



ISRG PUBLISHERS

Abbreviated Key Title: ISRG J Arts Humanit Soc Sci

ISSN: 2583-7672 (Online)

Journal homepage: <https://isrgpublishers.com/isrgjahss>

Volume – II Issue-I (January- February) 2024

Frequency: Bimonthly



AFFECTIVE MEANING AND CULTURAL REFLECTIONS OF GENDER-BASED CONSTRUCTS OF “OKAY”

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| **Received:** 16.02.2024 | **Accepted:** 19.02.2024 | **Published:** 26.02.2024

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Abstract

This research engaged with an examination of the affective meanings conveyed in the various usages of the English lexical item, “Okay”. The objective of this research is to investigate the impact of culture on gender-based constructs of “Okay” as used by the feminine gender in interpersonal communication, with reference to married Igbo women in Nigeria. The theoretical orientation of this research is framed around affective meaning as presented by Leech (1981). The data for this research is collected, through observation technique, from spoken interactions between some enlightened married Igbo couples in Nigeria, that speak English as a second language. The method of this research is qualitative, with an interpretive methodological paradigm. This research showed that affective meaning, which relates to feelings, moods, emotions, and attitudes, is reflected in the gender-based constructs of “Okay”. However, it was observed that the tone used by the women during the spoken interaction helps to convey the affective meanings conveyed by the gender-based constructs of “Okay”. Moreover, it was discovered that the women use “Okay” to prevent being disrespectful and refrain from engaging in conflictual arguments, to maintain peaceful interpersonal relationships with their husbands. Nevertheless, do the affective meanings derived from gender-based constructs of “Okay” engender sustainable real peace in interpersonal relationships? These, amongst other questions, are highlighted in this research.

Keywords: *Affective Meaning, Culture, Gender, “Okay”.*

INTRODUCTION

Expressions of affect, which basically express one’s emotional stance toward what one is talking about or what the interlocutor has said or done in her previous conversational turn, are prevalent in all levels of the language used in spoken interaction. This research is concerned with examining the affective meaning conveyed in the various usages of the English lexical item, “Okay”. The objective is to investigate the impact of culture on the gender-based constructs of “Okay”, deployed for affective use in

interpersonal communication by the feminine gender, with reference to married Igbo women in Nigeria.

“Okay” is an informal English word, originating in American English. It is frequently used by speakers of the English language, either as a first or second language, particularly in spoken conversations. “Okay” is a word that logically applies when providing agreement to something. Responses with “Okay” usually create very positive, pleasant, and agreeable exchanges. Grammatically, “Okay” fits wherever “It’s alright” could be used.

Basically, “Okay” is used to express satisfaction, acceptance, assent, concession, acknowledgment, agreement, or approval.

However, the word “Okay” can be used to express meanings far opposite from being agreeable, which reflect in the tone used in the spoken interaction. Such opposite usages of “Okay” constitute the focus of this research, particularly as used by the feminine gender, with reference to married Igbo women in Nigeria that are second language speakers of the English language. What could be the causes and effects of adopting such conversational strategies by the women? Are such strategies influenced by culture? These questions would be addressed through this research.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The data for this research is collected, through observation technique, from spoken interaction between some enlightened married Igbo couples in Nigeria, that speak English as a second language. The method of this research is qualitative, with an interpretive methodological paradigm. The theoretical orientation of this research is framed around affective meaning as presented by Leech (1981).

AFFECTIVE MEANING

Leech (1981) notes that affective meaning reflects the personal feelings of the speaker, including his attitude to the listener, or his attitude to something he is talking about. We can disclose our feelings and attitudes directly or indirectly by scaling our remarks according to politeness. In dealing with affective meaning, factors such as intonation and voice timbre (i.e., ‘tone of voice’) are also important.

So, affective meaning relates to feelings, moods, emotions, and attitudes. It deals with how someone feels or acts and could be distinguished between expressions of positive emotions (e.g., love, hope, joy, enjoyment, etc.) or negative emotions (e.g., anger, anxiety, guilt, shame, etc.). Essentially, affective meaning is concerned with meanings derived from expression of emotions or from something that has been influenced by emotions, or from something that results from emotions. It emanates due to emotions elicited by a stimulus, such as a word or phrase.

Emotion, as defined by *Oxford Dictionary*, is “A strong feeling deriving from one’s circumstances, mood, or relationships with others”. Schacter et. al. (2011) note that emotions are responses to significant internal and external events. According to *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, emotions can be occurrences (e.g., panic) or dispositions (e.g., hostility), and short-lived (e.g., anger) or long-lived (e.g., grief). Graham (2014: 63), as a psychotherapist, describes all emotions as existing on a continuum of intensity. He points out that fear might range from mild concern to terror or shame might range from simple embarrassment to toxic shame. Also, he differentiates emotions as functional or dysfunctional and argues that all functional emotions have benefits.

Fox (2008: 16-17) describes emotions as consisting of a coordinated set of responses, which may include verbal, physiological, behavioural, and neural mechanisms.

Hume (2013) observes that in some uses of the word, emotions are intense feelings that are directed at someone or something. On the other hand, emotion can be used to refer to states that are mild (as in annoyance or content) and to states that are not directed at anything (as in anxiety and depression). LeDoux (2018) defines

emotions as “the result of a cognitive and conscious process which occurs in response to a body system response to a trigger”.

According to Hakulinen and Sorjonen (2012:147), “Expressions of affect, that is to say, resources for expressing one’s emotional stance toward what one is talking about or what the co-conversant has said or done in her previous turn, are used in all levels of the language used in spoken interaction.” Moreover, they pointed out that “Certain parts of speech – evaluative adjectives, interjections and expletives as well as other intensifying expressions (e.g., adverbs) – have become specialized for affective use.”

Invariably, emotions constitute the major essence of affective meaning, which is the theoretical framework of this research. As earlier mentioned, this research is concerned with examining the affective meaning conveyed in the various usages of the lexical item, “Okay”, with particular focus on the gender-based constructs of “Okay” as used by the feminine gender, with reference to married Igbo women in Nigeria that are second language speakers of the English language. What could be the causes and effects of the women’s conversational strategies of using gender-based constructs of “Okay”? Are such strategies influenced by culture?

WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture can be defined as all the ways of life of an entire society, including language, social norms, codes of manners, law and morality, values, customs, habits, food, dress, arts, symbols, beliefs, rituals, religion, and institutions that are passed down from generation to generation. LaMorte (2016) notes that culture generally refers to “patterns of human activity and the symbolic structures that give such activities significance and importance”.

Tylor (1871), an anthropologist, was the first person to use the term “culture” in the way we currently understand. He defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”.

Hofstede (1984) asserts that “Culture is the collective programming of the human mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from those of another. Culture in this sense is a system of collectively held values.” Corroboratively, Cole (2019) states that:

Culture is a term that refers to a large and diverse set of mostly intangible aspects of social life. According to sociologists, culture consists of the values, beliefs, systems of language, communication, and practices that people share in common and that can be used to define them as a collective. Culture also includes the material objects that are common to that group or society. Culture is distinct from the social structure and economic aspects of society, but it is connected to them – both continuously informing them and being informed by them.

Essentially, culture plays a vital role in our social lives. Cole (2019) points out that culture “is important for shaping social relationships, maintaining, and challenging social order, determining how we make sense of the world and our place in it, and in shaping our everyday actions and experiences in society”.

Among other things, culture is also concerned with how identities of race, class, gender, and sexuality are expressed. This aspect of culture connects with the objective of this research which is to investigate the impact of culture on the gender-based constructs of “Okay” for affective use in interpersonal communication.

CULTURAL IMPACTS ON WOMEN: WHEN WOMEN SAY “OKAY”

Culture and gender are so closely connected that cultural factors significantly determine gender differences in roles and behaviours of the people identified by the culture. In other words, culture has tremendous impact on roles, behaviours, values, identity that are gender-related and how they manifest themselves in diverse social contexts. According to Best and Puzio (2019: 235), “Culture governs the socialization of children, the tasks children are taught, the roles adult men and women adopt, and the expectations that govern women’s and men’s attitudes and behaviors. Culture provides the context in which gender roles, identity, and stereotypes unfold as well as parameters regarding sexual behavior.”

Culturally, the indigenous Igbo people, who are predominantly located in the southeastern part of Nigeria, have a highly organized structure. The socialization process of Igbo women’s attitudes and behaviours controls misdemeanor and unwholesomeness, such that women are restrained from engaging in heated arguments and strong disputes with the men, especially their husbands. So, this cultural orientation predisposes the women to adopt strategies that shield them from being seen as disrespectful.

The cultural impact on the married Igbo women’s conversational interactions with their husbands is that they adopt the strategy of passive aggression in contentious conversational contexts. Hall-Flavin (2021) states that: “Passive-aggressive behaviour is a pattern of indirectly expressing negative feelings instead of openly addressing them.” He points out that: “There’s a disconnect between what a person who exhibits passive-aggressive behavior says and what he or she does.” For instance, passive aggression is revealed in the gender-based constructs of “Okay”, whereby it sounds like expressing agreement, but strongly means the opposite.

So, sometimes, when women say “Okay” in controversial or contentious conversational contexts, it does not truly mean giving approval or expressing agreement, rather it indicates passive aggression whereby it sounds like she is agreeing, but strongly means the opposite. It could mean opposites such as defiance, daring, disengagement, disinterest, disillusionment, disapproval, disagreement, amongst other options. All these opposite expressions depict that everything is not looking good in the prevailing conversational contexts, because of the underlying negative affective meanings they convey. Interestingly, those expressions are the gender-based constructs of “Okay” as used by the feminine gender, with reference to married Igbo women in Nigeria.

However, the negative undertones underlying the gender-based constructs of “Okay” are reflected in the tone used by the women during the contentious conversational interactions. The tone helps to convey the affective meanings, couched by the emotions and moods expressed through the passive aggressive behaviours that are demonstrated while uttering the word: “Okay”.

Strategically, the women use “Okay” to prevent being disrespectful and avoid engaging in conflictual arguments, for peace to reign. Nevertheless, this type of peace is relative, not real, because using “Okay” to respond in certain conversational contexts can be viewed by the co-conversant as being indifferent, or dismissive. The effect of relative peace is that it bears on the friendly atmosphere in the interpersonal relationship of the couples and

creates tension and discomfort in their homes. For instance, let us consider the use of “Okay” in the following sample data:

DATUM ONE:

Husband A: Hmmm! I have considered your objection to the business proposal I mentioned to you yesterday. But I have decided to go on with the project.

Wife A: Okay! (shockingly / disengages)

DATUM TWO:

Husband B: Well, despite your reasons, I will still cancel the trip.

Wife B: Okay! (glumly / disengages)

DATUM THREE:

Husband C: Although you feel good about that fashion trend, you should not follow that track.

Wife C: Okay! (despondently / disengages)

The affective meanings conveyed in use of “Okay” in the above sample data were revealed through the tone used in the utterance to show the wives’ attitude, respectively, towards their husbands’ decision concerning the various issues discussed. The “Okay” is contrary to being an agreement or approval of their husbands’ decision, rather the “Okay” was said just to avoid conflict. Implicitly, the emotion conveyed in the wives’ utterance of “Okay” conveys the affective meaning of disengagement from controversies, to keep peace from evading them.

So, to avert lingering domestic tension, should the women be outright in voicing out their disagreement, rather than using gender-based constructs of “Okay” to disengage from the men / husbands? The fix is that the women, who were outright in voicing out their positions of disagreement, or their oppositions, were seen as confrontational, argumentative, and disrespectful, which were detrimental to harmonious interpersonal relationship. So, how could this fix be resolved?

Either way, the interpersonal relationship is put in a tight corner. However, using gender-based constructs of “Okay” by the married Igbo women, in contentious conversational contexts, still helps to manage disruptive threats to marital stability. Nonetheless, peaceful resolution of conflicts can better be achieved and sustained through skillful dialogue and tactical negotiations, rather than suppressing emotions through using gender-based constructs of “Okay”, to convey affective meaning, in communicative interactions.

CONCLUSION

This research has shown that affective meaning, which relates to feelings, moods, emotions, and attitudes, is reflected in the gender-based constructs of “Okay”. Moreover, culture and gender are so closely connected that culture provides the context in which gender roles, identity, and stereotypes are specified, and cultural factors significantly impact on women’s and men’s attitudes and behaviours. Thus, the cultural impact on the married Igbo women’s conversational interactions with their husbands is such that the women adopt the strategy of passive aggression in contentious conversational contexts. This passive aggressive behaviour is revealed in the usage of the gender-based constructs of “Okay”, whereby it sounds like expressing agreement, but strongly means the opposite. However, it was observed that the tone used by the women during the spoken interaction helps to express the affective meanings conveyed by the gender-based constructs of “Okay”. Furthermore, it was discovered that the women use “Okay” to

prevent being disrespectful and refrain from engaging in conflictual arguments, to maintain peaceful interpersonal relationships with their husbands. However, peaceful resolution of conflicts can better be achieved and sustained through skillful dialogue and tactical negotiations, rather than suppressing emotions through using gender-based constructs of “Okay”, to convey affective meaning, in communicative interactions. Further research on diverse dimensions of the use of “Okay” is strongly recommended.

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