semantic. As expected by the encoder, the decoder of the utterance interprets it not according to the norms of English, but according to regional usage. A person cannot be coming and be going simultaneously, since they are non-verbal opposites. Besides, I am coming and I and I am on my way to church are locutionary acts with semantic divergence. It is the situation in which a Nigerian utters “I am coming” that determines whether it means “returning” or “going”.

#### Example 7

*“Give us Kola if you want the particulars prepared within two days”*

Nigerian discussants are familiar with the fact that an encoder of “Give me Kola” in various speech situations, means “Give me money”. The encoder of U.7 expects this knowledge to be in the psyche of his decoder. People do not interact according to a pre-established mode. Instead, they continuously examine each other’s behaviour and react accordingly. The use of “kola” to refer to the Naira is dominant among men of the Nigerian Police Force. It became widespread in the country as the citizens interact with the men of the Nigerian Police. We observe that there are even cases of saying x according to the pragmatics of ethnic context. Shortly after the execution of the notorious armed robber, Lawrence Anini, in Edo State of Nigeria in

the roaring 1980s, Nigerians from that part of the country began to use the expression “Anini” as a co-referential nominal for “money”. Ethnic (local) conventions are practices that exist in the values and mannerisms of ethnic groups. When acts have denotations among members of a particular ethnic group, such denotations (positive or negative) are intra-ethnic conventional forms of behaviour. In Nigeria and Africa at large, people have different ethnic backgrounds, hence different values. The Yoruba man’s values and beliefs differ from those, which the Igbo man upholds.

Example 8

*“Right now, I am at the supermarket to buy cream”;*

“Cream” refers to “pomade” for soothing the skin as far as many Nigerians are concerned. The expression should transcend this meaning, since there are various creams, not meant for soothing the skin; cream is used as recipe even by caterers, to prepare certain types of food. The re-invention of English changed this meaning in Nigeria. We agree that society has no real external reality but a phenomenon that emerges from the way people define their situations. The crux of this postulation is that social conducts are informed by human interpretation of society and her agencies.

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#### 4. DISCUSSION

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The use of the English Language in Nigeria is region-dependent as it captures the Nigerian existential reality or social dialectics. Every Nigerian speaker of English has illocutionary goal(s) which language is used or modified to achieve. Geomplacatures cut across various spheres of the Nigerian daily life. The elements subtly creep into Nigerian English, and gain acceptability in due course. Linguistic elements categorized as Geomplacatures are not intelligible to the native speakers of English, who are bereaved of the socio-cultural contexts which underlie such elements.

Passed from one generation to another, language preserves the socio-cultural identity of its speakers to a large extent. This idea of continuity is vital in the explanation of the dimensions language takes in the communicative strategies of Nigerian speakers. Nigerianisms depict identity, social emancipation and originality. Besides, it is not class-based; the youth, adults, literates and illiterates enact the Nigerian speech forms in communicative events. It is pertinent to state that the decolonization of English in Nigeria is evident in diverse kinds of discourse texts besides mobile-phone text messages: literary texts, non-literary text, talks, among others. For example, through drama, prose and poetry genres, Nigerian literary writers have registered the socio-cultural realities of Nigeria in the articulation of their thematic concerns and style. Similarly, we are aware of certain Nigerianisms in the language of Christians. For

instance, the utterance “Give God a dangerous offering” is commonly used by Nigerian Christian religious leaders as a persuasive speech act. It is steadily communicative because its illocutionary content has become shared knowledge among Nigerians. In addition, when a Nigerian Christian tells another Nigerian, “Give three gbosa to Jesus”, the utterance is understood.

On the basis of globalization, we justify the upsurge of regional Englishes (such as the samples of Nigerian English utterances we examine in this study) at various levels of linguistic analysis. Globalization is the most resultant phenomenon in the post-independence Nigeria. The potency of globalization in the multi-faceted unification of diverse societies is not a debate. The break-away from Standard British English in terms of how Nigerians use English to achieve diverse illocutionary goals, is itself a form of linguistic nationalism. In terms of content and presentation, Nigerian English captures the everydayness of the Nigerian values. We observe the uniqueness of Nigerian corpora of English utterances in terms of lexico-semantic features and structural properties. Medubi (2006) has submitted that like many other non-standard varieties of English, much has been said and written about Nigerian English. The various sociolinguists who elucidate NE phenomenon hold that it is a variety that differs markedly from the normative features of the standard variety. Nigerian English (NE) according to these scholars, is emergent and reflects the socio-cultural inclinations of the speakers. Medubi (Ibid.) contends “that the wave of globalization on various nations, with the concomitant effect of threats of loss of nationhood, has made it increasing necessary to advocate the repositioning of NE as the language capable of ensuring Nigeria’s territorial integrity by conferring a definite and legitimate identity on its speakers”. We align with Medubi’s position that the very structures used to stereotype NE as a variety which legitimizes deviational usages, form the basis for recognizing its ability by emphasizing what is Nigerian.

We attempt in this study, an integrative investigation of Nigerian multi-lingual linguistic milieu where English is super-ordinate in terms of functions and officialdom. Scholars contend that the standardization of Nigerianisms in Nigerian English and the resultant nativization is a panacea to the age-long language question in Nigeria where arguments for, or against English have been influenced by centrifugal and centrifugal attitudes. While communicating in English, linguistic choices of Nigerians are germane to culture and pragmatics of varied situations. We align with the view that nativization of English is a pre-requisite for maximizing the dividends of English as a global asset. Olaniyi (2006) opines “that a phenomenal question that dominates the world of sociolinguistic studies with impulses is the unprecedented history of the diffusion across the globe of the English language in relation with social and cultural inclinations of its host”.

Although Nigerians use English contrary to form, their Nigerian decoders do not find it difficult to locate “the world spoken of” in their utterances. See Allan (1986) for insights on how shared knowledge facilitates the decoding of utterances in regional discourses. In similar direction, Leech (1983, p.216) submits “that generally in interpersonal pragmatics we base descriptions on observations by native speakers who are members of the speech community being examined.”

Meanings of verbal and non-verbal communication in various contexts differ according to regions, and this forms part of the weaknesses of implicature theories; the theories lack universality or cross-cultural viability.

## CONCLUSION

Passed from one generation to another, language preserves the socio-cultural identity of its speakers to a large extent. This idea of continuity is vital in the explanation of the dimensions language takes in the choice of words and communicative strategies of Nigerian speakers. The study examines the use of English in Nigeria, with the understanding that English is an alien Language to participants of discourse in the Nigerian speech community. The Language and the people of Nigeria have experienced the sociolinguistic implications of language contact phenomena. The Language thrives in retaining its norm in Nigeria to some extent, due to its functional potency (its instrumentality to Nigerian speakers). However, very many Nigerians still rely on the varieties of English that are not intelligible to the native speakers of the Language. We note that some elements categorized as Geoimplicatures are indeed Nigerian Pidgin English; just as pidgin, Geoimplicatures are emergent expressions. From the point of view of linguists, no language is superior so long as all languages communicate speakers’ intentions. Similarly, Geoimplicatures are potent communicative tools in the lexicon of most Nigerian discussants. Pragmatics, discourse analysis and sociolinguistics elucidate the idea that communication is germane to audience, topic and situation. If this be the case, regional forms of English such as is obtainable in Nigeria, are not necessarily traits of linguistic incompetence; they capture reflect “social competence”.

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