FUNCTIONAL PERSPECTIVE TO PLURILINGUAL COMMUNICATION IN HETEROGENEOUS SPEECH COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Prescriptive linguistic theories have viewed communicative competence for multilinguals as attainable separately in the different languages they use. However, plurilingualism – an emerging, 21st-century concept in communication studies – views communication in multilingual communities as a means, not an end. The functional method, as opposed to the earlier prescriptive methods, employed in this essay, views communicative competence, not as a goal to be achieved but as a process to be involved in. It was discovered that it is not necessarily so-called competencies in individual languages that aids the inclusion and survival of multilinguals in their heterogeneous speech communities. Rather, it is the continuous, deliberate and mixed use of multiple languages in various communicative events. This essay concluded that this communicative competence is, therefore, not per se attainable as a stop but only as a process. It was also recommended that language users trying to survive in plurilingual speech communities should be involved in active and continuous conversations across the different, available languages.

Keywords: communicative competence, functional linguistics, language user, speech community, survival

INTRODUCTION

With the emergent migration frequencies in human communities, there is a growing need to study the communicative strategies employed by language users in their heterogeneous communities both for survival and inclusiveness (Canagarajah & Wurr, 2011). These language users may ordinarily be – and they usually are – monolingual but in a bid to meet up with the communicative needs that they every day come across in their interactions with one another, they naturally begin to (learn to) use other languages, usually together with theirs, to communicate. Because this pattern is continu-ously increasing, it has received equally increasing attention in the literature in the 20th and 21st centuries (Khubchandani, 1999; Ploog, 2008; Canagarajah, 2009).

Focusing more on the functional study of the plurilingual tradition in heterogeneous communities, Canagarajah (2009) took it down to South Asia as a matter of focus, unlike Schmitz (2012) who took the theoretical perspective. Following the approach of the former, therefore, it is necessary to begin this essay by introducing functional linguistics before venturing into its discussing plurilingualism and strategies for the survival and

inclusion of language users in such (plurilingual) speech communities.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinning of this essay is Halliday & Matthiessen's (2004) Systemic Functional Linguistics, (SFL) – also known as functional linguistics. SFL is a prominent linguistic theory that offers a unique perspective on language by focusing on the functions of language in cognition, communication, and society. In this section, this essay discusses the core principles, objectives, and contributions of functional linguistics, and demonstrates how this approach facilitates a deeper understanding of language as a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon, towards a better framework for the ensuing discussion.

The theory emphasises the functional and communicative aspects of language, contrasting with more structural or formal approaches such as in generative grammars stand for (Carnie, 2007 p.13). The logical objectives of functional linguistics revolve around understanding how language operates as a system, the functions it serves, and the role of language in shaping communication, thought, and society (Rabiah, 2012).
SFL asserts that language serves various social functions and views it as a system of choices, placing a balance between structure and function. It primarily seeks to answer questions about how language accomplishes communication, negotiates meaning, and expresses social roles (Linares & Zhi-Ying, 2020).

A key feature of the theory which is relevant to this essay is its identification of three (3) metafunctions of language: the ideational (concerned with representing experience and knowledge), the interpersonal (focused on interaction and social relations), and the textual (related to the organisation of discourse) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Analysing these metafunctions helps uncover the multiple dimensions of linguistic communication, proving that grammar not as a set of rules but a resource for meaning-making. The logical objective here is to explore how linguistic choices (that is, in terms of grammar and lexis) shape meaning in context. This aspect of SFL, which it provides paradigmatic resources for (as defined in Chiu & Lu, 2016), aligns with the idea that language is inherently dynamic and context-dependent (Hasan, 2014).

A third key feature of SFL that is relevant to this study is that it extends to the realm of social semiotics. It examines how language is used in the construction of social reality, the negotiation of power, and the expression of identity especially in culturally diverse societies. Social semiotics is crucial in understanding how language functions as a tool for maintaining and challenging social structures, which are often analysed as rigid in generative grammars. Expressing the notion that SFL studies emerging languages as occasioned by the mix of cultures and peoples, Halliday (2002, p.118 cited in Linares & Zhi-Ying, 2020, p.239) writes that the theory focuses on ""the emergence and development of national languages, the status of linguistic minorities, functional variation (i.e., register) in language, unwritten languages and dialects," and so on.

SFL as a Useful Resource for Plurilingualism

Plurilingualism is a sociolinguistic concept that views any multilingual communicative event as an inter-operation of bits of multiple languages in a complementary manner. In other words, multilinguals who find them-

selves involved in plurilingual communicative events use the languages mutually shared (by participants) for the primary, social purpose of transmitting the intended information. All in one, this captures all three SFL metafunctions of communicating experience (ideational) using lexico-grammatical resources (textual) in social situations (interpersonal).

Plurilingualism, therefore, opposes almost everything that generative grammars stand for. According to Carnie (2007, p.13), generative grammars believe that there is a kind of innate knowledge that every native speaker of a language has, which helps them to comprehensively create, identify as well as respond to "well-formed" sentences in the language. In the view of plurilingualism, however, there are no "well-formed" sentences as opposed to ungrammatical sentences. What is important is that the multilingual speaker can use all available lexico-grammatical resources of the languages, not necessarily that they have individual competencies in, but that are mutually shared with other participants in the communicative event to transmit information.

Summarising the concept of plurilingualism, Canagarajah (2009, p.6) lists its five defining features as: (1) integrated communicative competence derived from a repertoire of individual competencies, (2) unequal proficiencies in all the languages, (3) using different languages for distinct purposes qualifies as competence, (4) language competence is treated as a form of social practice, and (5) there is a recognition that speakers self-develop plurilingual competence intuitively and through social practice more than formally (and) through schools. Aligning with this view, Grover's (2022) describes plurilingualism, highlighting its similarities with the concept of translanguaging to reveal the underlying principles as: "the non-compartmentalization of linguistic varieties; the foregrounding of linguistic repertoires and integrated competencies; and a focus on contextualization, processes and practices."

According to the concept of plurilingualism, the language user, who is in a multilingual society typified by the diversity of language and culture, interacts with other language users towards achieving different things at different times. In one communicative event, for instance, the language user may have to communicate with another who speaks another language towards buying a meal, and immediately after this, they get involved in a second event, with another user who speaks a third language towards selling a house. These are only two out of millions of daily situations that may never be pre-planned, because the language user may not know who will sell what or buy what, who will give what or take what, or who will say what or hear what. Utterance (1) and (2) have the same meaning, but a multilingual in a plurilingual society may replace the former with the latter to be more receptive to another communicator whose lexicon may not be as vast as theirs, or whose understanding of clause-complexes may be limited and hinder comprehension.

 (1) Hand over to me, the basket of onions donated by the farmers group
 (2) Give me the onions the farmers donated

Little wonder Bialystok (2017, p.234) opines that in whatever circumstance, "language use is the most intense, sustained, and integrative experience in which

humans engage." Therefore, the "linguistic diversity" which Canagarajah says "is at the heart of multilingual communities" makes it that "meaning does not reside in the language; it is produced in practice" Canagarajah (2009, p.930-931).

The understanding of plurilingualism is assisted enhanced when viewed through the lens of SFL, because the latter accommodates sociocultural identities and differences. The linguistic theory can shed light on the sociocultural aspects of plurilingualism by examining the functions and meanings of different languages in various settings. This can contribute to a better understanding of the role of language in identity, power dynamics, and social practices in multilingual communities. SFL also provides a framework for understanding how different languages may be used for specific registers and genres, which are core features of the theory (Hasan, 2009). This is as plurilingual individuals often switch languages to suit the communicative context and purpose, and SFL is a ready resource for this.

While only recent studies have focused on plurilingualism in the classroom (Tour et al, 2023; Cross et al., 2022; Hopp et al., 2022; Lopez & Gonzales-Davies, 2015), SFL helps as a resource in academic and pedagogical situations with plurilingual backgrounds. For instance, multilingual texts and recorded speeches using such contexts as code-switching, translanguaging, or diglossic situations help to understand how individuals and communities deploy multiple languages to achieve their communicative goals.

In the area of pedagogy and language education, Lopez & Gonzales-Davies (2015) observed that the recognition or accommodation of second languages in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes was usually being discouraged. This was due to experts' belief that allowing it would foster negative interference, loss of interest in the FL, as well as reduction in contact with the FL. The application of SFL, however, can inform pedagogical approaches that embrace plurilingualism, as teachers can design language instructions that acknowledge and value the diverse linguistic resources of learners, helping them develop proficiency in multiple languages. In this regard, Lopez & Gonzales-Davies (ibid.) recommend Pedagogically Based Code-Switching and Translation for Other Learning Contexts.

A major meeting point for SFL and pluriligualism as two linguistic concepts is that they accommodate so-called new languages, provided they perform their communicative functions. The so-called eventual language differs from that found in a multilingual situation. In the multilingual situation, features of a language are still inherent within the mixed structures and use. However, in the plurilingual situation, since communication – not individual competencies – is primary, the used languages may not conform to their traditional grammatical rules. In his study of Plurilingual English in India and Sri Lanka, Canagarajah (2009, p.8) discovered that forms were sometimes "marked by deviation in phonology, grammar, and semantics from the metropolitan or (World Englishes) varieties" but there was no "prescriptive tendency of treating it as an error or letting it affect intelligibility."

Surviving Communication in a Multicultural, Plurilingual Speech Community
According to Milburn (2004), there is no possibility of the notion of homogeneity in the concept of speech communities, viewed from any perspective. If the term itself is to be analysed literary, it is a community where

language users continuously engage in speeches of different natures and with different other users (who may have other languages as their first language) for different purposes. Therefore, the generative view that "ideal speakers" attain competence in a given language used the exact same way by other language users using only the same language in the given community contradicts the very idea of speech communities. Put by Silverstein (2014, p.5-6):

> The speech community…organizes people by how they engage in and interpret such context-bound (inherently indexical) communication, seeming therein to reference social norms for discursively mediated social interaction, whether carried on through the medium of one denotational code or many. (It) involves norms of indexicality, the interpretability of (in the case of language) verbal behavior in relation to expectations of appropriateness-to and effectiveness-in dynamic real-time contexts – especially the "who"–"to whom"–"about what-or-whom" matters of identity that differentiae social contexts.

In the foregoing discussion, it was emphasised that what primarily differentiates a multilingual situation from a plurilingual one is that there is usually some conformity to norms in the repertoire of languages put together in the former, while in the latter, there are usually visible deviations from norms in the collected repertoire. Silverstein's position corroborates and necessitates linking the indexicality that defines plurilingualism with that (the same) which defines the speech community, hence establishing the existential, inseparable nature of both concepts. It is, however, important to find a middle ground and clarify the mix of cultures and languages.

A multicultural, plurilingual speech community is characterized by its diversity in terms of cultures, languages, and communication styles (Louf et. al., 2021). Such communities encompass people from various backgrounds, including different races, ethnicities, religions, and nationalities. These individuals often bring with them a multitude of languages, dialects, and communication norms. Within this rich tapestry of diversity, the opportunities for growth and understanding are vast, but so are the challenges.

Since the foregoing discussion argues that individual proficiencies in different languages is not a limiting factor in plurilingual contexts, the first challenge is cultural misunderstandings that arise from cultural norms and values that differ significantly among individuals from various backgrounds. To illustrate this, Boldyrev & Dubrovskaya (2019) identified two types of contexts: context of collective knowledge, and context of individual knowledge. While the former characterises concepts of the human world held universally such as of the meaning of *da-da* cooing to mean *father*, the latter refers to the concept held by individuals based on their social experiences. It is the latter that often brings up issues of cultural misunderstandings.

The second challenge is the content of conceptual systems, which refers to "different contexts of knowledge (activated) depending on the experience (language users) have (ibid., p.24). For instance, the word *drug* immediately means controlled substances in civilised countries like the USA and England where there are heightened battles against the importation and running of controlled drugs, but in countries like Nigeria, *drugs* very

readily means medication used for ailments as common as headache and malaria. This difference in the content of concepts may very well lead to misunderstandings when language users from both speech communities converse.

According to Boldyrev & Dubrovskaya (2019, p.24), the third challenge is mainly rested on the "diversity of appraisal and evaluation practices" and can very easily be avoided if language users become aware of it. Content words in languages often have interpretations that differ when evaluated – not really in meaning but in social implications. A Yoruba man asks after a friend's wife, saying: *How is my wife?* This is deemed a misnomer in universal grammar, as the social implication of *my wife* is that a wedding ceremony must have been held between the person asking and the one being asked after. In Yoruba land, however, this is allowed and the husband understand what it means, but would that be the case if the husband is English, and is not aware of the diversity of appraisal?

The observation is that communication challenges in multicultural, plurilingual speech communities go beyond grammatical rules and structure, but they are rather circled around language users' perception and conception of life based on their experiences and shared beliefs. How then can the language user overcome this hurdle, and use the plurilingual situation to their own advantage and to that of the society?

Plurilingualism is a social factor that fosters cross-cultural cohesiveness, understanding, inclusivity and strong interpersonal relationships. However, the attainment of an ideal plurilingual situation is made difficult primarily by the requisite quality of frequent communication. Even as it has been established in the foregoing discussion that rules guiding the individual repertoires of the concerned languages are not transferred, it has also been discussed that frequent social practice is a requisite factor in the plurilingual concept. How then does a language user survive this regular user contact in the multicultural, plurilingual society, especially as they are very likely to have very low knowledge of the separate uses of the adjoined languages? The first approach to consider is embracing linguistic diversity and intercultural competence. The plurilingual context of multicultural societies puts together people speaking different languages and from/with different cultures. According to Saville-Troike (1982, pp.32-33), "there is a correlation between…a language and the beliefs, values, and needs present in the culture of its speakers." He further inferred that interacting with the speakers of the language would in turn mean getting familiar with what they consider important, how they narrate experiences, a history of linguistic borrowings, animacy leanings, as well as hierarchies of social classifications. Therefore, language users in the plurilingual context, who tend to value and respect diverse languages and cultures, fostering a sense of inclusivity and appreciation, are bound to have a higher likeliness of surviving communication in the speech community. These language users would recognise that their survival and inclusion goes beyond their own context of individual knowledge as developed by their personal experiences. As they recognise the importance of each language (even as they do not speak all), they naturally tend to develop intercultural competence, when they encourage dialogue outside their local language or first language, attend or promote intercultural exchange programmes and other activities that foster empathy, respect and cultural understanding.

However, the position just established may be faulted by the effect of emerging languages and culture in an existing plurilingual society. Since language and society are dynamic and change with time, new languages and cultures may emerge (either gradually or suddenly), hence posing a new challenge for the language user who already embraced the linguistic diversity and intercultural competence earlier existing in their society.

To adjust to the new reality, the language user would need to encourage continuous learning and adaptation to the emerging linguistic and cultural developments which are oftentimes unexpected and natural within the speech community. It was earlier established that SFL as the linguistic theory adopted in this study views competence as a process and not a stage. Therefore, the continuous self-engagement by language users in and their openness to a dynamic linguistic environment would ensure their continuous survival in the changing, plurilingual speech community. In his 2016 paper on sociolinguistic variants and minority speech community, Jha (2016) concluded that "most conflicts which are perceived to be related to race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, class, caste, and religion can be minimized by becoming aware of other people's ways of living and using that knowledge in communicating." The *drug/medicine* example given above may very easily be overcome, if language users give themselves to understanding the content of conceptual systems. The possible solution to the third identified challenge (found in the diversity in evaluation) may as well be overcome by consciously enhancing one's knowledge of these diversities, intensifying target contact and even random, natural encounters, as well as accommodating the gaps in appraisal practices when using words and expressions that may be misconstrued by other users

due to the gap.

The survival of language users in plurilingual speech communities is not the exclusive concern of the said users, as a role is also played by government, institutions and other regulatory authorities. Governments may establish inclusive language policies which foster multilingual education. In Bolivia, bilingual education was not introduced until 1994 after the educational reform that acknowledged that "education is intercultural and bilingual because it respects the heterogeneity of the country (and recommended that) children's first language is to be used as the medium of instruction for the first several years in the districts and areas where the students speak their original language with Spanish as L2" (Danbolt, 2011) In Nigeria, secondary school students are taught, at least a local language and, in some cases, a foreign language, in addition to the lingua franca, English which is the general language of instruction. To further guarantee that linguistic variety is valued and protected outside the formal classroom, government may also make resources available, such as community language lessons, translation services, and interpretation support.

Governments may also provide language support centres and services, as well as promote the use of multiple languages in public spaces. These spaces include government adverts and government-owned television stations as well as on roadside signposts and public documents (such as on the Nigerian passport).

CONCLUSION

By the foregoing discussion, it has been established that plurilingualism is at a different level from multilingualism, as it capitalises on continuous, intercultural communication whose level of proficiency is not assessed

through an examination of the individual languages involved, rather, a holistic view is given. SFL, which thrives on the three metafunctions of language use for communication in social interactions, was adopted as the appropriate theoretical underpinning for the essay.

Since the discussed nature of the plurilingual context of the heterogeneous speech community is favoured by the functional perspective which sees competence in practice rather than knowledge, it is advised that language users attempting to thrive in plurilingual speech communities engage in active and ongoing dialogues in all of the accessible languages.

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(Manuscript received:9th March, 2022; accepted: 18th July, 2023)