

# Language Choice and Cultural Context: A Case Study of Taboo Words and Expressions in Nimo Speech Community

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## Abstract

This paper investigates language choice and cultural context by studying the use of taboo words and expressions in the Nimo speech community. The objectives of this research were to explore the Nimo cultural norms, values, and beliefs by investigating the attitudes of the Nimo speakers with regard to the use of taboo words and euphemistic expressions and various contexts where the use of certain words and expressions are tabooed in the speech community. It describes the main reasons why they use taboo words and discuss some sensitive topics such as sex and death etc. This study advances some explanation on the social and psychological aspects which influence greatly the individuals' employment of language with the age and sex restraints. It also aims to test their attitudes regarding the use of taboos in mixed-sex groups. To achieve the objectives of this study, three research questions were developed. The design of the study was a descriptive survey. The Speech Act Theory of Austin 1962 was used as the theoretical framework for the study. The target population for this study was 18,428 indigenes of Nimo in Njikoka Local Government Area, Anambra State, Nigeria. A simple random sampling technique was used to select 12 respondents for this study. The oral interview was used to elicit information from the respondents. The data for this study were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data from the respondents were analyzed critically. Qualitative data from journal articles, books, magazines, and newspapers were explored and used in this study. The findings of this study reveal that Nimo speakers have distinct attitudes regarding the use of taboos and euphemistic expressions. There are many reasons behind the use of taboo words by the speakers and they do not discuss taboo topics in mixed-sex groups. This study recommends that students should be exposed to related Igbo programme(s) on radios and televisions. Both schools and homes need to be brought together so that the application of cultural values to daily lifestyle may be a reality. Igbo language teachers must serve as good instruments and be prepared to utilize their skills in helping their students achieve a high degree of proficiency in the Igbo language.

**Keywords:** Language choice, cultural context, taboo word, euphemism

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## 1. Introduction

Language is an indispensable medium of communication by which people can communicate their views, emotions, and attitudes. Language is seen as an essential part of human social interaction since it helps in building up relationships. Language is a medium by which people's ideas can be conveyed and sometimes it can be followed by gestures. The context, to which language is used, has great importance. Therefore, language and the context in which interactions take place are inseparable. This implies that there are social aspects that play significant functions in directing language use between speakers. In other words, the use of language depends greatly on the social contexts where interactions occur. Some aspects of life influence language. They include social structure, social environment, and values of the society.

Language is deep-rooted in the culture of its people since it reflects their norms, values, and taboos. Gaius (2016) maintains that disregarding these beliefs during interactions may generate severe assault between speakers since every individual has to behave appropriately in his/her society depending on its norms. In this vein, one ought to account that all languages have definite words, expressions, sentences, and topics that are prohibited to be spoke or conversed in public. These words are called taboo words in a language(s). Taboo words (TWs) exist in all human languages and cultures, despite the fact that each society has its norms and taboos. Magna (2017) posits that taboos are correlated to the cultural beliefs of society. This implies that there are taboos that are universal and there are culture-specific ones. Note that to keep away from embarrassment and face-losing, people try to seek for substitutions that can hide the harmonious power of taboo words. Sometimes, euphemisms are used to replace derogatory or hurtful expressions that can bring about harm and shame for

speakers/hearers. These expressions are related to the religious and cultural beliefs of a given society and define its socio-cultural structure. Ghounane (2013) admits that the use of taboo words differs from one person to another depending on certain social factors such as anger, frustration, annoyance, and so on. Furthermore, gender, age and educational background of the speaker play important roles as social variables in examining language in a given society because males and females use it variously depending on their ages.

Language can be the medium through which a society may be influenced, controlled, or manipulated. It reflects some certain degree aspects of the society it is spoken. Knight (2014) states that it indicates something about the way which a society is structured, as conveyed; perhaps, through its kingship terms or its beliefs, norms, and values illustrated, for example, through linguistic taboos, descriptive labels for social and ethnic groups or in terms for the men or women. Ugwu (2015) asserts that the Igbos are culturally homogenous; they form a group that interacts in paternal ways and shares beliefs, values, goals, and norms, and has a feeling of membership. Their rich cultural heritage is submerged in their proverbs, songs, music, dances, drama, paintings, drawings, marriage ceremonies, festivals, chieftaincy installations, etc. All these aspects of culture which bind the people are made meaningful and expressed through the use of language. The Igbo language is thus, a unifying factor of the Igbo culture and has proved an efficient and useful tool for the circulation of the Igbo culture from age to age.

Propriety in language use, being a sociological phenomenon among the Igbo people generally and Nimo people in particular centers' on their sense of decorum and etiquette. They always disapprove of any inappropriate or unacceptable use of tabooed words in certain cultural contexts, especially in public or sacred company. Although nobody is physically punished for impropriety unless, in circumstances that amount to slander, the Nimo people resort to circumstances if reference must be made to certain morals and expressions. These restrictions in usage are not initially enforced but socially determined to maintain order in the community. Social norms of language choice vary from context to context and from culture to culture. The idea of context here is extended to apply beyond linguistics contexts or environments but also to the socio-situational circumstances of speech events in language. Many things could be made clear by studying typical speech situations. What this means is that situation in life makes it necessary that something should be said, or not be said or mentioned. These situations and the participants involved are guided by social variables such as age, sex, and religious beliefs that constitute the cultural contexts. In recognition of the above heterogeneity nature of speech communities and the extent to which variations in use carry socio-stylistic meanings, this work approaches the study of language use within the socio-cultural contexts by examining linguistic taboos inherent in Igbo language using the Nimo speech community as a case study. This is a kind of starting point in the examination of interpersonal interactions with regards to culturally defined situation of language use. In the Nimo community, social grace may require speaking in a certain style evidenced by using certain forms of words, modes, tones, and pronunciations to fully observe social propriety. This area of study has not been accorded much priority in the Igbo language; especially in the area of cultural influence on language use, hence the need for this paper to use the Nimo speech community.

## 1.2 Statement of the Problem

Taboo words and expressions exist in every human language as well as euphemistic expressions. Cultural demand towards propriety in speech may vary from society to society and also from culture to culture. The fact that man speaks is not itself culture, it is socially necessary that he does so to express himself well to others. That he says this and keeps away from the use of certain expressions in a context though may be used at other times, and places by other people are matters of culture. Note that profane expressions being largely conditioned by social influence are also subject to cultural belief. It is observed that many Igbo scholars have worked on taboos as a general phenomenon with little or no attention to the more abstract aspects of it. While some scholars merely defined the concept, others make lists of taboos and euphemisms without giving them in-depth studies or relating them to language choice and cultural contexts. Furthermore, it is also observed generally that in the Igbo society and the Nimo speech community, particularly that some individuals do not know the cultural contexts in which some words and expressions could be used or regarded as taboos and the consequences that await the defaulter since the cultural context influences the abuse or adherence to them. Regarding the impropriety in language use, our judgments demand the character, status, sex, and religious belief not only of the speaker but also of the person(s) before the breach of etiquette is committed. Because of these, this paper sets out to make a bridge between aspects of culture and language use so that one can understand the taboos and norms of the speech community under study since no work has been done on this subject matter. In this context, certain questions are put up to enable the researcher to achieve the objectives of this study:

- i. What are the attitudes of the Nimo speakers regarding the use of taboo expressions?
- ii. What are the reasons behind the use of taboo expressions?
- iii. Do Nimo speakers discuss taboo topics in mixed-sex groups?

### 1.3 Scope of the Study

This study covers only some major cultural contexts in the Nimo speech community where taboo words and expressions are either partially allowed or completely disallowed to find out the attitude of the speakers toward using them, to find out the reasons behind the use of taboo expressions and whether they discuss taboo words in mixed groups. The contexts are numerous but for this paper, major contexts known to be pertinent to the normal lives of the people of the community will be discussed. The contexts include:

**Greeting:** This is of particular interest to the Nimo people because it occurs in every interaction.

**Presentation, breaking, and praying with kola nut:** the Igbo people generally regard the kola nut as a veritable instrument for prayer. Whenever it is presented, the people staying around will listen attentively to the prayers that follow. Everything around it is sacred.

**Family:** just like every other group of people, the communities live in family groups, both nuclear and extended. The uniqueness or distinctiveness of every family both in nature and organization determines what is said or avoided and in what context

**Masquerade Ceremony:** this is a kind of cult specifically meant for males above the age of ten years. Nonmembers and females are not allowed to know the secrets about it.

**Judicial context:** whenever there is a misunderstanding between the members of the community, people come together to try their cases.

**Traditional ceremonies:** these are cultural ceremonies inherited from our forefathers which may have lost some of their original meanings.

There will be a definition as well as a classification of common taboo words and expressions in the study area. This work will regard any other name used to avoid mentioning the actual name of the study object as a euphemism, therefore, a definition of euphemism concerning this work will be given later. The Igbo language, customs, and institutions will serve as the base of reference in general and the culture of the Nimo speech community in particular. This notwithstanding, there will be no discussions on either the custom of Igbo people or that of the study area through issues about them may be mentioned.

## 2. Literature Review

In this section, the conceptual studies, theoretical studies, empirical studies, and theoretical framework related to this study will be discussed.

### 2.1 Conceptual Studies

In this section, we are going to explain some of the operational terms used in this study.

#### a. Language

Language is a phenomenon that is peculiar to human beings, and its primary function is communication. According to Churchill (2012), man can use language that takes him from the ranks of lower animals, denotes him as a rational creature, and places him on a pinnacle above all other animals. Language is a major factor in the growth of man multiplicities. Hence, it has been variously explained by scholars and language experts as a means of expressing thoughts, ideas, and desires. Hornby (2012) defines language as a human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, feelings, and desires using a system of sounds and sound symbols. Gatherer (2014) defines language as a social phenomenon structurally to the same extent that other cultural patterns, verbal and non-verbal language are social expressions that have an underlying structure, a pattern, which serves as the organizing principle of cultural behavior. From the above definition, language and culture are seen to be mutually exclusive, interrelated, and can be hybridized; they are separable but never separated.

#### b. Language Choice

Language choice does not exist in a vacuum. This is because language is a means of communication among people and the use of language reflects the infinite complexity of human relationships. There is a need for individual(s) or speaker(s) of society to select appropriate language suitable for a specific context. Note that knowing the rules for the appropriate choice of language is part of the speaker's communicative competence. The choice of language in a particular context depends primarily on the environment or social surroundings in which the speaker finds himself/herself. Furthermore, it depends on the topic, setting (including locale and time of the day), and participants (including their age, sex, and social class or status).

#### c. Cultural Context

Culture concerns itself with the beliefs, customs, values, and activities of a specific group of people including their lifestyles at a specific time. Because culture indicates people's way of life, it provides order and guidance for social behaviours and stability among changes. Cultural context has to do with the social and cultural background related to verbal communication. It is related to the society in which individuals are raised and how the culture influences their behaviours. It incorporates values that are learned and attitudes that are shared among the groups of people. It includes beliefs, customs, norms, and ideas. Cultural context can also be a custom or norm of a society, the characters lived in, and how their culture can affect their behaviors. Macon (2011) posits

that cultural context looks at how, where, and when each context is set. Verona (2016) adds that since culture refers to the symbolic system of human beings, the cultural context concerns various symbolic expression systems that affect aesthetic communication. It is worthy to note that the members of a society have norms and restrictions that the society makes on verbal communication activities.

#### **d. Taboo**

In any speech community, there exist words or things which are considered to be not suitable if spoken in public occasions. A great number of words are therefore taken as vulgar, disgusting, or improper when used in communications. These words are called *taboos*. The word, the *taboo* is borrowed from the Tongan *tapu*, an adjective that refers to persons or objects under prohibition (Burridge, 2010). Gu & Lu (2002:264) posit that Tongan “is a language spoken by Polynesians in the Pacific archipelago where any sacred or humble things are forbidden to touch or even to talk about”. The adoption by the English language of this foreign word with the variations of spellings caused the loss of its spiritual meaning. The word still means that a person is forbidden from performing certain things and that objects can also be under prohibition. Taboo words are those words that are to be avoided completely, or at least keep away from in “mixed company or polite company”. What counts as taboo language is something determined by culture, and not by anything ingrained or built in the language (Akamjian, Dermers, Farmer, & Harnish, 2001). According to Wardhaugh (2000), taboo is the proscription or avoidance of in any society of behavior believed to be injurious or harmful to its members in that it would cause them tension, embarrassment, or shame. Fershtman, Gneezy, and Hoffman (2011) assert that taboo is an 'unthinkable' action, and the thought of breaching or breaking one can prompt social punishment. They believe that taboos are the social 'thought police', discouraging individuals from carrying out a particular kind of action. This definition of taboo seems to be logical. Taboos act as a technique to prevent people from breaking rules. However, it is not a law in itself as there is a difference between the meaning of law and taboo. Law is a legal system or order of social rules that controls the conduct of members of societies and is obtained from human practices (Hart, 1977). Similarly, Fitzpatrick (1992) opines that law is determined by the functions it performs and this is seen as a straightforward relation of effectiveness in its effect on behaviour or in social change, while taboo is perceived as part of community social norms. Tabooed subjects can vary from culture to culture. They include: death, body functions about sex, illness, age of ladies, words believed to be blasphemy, excretion, religious, and so on. Societies share this point of view, particularly the Nimo speech community and Igbo society at large. Taboos serve as a protector of moral values to the society. It is an efficient system of preserving, transmitting and sustaining moral values, and bearing in mind that language is unique code for communication

#### **e. Taboo Management**

To avoid language taboo (LT), speakers have to use linguistic mechanisms and rhetorical means to manage or handle it. Qanbar (2011) points out on how people can employ several approaches or plans to keep away from uttering taboo words. These approaches include euphemism, creating antonyms, metaphoric expressions, and jargons. To handle LT, speakers might code switch from the first language (L1) to the second language (L2) or employ euphemism.

#### **f. Euphemism**

Euphemism is one of the most common taboo management strategies. Halmari (2011) remarks that humans have always make use of euphemisms; vague and indirect utterances in their bid to skip life's tough realities and that in euphemistic use of language, one expression is replaced by another. Burridge (2010) notes that taboo words are avoided so as not to offend the audience. Speakers try to speak words that do not necessarily injure or upset others. The choice of words is considered as a must by many. In the Igbo land and the nation at large, hurting the listener is not allowed under any circumstance. It is the duty of the speaker to make sure that they are polite at all times to be accepted by the listener(s), and euphemisms may be used to avoid offensive words. Webster (2011) defines euphemism as an innocuous word or utterance used in place of one that may be found derogatory, insulting or suggest something offensive. White (2014) defines euphemisms as polite, mild phrases which replace offensive ways of uttering something sad or intolerable. It is the use of pleasant, harmless or unoffending words to substitute rude or offensive ones. Pascal (2016) maintains that euphemism is a polite or mild word or utterance used to refer to something embarrassing, taboo, displeasing or uncomfortable.

#### **g. Speech Act**

The speech act is an expression regarded as an action, specifically concerning its intension, purpose, or effects on the listener(s). It is an expression that performs its function in communication. It is a bit of speech produced as part of social interactions. It includes real-life interactions and requires not only the knowledge of the language but also an appropriate use of language within a particular culture. We perform speech acts when we offer an apology, greeting, request, complain, and give an invitation or refusal. A speech act may comprise just one word as in *sorry* to perform an apology or various words or sentences such as *I'm sorry I forgot to reply to your message* and so on.

## 2.2 Theoretical Studies

The speech act is something expressed by an individual not only presenting information but performing an action as well. The speech act theory of Austin (1962) is of great importance in this review. This theory was summarized under five categories. (verdictive, exercitive, commissive, behavitives and expositive). Austin posits that 'to say something is to do something which means that speech is performative. In making speeches, we have performative utterances which are neither true nor false but create a specific social effect by being uttered; verdictive refers to giving a verdict, estimate, appraisal, grade, and so on. Exercitive implies a speaker exercising power, right, or influence to make utterances. Commissive, this is made manifest when a speaker is making a promise or an undertaking that commits him to do something. Behavitive speech act is the kind of behavior being put up like praying, cursing, apologizing, congratulating, and challenging. Expositive is the last category that refers to how a speaker makes utterances during an argument or exposition. Many other disciplines such as discourse analysis, stylistics, communication theories, ethnolinguistics, and so forth have emerged and have continued to be reviewed in different dimensions in a bid to have an adequate description of language choice. Communicative competence concept marked the beginning of the revival of interest in language in the broadest sense. The term was used by Hymes (1962, 1972). He argues that it is essential to incorporate social and cultural factors into the linguistic description. His communicative competence recognized our ability to construct and interpret appropriate utterances in a given linguistic and social context with specific goals or purposes. The child in Chomsky's view internalizes a set of rules which enables him to produce grammatical sentences but Hymes (1972) argues that the child learns not just grammar but also a sense of appropriateness. It is not enough for the child to be linguistically competent, to function in the real world, he must also have learned when to speak, what to speak to, who to speak to, and how to speak in different circumstances. Coates (1986) points out that someone who speaks at the same time as others, or who does not respond to questions might use well-formed sentences but is incompetent in an important sense. Therefore, it is even easier to think of incompetence in communication through Hymes's view than Chomsky's view of grammatical incompetence. For instance, it is easier (quite offensive) to notice a blasphemous statement or an abusive statement (word) than an incorrect tense used in a statement in most speech communities. It is this knowledge of how language is used in a given society which depends on social and cultural interaction that constitutes competence.

This paper tries to establish that the distribution of linguistic features cannot be understood solely in terms of their internal relationship within grammar but must be seen as part of a broader socio-cultural context in which some words and expressions are considered improper including other social variables that affect the use of such words and expressions. For a person to be competent and appropriate in the use of language, the context of linguistic taboos must be internalized in addition to his/her mastery of other grammatical rules. For this reason, Bash and Harnish (1979:94) maintain that "every interpersonal situation ranging from casual, two-person encounters to elaborate ceremonies and complex institutional activities involves mutually recognized rules governing certain types of context(s) and person(s). This paper, therefore, bases its assumption that in addition to the mastery of grammatical rules in the Igbo language, every speaker must also have full knowledge of the cultural contexts of linguistic taboos.

## 2.3 Empirical Studies

In this section, we are going to review some of the works which scholars have done on taboos and euphemisms in different societies and cultures and their findings. Ghounane (2013) conducted a study on the sociolinguistic view of taboo language and euphemisms in the Algerian society: attitudes and beliefs in the Tlemcen speech community. The study was geared to examine Tlemcen speakers' attitudes regarding taboo topics namely sex and death and their euphemistic substitutions. It also focused at improving a useful understanding of these sensitive topics. Thus, it aims to prove that some linguistic expressions/utterances are the result of societal, psychological, and cultural pressures. The outcomes of the study reveal that the percentages of both taboos and euphemistic usage are almost equal; however, statistical analysis of the questionnaire disclosed that the respondents' attitudes regarding taboos were very much positive. These discoveries show that the use of these two linguistic phenomena differs from one person to another depending on their age, gender, educational background, and the context of use.

Abi-Esber, Yang, Muranaka & Moustakim (2018) carried out a study on linguistic taboos using Australian Lebanese Speakers as a case study. This study aimed to examine how Lebanese Arabic speakers living in Australia utilize their linguistic taboos, to comprehend their cross-cultural adaptation in the Australian context. The particular research focus attention of this study comprises of how and why Lebanese Arabic speakers of various age ranges use linguistic taboo words. A total of 56 Lebanese students were deemed to satisfy the participation criteria. A research tool, NVIVO 10 software, was employed to analyze the questionnaires and interviews and to assist in sorting major themes, as discovered above, for critical discussion. The findings indicate that the older participants' favour to use a specifically designed or marked euphemistic form of linguistic taboo whereas the younger participants' use of linguistic taboo is much affected by some factors such



as peer pressures and video games, and they do not always use more taboo words than older participants as revealed in previous research.

Abijo & Akandeo (2018) conducted a study on the linguistic taboos in Yoruba society and their relevance to teaching-learning in Nigerian secondary schools. The study analyzed some Yoruba language taboos which are one of the very unique departments of knowledge of Yoruba study. During the study, answers were sought through the following questions: What is a taboo? What is the underlying philosophy of linguistic taboo as a matter of particularity and emphasis in Yoruba society? Also, an in-depth analysis of some linguistic taboos, words used as their substitute, and why were carried out. The study also considered the relevance of linguistic taboos to teaching and learning in secondary schools and some recommendations were made on the teaching and learning of linguistic taboos in schools.

Ansah (2014) carried out a study on language choice in multilingual communities using Larteh, Ghana as a case study. The paper investigated factors that control language choices that multilingual speakers make in Larteh, a multilingual community. The study was analyzed using the Markedness Model developed by Myers-Scotton (1993, 1998). Larteh is a non-reciprocal bilingual community, where the people speak Leteh<sup>2</sup> and Akuapem Twi (Johnson, 1973: i). English is the third language for those who have had formal education. In this research, three areas of language use were examined namely: education, tradition, and religion. Data from an interview survey on language use and participant observations were employed. The paper noted that due to changes in different domains of life in Larteh, present language use patterns in the community vary from what obtained about three decades ago (Johnson, 1973, 1975). Subsequently, factors that govern language choice are gradually undergoing some modifications.

## 2.4 Theoretical Framework

The theory relevant to this present study is the Speech Acts Theory. The Speech Acts Theory is important in the field of pragmatics. The following scholars contributed to the field of pragmatics: the British philosopher Austin 1962, the American philosopher, Searle (1969), and Grice (1975). This study used the Speech Acts Theory of Austin 1962 as a theoretical framework. Austin points out that the Speech Acts Theory shows the relationship between language and the context of use by providing a systematic classification of communicative intentions. Furthermore, he states that people do not use language in communication as a set of correct utterances but also build them in a particular action. In other words, expressions can perform certain kinds of communicative acts such as giving instructions, making expressions, asking questions...etc. Austin (1962:17) calls such utterances *performatives* which implies "utterances which are neither true nor false but which give rise to a specific social effect by being uttered." This theory was summarized under five categories. (verdictive, exercisive, commissive, behavitive, and expositive). First is Verdictive which refers to giving a verdict, estimate, appraisal, grade, and so on. The second is Exercisive which is made manifest when a speaker is exercising power, right, or influence to make utterances. The third is Commissive which is made manifest when a speaker is making a promise or an undertaking that commits him to do something. Fourth is Behavitive refers to the kind of behavior being put up like praying, cursing, apologizing, congratulating, challenging, and so on. Expositive is the last and fifth category that concerns to how a speaker makes utterances during an argument or exposition.

## 2.5 Summary

Language is commonly accepted to be a medium of expressing thoughts, ideas, and desires. It is a unique communication phenomenon for human beings that distinguish them from lower animals. The choice of language used in different contexts is then a strong factor in achieving effective communication.

This review has presented the views of many linguistics scholars, especially sociolinguists. Their opinions do not differ a lot in the final analysis. An obvious middle ground they have is that since language is for communication, for effective communication to take place it must properly be applied or used in such a way that it suits the speaker(s) in all contexts. This paper however agrees with the Speech Act Theory of Austin that sees language as performative and will base its analysis on it.

## 3. Methodology

The design of the study is a descriptive survey. The targeted population for this study was 18,428 indigenes of Nimo in Njikoka LGA, Anambra State (INEC voters' registration data, 2019). A simple random sampling technique was used to select 12 respondents for this study. Both structured and unstructured interviews were employed in the collection of the data for the study. The data for the study were carefully analyzed. The Speech Act Theory of Austin 1962 was used as a theoretical framework.

## 4. Data Analysis

The data is based on the Speech Act Theory of Austin 1962. In this section, various cultural contexts used in this work will be analyzed and discussed as it agrees and relates to the theory in application. The responses from

interviewees were meant to answer the questions raised in the introductory section. Respondents gave overall general taboo contexts and expressions in Igbo land and how specific it is to the Nimo speech community. According to them, taboo words include vulgar words such as words dealing with the private parts of the human body (genital organs), words dealing with delicate subjects, such as *osu* 'outcast', *ohu* 'slave', and so on; words felt to be too powerful as *onwu* 'death', swear words and so on are not usually called by their actual names, especially in a social or public gathering or polite company. Their real names are avoided and more pleasant or mild words are used in referring to them. They also outlined many contexts which include, greeting, family, village meetings, *umuada*/age grade meetings, childbirth context, traditional ceremonies, marriage, use of proverbs, killing and eating of certain animals, masquerade, judicial contexts, and so on but for this paper, major contexts that concern this study will be analyzed and discussed.

Austin's theory is summarized under five following categories: (verdictive, excercisive, commissive, behavitives, and expositive. These are applied below in different contexts:

**Greeting:** Greeting in the Nimo speech community is of particular interest because it occurs in every interaction. Note that it is a taboo for an adult to greet the young and also for parents to greet their children. This may however differ in the context where a child is sick. It is the parents that on going to check up on the child in the morning greet him/her with expressions such as *I futagwo ula* or *kee ki mee*, aside from this context, it is a taboo for greetings to go from adult to children in Nimo speech community. In otherwise a context, where an adult greets the young, it is to call him/her to order for failing to greet or being rude. Again handshake which is another form of greeting never goes from the young to the elder. It is taboo for the young to begin or commence a handshake with an elder; he will only accept a handshake when initiated by an elder. This is supported by *Austin's behavitve speech act*.

Furthermore, because of the importance of greeting to the Nimo speech community, sex is also a major factor that affects the pattern of address. Men are addressed differently from the women folk depending on the context. While handshakes are common among men, hugging and embracing are associated with females. A woman cannot initiate a handshake toward a man because it is taboo. The choice of address differs according to the social characteristics of the speaker such as social class, age, sex, and context. Men use forceful words in greeting or in addressing a gathering in the following form:

Greeting: Cha cha cha Nimo ekenee mu unu ooo! (two times)

Response: Yaa! (two times)

Greeting: Rie nu!

Response: Yaa!

Greeting: Nuonu!

Response: Yaa!

Greeting: Umụ unụ zua unu ooo!

Response: Isee ooo!

Women are not allowed to use these forceful words in greeting or addressing a gathering. They are to greet softly or in some cases lengthen their greeting to show politeness, as in:

Greeting: Ndi be anyi daalunu ooo.

"Our people, I greet you all ooo/ well done"

Greeting: Nnonu ooo.

"You are welcome ooo"

It is taboo in the Nimo community for a woman to bellow at her audience before making her speech. She must begin by acknowledging the presence of the men, whom she sees as her husbands, lords, and masters no matter their ages. Hence she starts in a subtle and submissive voice by saying *ndi di m*.

**Presentation, breaking, and praying with kola nut:** Although the language is shared adequately by men and women in the speech community of study, there is a restriction on the use of taboo expressions by women. Women do not present and break kola nuts in the Nimo community, it is a taboo. They are only allowed to present the kola nut(s) to their husband(s) who will then present it to the visitor(s) as well as pray over it as tradition demands. This implies exercising power, right, and influence and supports *Austin's second performative speech act of excercisive*. It is solely the men that have the power to pray over a kola nut otherwise it becomes a taboo. Furthermore, it is only men that pour libation which is an extension of the breaking of kola nuts. It is a taboo for women to pour libation or use the expressions associated with it. It is meant for the men folk because some form of incantations are involved which only men are permitted to use.

**Family:** Many taboo contexts and expressions exist at the family level in the Nimo speech community and are more behavitve in nature. For instance, it is a taboo for a woman to commit adultery and cook food for her husband. In the family context; no one is allowed to cross over each other when sitting down or lying down. In families, it is regarded as taboo for members to mistreat a widow and her children or forcefully take from them what belonged to them or their inheritance. A female member of the family is not expected to have children in the family out of wedding luck

**Masquerade ceremony:** Participating in the masquerade cult is not meant for everybody in Igbo land, no doubt it is a big *No* and a serious taboo for men who are not initiated into the cult to associate themselves with the masquerade expressions under any given context let alone the women. A lot of secrets are involved that only the big-hearted men are deemed fit to handle which women are completely incapable of keeping. There are also some special types of masquerade that men who are not initiated into the cult do not watch. A masquerade named *Ayaka* can only be watched by men who belong to the masquerade cult, herbalists, and *umu nwoke isi kara aka* (men who have strong heads) otherwise it is a taboo. This supports *Austin's speech act of commissiveness* which commits members by promising and undertaking to carry out the functions of the masquerade cult.

**Traditional ceremonies:** Taboo words and expressions exist in almost all the numerous traditional ceremonies of the Igbo people and Nimo people in particular. For instance, during marriage ceremonies, it is taboo for a woman to be in the council of elders that negotiate the bride price. Furthermore, it is taboo for a woman and a man to live together without the full consent and blessing of their parents. Again, it is taboo for the keg of palm wine meant for the marriage ceremony to pour during marriage preparation or on the way to such ceremony. Though *osu system* (outcast system) is abolished in Igbo land, some respondents still hold the opinion that marrying an *osu* (outcast) remains a taboo in the community.

Title-taking is solely reserved for men. In the Nimo speech community, men are the *ozo*, *ichie*, and *ofọ* title holders. In giving such titles, it is believed that there are secret language expressions surrounding the title that only men can keep and utter respectively.

An age-grade system is an executive group in Igbo traditional setting as well as in the speech community under study, it constitutes of men born during a particular period usually within five years. Women do not form or join age grades and are not socially allowed to belong to clubs. Though in some cases daughters (*umuada*) could intervene in serious matters in their communities of birth,

In childbirth ceremonies, songs associated with birth are hardly sung by the men. It is women that sing such songs at the arrival of a newborn, men can only come to the scene to welcome the newborn as well as sit down to watch the women celebrate and sing popular songs. Although men may sing birth songs or lullabies, it is the women that are noted for that.

**Judicial context:** The Igbo man believes in fairness and equity and that is why there are taboo contexts and expressions associated with it. In the Nimo community, it is taboo for someone or a family to encroach into another man's property forcefully without due consent especially landed properties. It is also taboo for the village council of elders to judge such matters when brought to them unjustly. It is taboo for family members to mistreat a widow and her children or an orphan. When cases like these are brought before the village council of elders, they usually constitute a committee to investigate and submit their findings for the final verdict to be given. This is in line with *Austin's verdictive* approach to speech act theory. Furthermore, the execution of the will of a dying man is usually expected to be upheld by his trusted relations and therefore commits the relation to a function that he must uphold. In situations where misunderstanding may arise or parties refuse to adhere to the will and try to manipulate such will, the relation in place as the executor is committed to stating without fear or favour the true condition of the will.

There are general taboo contexts and expression in Nimo which mostly supports Austin's behaviorives speech acts. They include areas such as killing a python snake in the community, when this happens the culprit will be made to perform certain rituals as well as give it a proper burial as is done for a dead man. It is taboo for women to use proverbs in public, especially before the council of elders. These proverbs are those containing taboo words or expressions (i.e words belonging to private parts of the body). A Nimo woman no matter her status is not allowed to use some Igbo proverbs, especially those of male or female genital organs to stress her point in the public speech. Proverbs as:

- a. A na-asọ nwaanyi ikpu ukwu anya, o ga-ara onwe ya.  
'Why must we fear a woman with a big vagina, will she make love to herself?'
- b. Onye amụ dị mma amaghị ihe onye ibi na- ahụ.  
'A man with a healthy penis does not know what his fellow man with an enlarged scrotum is passing through.'

Still in behaviorive contexts, according to respondents, it is a taboo for one to cause the fall of an elder in the Nimo speech community, using *aka ekpe* (left hand) to do anything even though the person might be left-handed is a taboo, whistling at night is yet another taboo. Announcing the death of a king openly is taboo in Nimo. They will rather say that *eze a gabala njem*. (The king has gone on a trip). Above all, marrying an *osu* (outcast) is considered a taboo though this context divided the respondents into two equal groups. While some especially the Christians believe that it is no longer a taboo, the other group mixed with both Christians and non-Christians think that it is still a taboo. Free-born men and women are expected to investigate the origins and social classes of their spouses to be to ascertain that they are not *osu* before contracting marriage. Respondents gave recent examples of marriage proceedings that have been stopped because investigations revealed that either family was



a descendant of an *osu*.

## 4.2 Findings

The following findings were made in the present study:

- i. Nimo speakers do not have various attitudes regarding the use of taboos expressions
- ii. There are many reasons behind the non-use of taboo words by the Nimo speakers.
- iii. The Nimo speakers do not discuss taboo topics in mixed-sex groups and their dialect does not contain many vulgar words.

The findings of this study show that the attitudes of Nimo speakers do not differ towards taboo expressions in any given context. Many respondents perceive some expressions as an insult since some words can acquire a taboo meaning due to their negative connotations and the attitudes which the individuals develop against them. Others alleged that it depends on the meaning and the goal of the taboo words used. The respondents asserted that the most offensive area is *sex* rather than *death* or *insulting religion*. Most respondents declared that they want to discuss taboo matters with their close or intimate friends, whereas some of them claimed that they prefer to talk about sensitive topics with their family members including wives, husbands, sisters, and brothers. On the other hand, other respondents maintained that they enjoy talking about them with their colleagues, but nobody wishes to discuss these topics, especially sexual intercourse, bodily effluvia, and body parts with public members since it is embarrassing and can be seen as a source of impoliteness and face-losing.

Most of the respondents refer to an old man as *nna anyi* (our father). Some of the respondents refer to an old man as *agadi nwoke* which is taboo since it shows disrespect to the old people. Most of the respondents resorted to the term *nnee* for old women, whereas many of them use the word *nwaanyi a*. On the other hand, the word *agadi nwaanyi*, which are spoken by a few of them, is lexis of Igbo dialect and is not much used by the Nimo speakers. Most of the respondents used *nwaanyi oma* for old unmarried women. This term is a type of euphemism that is employed to avoid mentioning that the woman is old and has not married yet. The question of age is sensitive for females in all societies. For this reason, most women try to hide their real age, especially unmarried ones. *Onochiriobi* is used by some of them. On the other hand, *nna ga- alu* is used by a few of them and it is regarded to as an open insult when an old unmarried woman is addressed by such a name. *Onyearuruala* is a word used by few for adultery.

An illegitimate child is referred to as *nwa ime mkpuke* by most of the respondents. Others call him/her *nwa a muru n'ulo*. The majority of the respondents call male sexual organ *ihe o ji buru nwoke/nwaanyi* and this is a type of euphemism that the Nimo speakers employ to hide the taboo meaning of the term. The term *utu* is spoken by some of the Nimo speakers. This latter is the most taboo term in the Nimo dialect and is a part of the body that is banned to be exposed or even mentioned in daily communication. However, this word can be found in men's speech, especially as a type of insult. Some respondents refused to answer a question about women's sexual organs due to their sensitive nature, although they answered the previous one. The main reason is that the Nimo people are sensitive to vulgar expressions. Most of the respondents resorted to saying *o gara ihe* when they want to say *he died*. Some say *o nagwo*, while few others say *o hapugwo*. Most of the respondents strengthen the family of the deceased by saying *kasienu*, some use the term *ji sienu ike*, while others say *ndonu*. Worthy of note is the fact that for a Nimo indigene to avoid the use of the taboo expression in any context, he or she resorts to the word *nso ma okwu* which means (if it will not be talking too much). This is because the Nimo speaker is conscious of vulgar expressions above anything while making speeches.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper investigated language choice by studying taboo words and expressions in Nimo speech community. The study of taboo language is always seen as inappropriate for academic research because of the sensitivity of its nature especially sex, however, it exists in all human cultures. No doubt addressing the dark side of both culture and language of a particular society is expected to include novel dimensions to understanding the human psyche. Interestingly, one should note that research on taboos and euphemisms is vast since they are heavily used in all societies and most studies, which are done in these two fields, have been piloted by Western researchers and few works have been done by Igbo scholars.

Language by which taboo words and expressions are been expressed is an indispensable tool for human communication and carrier of culture. Many taboo words and expressions exist variously in every society. In actual life, people always employ taboo words for some reasons and sometimes replace them with euphemistic expressions to avoid offending or harming people and also save face. Taboos and euphemisms are culture phenomena. They are integral part of culture in the Nimo speech community. They influence the use of language in the speech community and the Igbo society in general. This implies that they affect everyone in the society.

There are things the speakers of the community can refuse to talk about, and others they do not talk about directly, even though they know the words, or else, they express themselves on them indirectly or in a euphemistic ways. There are words which are hardly ever used because they are offensive or forbidding. Social

groups are different from one another in how members behave in this way that way. Worthy of note is that no group or community uses language randomly rather; well articulated language is required always in a context. Admittedly, this piece of work provides us with an overview of the socio-cultural structure, religious norms, customs, and beliefs of the Nimo speech community in particular and the Igbo society in general. Henceforth, one should note that each culture is unique in terms of which topics are considered taboo and which are not. This fact clearly shows that the use of taboos differs from one individual to another depending on their gender, age, educational background, the context of use, and attitudes.

## 5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the present study, the following recommendations were made:

1. As noted in chapter one, the cultural context of linguistics taboo is an area in sociolinguistic research that is concerned with the details of language in actual use- the field Hymes had named ethnography of speaking (1962). There is still a great deal to be done in describing and analyzing the patterns of use of language and dialects within a specific culture.
2. There is a need for further and adequate studies on the description of speech events, the interrelations of speakers and audience, and cross-cultural factors affecting public speaking events.
3. Both school and home need to be brought together so that the application of cultural values to students and children's daily lifestyles may be a reality.
4. Sociolinguists and Igbo language teachers must serve as good models and be prepared to utilize their skills and knowledge in helping their students achieve a high degree of proficiency in the Igbo language and culture.
5. The present Igbo textbooks are not quite comprehensive and inclusive and should be reviewed to make them more embracing and relevant.
6. Finally, visitor(s)/stranger(s) to the Nimo speech community should have an overall general view of taboo words, expressions, and contexts to appropriately perform any role in any scene staged by that society as opined by Goodenough (1957). Goodenough (1957) quoted in Frake (1978) proposes that a description of a given culture-ethnography should properly specify what a stranger to a society or community would have to know to appropriately perform any role in any scene staged by that society. This in essence means that added to the pattern of human behaviour which is learned by the members of the society and transmitted from generation to generation, culture should spell out its dos' and don'ts' to accommodate strangers. If this is to be taken seriously, one of the most important things about Nimo people is the proper use of languages especially when they are speaking.

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