



## **Language Use in a Speech Community: A Case Study of the Non-Academic Staff Union Members (NASU), University of Calabar**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The University of Calabar presents a good evidence of the complexity in the definition of a speech community. A number of such definitions postulated by some sociolinguists include, Lyons (1970:326), (Hockett 1958:8), Bloomfield (1933:42), Gumperz (1968), Labov (1972a:120), Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) as well as Bolinger (1975:333). One central point in the controversy over definitions is the issue of language use. This paper identifies some sociolinguistic characteristics peculiar to the language use by the Non-Academic staff of the University to validate the appropriateness of one of these definitions. It further reveals the limitations and inadequacies in some of the definitions.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Several working definitions of a speech community have been postulated by a number of sociolinguists. These range from simple definitions to complex ones. Lyons (1970:326) saw a speech community simply as “all the people who use a given language”. Bloomfield (1933-42) defines a speech community as “a group of people who interact by means of speech”. Charles Hockett (1958:8) defines the speech community as “the whole set of people who communicate with each other directly or indirectly via a common language”. On his own part, Gumperz (1968) saw a speech community as “any aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language use”. For Labov (1972a:120), speech

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community is not “defined by any marked agreement in the use of language elements, so much as by participation in a set of shared norms, these norms may be observed in overt types of evaluative behavior, and by the uniformity of abstract patterns of variation which are invariant in respect to particular levels of usage.

A number of these definitions including those of Lyons, (1970), Hockett (1958), Hymes (1972) and Halliday (1972) project language or speech homogeneity to be central issue in defining a speech community, Even Labov while adding that emphasis should be placed on shared attitudes and knowledge, however, based on his research in New York, he identified, projected and proposed a “single speech community with a single community grammar”. The main thrust of this paper is to uphold the definition of a speech community as given by Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) as buttressed by Hudson (2001:26), For Le-Page and Tabouret, the speech community is defined as a group in which “each individual creates the system for his verbal behavior so that they shall resemble those of the group or groups with which from time to time he may wish to be identified to the extent that:

1. He can identify the groups
2. He has both opportunity and ability to observe and analyze their behavioural systems.
3. His motivation is sufficiently strong to impel him to choose, and to adapt his behavior accordingly
4. He is able to adapt his behavior.

Hudson (2001:26) quotes Bolinger (1975) as applying the above definition by saying that there be no limit to the ways in which human beings league themselves together for self-identification, again, amusement, worship or any of the other purposes that are held in common; consequently there is no limit to the number and variety of speech communities that are to be found in society. He further maintains that any population of a state, city or village may be expected to a very large number of speech communities with overlapping memberships and overlapping language systems. This implies that different speech communities intersect with one another in complex ways with one another. One speech community defined in terms of shared attitudes or overlapping membership may at the same time contain parts of several speech communities defined in terms of shared language systems or varieties. The University of Calabar presents a good case in point to uphold the aptness and appropriateness of Le-page and Tabouret’s definition. It portrays the characteristics that demonstrate the complexity of the concept of the speech community.

### **University of Calabar as a speech community**

The University of Calabar, which used to be a campus of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, became a lull fledged University in 1976. It is situated in

Canaan Land in the city of Calabar, Cross River State, one of the states in the Oil Rich Niger-Delta Region of Nigeria. It is located in the serene environment that stretches from the Eta-Agbor gate to the swamps of the Akpabuyo River. It houses students of various academic programmes such as certificate, diploma, predegree, degree, sandwich as well as post graduate diplomas and degrees. It also houses the academic staff and the non-academic staff. The non-academic staff usually categorized into two; the senior staff under an umbrella association known as Senior Staff Association of Nigeria Universities (SSANU) and the junior staff under an umbrella association known as Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU). Hudson (2001:27) posits that for a community to pass for a speech community; a set of people needs to be distinguished from the rest of the world by more than one property, and some of these properties have to be important from the point of view of the member's social lives. In this respect, the University of Calabar as a speech community different from some other communities in the city or state is a group of people uniquely bonded together by the social desire for academic interaction. Such academic interactions could lead to skill acquisition, intellectual empowerment and character re-branding etc. Going by some of the definitions of a speech community mentioned earlier in this paper! It is expected that this speech community (University of Calabar) defined by interaction, should project a single or common system of interaction. The facts on the ground however, suggest otherwise.

Firstly! It is observed that in the composition of the groups that make up this speech community, there is an overlapping membership; ASUU, SSANU, NASU and students. In other words, there are a number of speech communities intersecting in a complex way with one another (Hudson 2001:26). In the course of this paper, it would further be revealed, how the community defined by interaction overlaps with that which is defined by shared language varieties.

The second observation in this speech community, is that rather than presenting a common system of interaction, a number of systems are provided for interaction. The definitions that recognize only a common system (language) of interaction in a speech community, excludes such communities as the University of Calabar. The University of Calabar speech community also has overlapping systems for interaction. This suggests that it shares not a single language variety but about three varieties. These varieties include, the standard Nigerian English, the Pidgin English as well as indigenous languages. Each individual of the community, influenced by some other factors such as class, context, gender and time employ any of the three languages to locate himself in the larger, multidimensional social space. Particular reference will be made here of the non-academic staff (NASU) of the university, comprising mainly of the junior non-teaching workers in the university.

**Language use by non-academic staff of University of Calabar**

Every staff of the university that is not a lecturer is supposed to be identified as a non-academic staff. However, trade unionism appears to have made further categorizations or distinctions among those who are not lecturers. The senior among the non-academic staff are recognized under SSANU (Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities) while the junior among them are recognized under NASU (Non-Academic Staff Union). It is in this context that we are discussing the language use by NASU in the University of Calabar speech community.

The NASU members of the University of Calabar are “made of some that are highly educated and others with low level of education in a ratio of approximately 30:70”. In carrying out their administrative duties, the well-educated among them use the Standard Nigerian English (SNE) while those with low level of education make use of the Nigerian Pidgin English. This was observed in an interaction between the supervisor of one of the Hall Annex and one of his staff as presented below.

Supervisor: Good morning Arit, why are you late to work?  
Arit: Morning Sir, I no bin dey house  
Supervisor: Did you come for work yesterday?  
Arit: I been come but na late too  
Supervisor: You’d better be serious with your work.  
Arit: Abeg Sir, no vex, e get as things dey.

Furthermore, forms and expressions like the following are identified with the well-educated ones:

“We take our work serious”  
“Yes, I am the supervisor”  
“We operate on rules”  
“We query dull staff”  
“Our union is for welfarism”  
“We act on instructions”

On the other hand, those with low level of education are found often to make such expressions as the ones shown below:

“I be staff”  
“Dem sabi query junior staffs”  
“Dem no pay well”  
“We de work overtime”  
“Our promotion de stay”  
“Promotion go soon come”  
“Him de craze”

It is discovered also, that under certain social contexts, both the well-educated and those with low level of education, employ the use of Pidgin

English as well as the indigenous languages. This social context could be when they come in contact with colleagues or members of the community who happen to speak the same indigenous language. In such contexts, there is usually code-mixing among any two of the three language varieties, standard Nigerian English, Pidgin English and the Indigenous language. Examples of such interactions are shown below;

| S/N | Code Mixed (English + Indigenous Language) | Translation                   |
|-----|--|-------------------------------|
| 1   | Iduhe ke office<br>Efik + English          | He is not in the office       |
| 2   | Ikaha School<br>Efik + English             | He has not gone to school     |
| 3   | Adidi big man<br>Efik + English            | He is now a big man           |
| 4   | Pension iduhe<br>English + Efik            | There is no pension           |
| 5   | Enomi appointment<br>English + Efik        | I have been given appointment |
| 6   | Mmebo promotion                            | I have been promoted          |
| 7   | Owo ikpehe salary<br>Efik + Efik + English | Salary has not been paid      |

As observed above, there is a kind of morpho-syntactic juxtaposition in this code mixing. In no. 5 of the examples above, the construction in Efik “Enomi” is a full sentence with both NP and VP. In the process of mixing, the English noun “appointment” is juxtaposed to it for completion and clarity. Such morpho-syntactic, juxtaposition in code mixing in indigenous language is not peculiar to the language use by NASU members, University of Calabar alone. It appears to be a new trend in Nigerian Gospel Music Industry as reported in Iwuchukwu (2006). While this linguistic device was employed by gospel artistes to create stylistic and semantic effects, it was used by NASU – University of Calabar members in informal social contexts, especially, amongst those that belong to the same social class, for completion and clarity.

The NASU-University of Calabar used the Standard Nigeria English in their phatic communion. For example, good morning/afternoon/evening, “Thank you”, “welcome”, “How are you” etc. This is observed however, some slight phonological variations due to age, gender and mother tongue interference. For example, two aged cleaners were observed saying (/Kudmɔ:nin/ instead of /gudmɔ:nin). They also had ungrammatical constructions such as (a) “I am there yesterday”, (b) “The supervisor and his friend is here” instead of using “was” and “are” in the two constructions respectively.

**Justifying Le Page and Tabouret Kelleri Hudson's Definition**

It is pertinent to note in the above use of language by the NASU – University of Calabar that, in an attempt to locate themselves in the larger space of the University community defined by interaction (academic), they identify with a community defined by shared language varieties. There is therefore, a proven case of interaction of speech communities with one another in a complex way as postulated by Hudson (2001). This further agrees with Tabouret and La Page's definition in which they said that "Each individual creates the systems for his verbal behaviour so that they shall resemble those of the group or groups with which from time to time he may wish to be identified, to the extent that he can identify the groups.../1. The NASU – Unical created systems for their verbal behaviour to conform with the group they wish to be identified with. Their definition's rejection of a community grammar is validated by NASU – University of Calabar's use of three shared language varieties or systems within the community.

**CONCLUSION**

In this paper, we have examined various definitions of a speech community. We discovered that the use of language in a speech community is at the centre stage of the controversy over its definitions. A cursory look at the definition of a speech community Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) buttressed by Hudson (2001) using the language use by the non-academic staff of the University of Calabar as a speech community, reveals some interesting facts: The community is specifically identified with a definite social interaction. It however, possesses not only an overlapping membership but also overlapping language systems. This tends to suggest that definitions of speech community which give the sense of shared community grammar or restricted membership as the only defining characteristics should be disregarded.

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