

The Language of Colour in Ibibio

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Abstract

This paper discusses the semantic analysis of the language of colour in Ibibio. The theoretical framework adopted is the conceptual hypothesis as expounded by Goldman 1975 and Jackendoff 1990. The efficacy or otherwise of the use of colours as a veritable tool of communication (in Ibibio) is investigated. The data were collected from Central Ibibio. The conception of colours by different classes of people in different language environments is highlighted. The sample space for this study is carefully selected to enable the researcher answer such questions as: Does colour speak? Is the language of colour learned or acquired naturally? The instrument of interview approach is used to assemble the data. The analysis of the data so generated reveals that a simple colour may communicate different things to different people in different environments. Besides, the language of colour cannot be understood naturally but must be learned. The local languages/dialects covered by this study do not have word term for pink, brown, purple and grey. In both traditional and contemporary societies, colour at the traditional level speaks definite language whereas at the contemporary society, a simple colour may communicate different things to different people in different environments.

1.0 Introduction

Many linguists and scholars have defined language from various perspectives depending on their specific research interest, since no one definition can capture all its essential characteristics. We shall therefore consider a few of these definitions which have some relevance to the subject matter of this discourse.

Eka and Udofot (1996) explicate that language is a system made of phonic or graphic symbols which are arbitrarily chosen or agreed upon by convention and are usually learned and used by a speech community for the purpose of communication. Azikiwe (2007) enthused that language is a collection, of motor responses which function symbolically and are used for verbal communication. On the other hand, Udofot (1998) observes that ideas are not expressed by language but that language is the shaper of ideas and that nature is dissected along lines laid down by relevant culture.

In support of the fact that the language of a particular society is an integral part of its culture, Wardhaugh (1992) sees culture as whatever a person must know in order to function in a particular society. Willie (2004) goes further to say that culture refers to the

totality of knowledge which one must have or acquire in order to get through the process of daily living in a particular society. This knowledge includes among others, social norms, food habits, ways of dressing, rites of passage and symbolism of colours. In this paper, we shall examine colour as it permeates the Ibibio culture and by extension, has become a latent symbol of communication. In view of the fact that a well designed diagram can be perceived contrastively by different people depending on their power of imagination, background as well as their intellectual powers, Udofot (2004) posits that conceptual theory encourages subjectivism and introspection. Umego (2003) believes that conceptual meaning is analogous to the primary meaning of a word and is usually not influenced by the contextual colouring or emotional overtones by the interlocutors. Ndimele (1999:33) in his contribution asserts that the conceptual meaning of a word can be realized in terms of contrastive semantic features.

1.1 Aims and Objectives

This paper seeks to ascertain the efficacy or otherwise of the use of colours as a veritable tools of communication. It shall also examine the perception of colours by different classes of people in different language environments. To achieve these objectives, we wish to answer such questions as:

- (1) Do colours speak?
- (2) What is the significance of colour in our local community and cities at large?
 - (ii) How do people respond to the stimuli emitted by colour?
 - (iii) If they do, does it impart definite and unique information to all its audience?

1.2 Background to the Study

The name Ibibio is not only a mark of identity for the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria but also a language spoken by this ethnic group (Essien 1990: ix). The people cluster around the South Eastern part of Nigeria, specifically, Akwa Ibom State with a landmass of about 8,412 square kilometers. They number about four million and speak Ibibio as their mother tongue (Essien (1990: ix).

The word Ibibio shall henceforth be used to refer to either the people or their language. The Ibibio are found in Ikono, Itu, Ini, Ibiono Ibom, IbesikpoAsutan, Etinan, NsitAtai, IkotAbasi, Onna, MkpatoEnin, Nsit Ibom, NsitUbium, Uruan and Uyo. There are also other groups like Eket, Ibeno, Annan, Oro, Okobo, Eastern Obolo who by language and culture are regarded as Ibibio even though they deny the fact (Essien 1990). The Ibibio people are also found in the surrounding States of Abia, Rivers and Cross River. Specifically, we find the Ibibio indigenes in Akamkpa, Odukpani, Akpabuyo and Calabar in Cross River, Ndoki in Abia and Eleme in Rivers.

1.3 Methodology

The sample space involved in this discourse consists of five cake designers, a class of 25 children of ages 6 – 7 years, four randomly selected churches in Akwa Ibom State,

members of social groups and five elders. The instrument of data collection was the interview approach. The data so generated were tabulated and analysed accordingly.

2.0 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted in this paper is conceptual hypothesis as expounded by Goldman, 1975 and Jackendoff, 1990. This hypothesis is premised on the claim that meaning of any entity is succinctly dependent on the inherent lexical components which conflate to give it its meaning. Another important characteristic of this conceptual model is the existence of a binary feature such as plus (+) or minus (-), which is used to differentiate the presence or absence of distinctive meaning of colours. Besides, colour functions as a symbol in social, religious and educational life of the Ibibio people. In view of the varieties of the theory, this paper is restricted to the notion which specifies the meaning of a word or colour or symbol to the concept associated with it in the mind of the speakers of that language.

2.1 Colour and its Conceptual Meaning












Colour is usually defined in one or two ways either subjectively, as an aspect of visual appearance, or objectively, as the property of light by which we are made aware of objects or light source (Nickerson, 2006).

Anyanwu and Appah (2013), in their contributions, conjectured that colour is the sensation resulting from stimulation of the retina of the eye by light waves of certain length. In addition they assert that colours constitute media or means through which messages are transmitted. For the purpose of this paper, the central focus shall be confined to a consideration of colour, not only as a part of visual experience but more importantly as a means of communication in Ibibio.

2.2 Do Colours Speak?

The colour spectrum is a physical as well as visual continuum, because any one distinguishable colour may merge gradually at the point of visual discrimination and imperceptibly into its neighbours. As observed by Lyons (2009:313) and confirmed by this researcher, all languages, presumably, furnish their users with words that enable them to refer to certain areas of this visual continuum: such as red, white, black etc. We shall, at this juncture, consider the intrinsic content of information or message transmitted by different shades of colour to the subject in focus.

COLOUR TERM IN IBIBIO, ANNANG, EKID AND ORO(ORON) LANGUAGE

English	Clours	Ibibio	Annang	Ekid	Oron
White		Afia	Afia	Afia	Afie
Red		Ndaidad	Adadad	Ndide	Arara
Green		Awa-awa	Awawa	Awawa	Awa-awa
Black		Obubid	Oweiwen	Abubre	Ebribre
Orange		Nsan-nsan		Efian-efian	-
Pink		-	-	-	-
Purple		-	-	-	-
Brown		-	-	-	-
Yellow		Uto-uto	Utouto	Utouto	Uto-uto
Blue		Bru-bru	-	-	Brubru
Milky		Ndom-ndom	-	Ndo-ndo	Ndon-ndo

2.3 Colour in Traditional Ibibio

In Ibibio, black is traditionally represented by *nkañ* (charcoal) [and can easily be seen in clothes, bags, shoes, etc] as a language, it speaks death, shame, condemnation and dark secrets. Specifically in culture, masquerades wear black paraphernalia to depict ancestral antiquity and secrets. It also symbolizes a fearful thing or terror, especially to women, children and non-initiates. In a situation where death occurs, members of that family are traditionally expected to wear black clothes (*ofonikpo*, mourning clothes) both at the funeral and memorial services to project the message of sadness, sorrows of heart and a state of unwellness in the family. Besides if a thief is caught or found guilty after investigation, *nkañ* (black charcoal) is pasted or rubbed all over the thief's body. The

significance of black in this circumstance is to communicate shame and disgrace not only to the thief but also members of his family.

In Ibibio, afia (white) is traditionally symbolized by a piece of white cloth. Generally afia (white) portrays the message of exculpation and soundness or wellness. In the context of exculpation, if an accused person is finally exonerated by court of law or council of competent jurisdiction of killing or stealing, he or she ties pieces of white cloth across the fore-head and the wrists. This is usually accompanied with singing and dancing to the village square and to everywhere as a mark of discharge and acquittal.

Furthermore, the death of any person at very old age is traditionally characterized with wearing of white clothes by members of the family during the funeral and memorial services. This, to every sympathizer, connotes an accomplishment as well as a life well spent on earth. Besides the relative of the deceased wave afiaikpreofon (white piece of cloth) in a dance and praise to God, who protected and provided the death person with blessings to complete his/her days on earth.

In Ibibio, ndom-ndom (milky or white clay) is traditionally represented by a white chalk clay which is a clay usually found in beds of special rivulets. It is normally used to decorate or adorn women or damsels during traditional dances such as asian-ibaañ, abre and abañ. In this context, the use of ndom-ndom (milky) depicts that women are the symbol of peace and beauty in the community. In addition ndom-ndom (milky) is used as a symbol of exculpation. If the accused person is a woman and has been exonerated by a court of competent jurisdiction, unlike her male counterpart, she rubs ndom-ndom on her body to show her discharge and acquittal. Besides, women also rub ndom-ndom (white clay) at the new birth of children in the family.

It is equally pertinent to note that whenever awa-awamfañ (green leaves) are tied in front and at the rear of a vehicle, a message is sent to every looker that the vehicle is conveying a corpse. In this scenario, it is traditionally believed that the relatives of the deceased are admonishing the corpse to see the need for his/her peaceful transition to eternal rest.

In Ibibio, Ndaidad (Red) depicts danger, aggression or violence. The actual interpretation depends on the context of its representation. For example if a piece of red cloth is tied to a stick and pegged in a bush tract or path leading to a definite location, this sends a message of warning of an imminent danger or a prohibition restraining entry into that location. On the otherhand, whenever ndaidad (red cloth or red clay/chalk) is a part of the paraphernalia of the masquerade called umianaEkpo (blood masquerade) the implication in this context is that the blood from non-initiates is required to appease the ancestors. Consequently, the non initiates including the women and children go into hiding.

Again in Ibibio, Nsan (orange colour) has limited meaning. It is traditionally used as a symbol of continuity of either the tradition or the gods of the land.

In Ibibio, uto-uto (yellow colour) is traditionally represented by ayei (fresh yellow palm front). If it is placed in a piece of land by elders, it automatically depicts prohibition and communicates imminent danger. On the contrary, if any person other than the elders who planted the ayei in advertently removes it, the consequence is sudden and mysterious deaths. Uto-utoaye can also function as a traditional injunction calling for truce or peace, if it is served on each of the warring communities. The principal role of ayei in this case is to sound a clarion call for cessation of hostilities.

Another important representation of uto-uto (yellow colour) is mkpatatad (crawling fern plant). This symbolism is usually seen in ekpont^kenyin (children masquerade) and mfonekpo (beautiful masquerade). The message deduced by the community in this context, is that of tenderness, peace and non violence.

In Ibibio, awa-awa (green colour) is prominent in a particular green leaves called odudu. It is traditionally used for fencing to demarcate controversial piece of land by village council. It is also used by masquerade to communicate perpetual continuity of culture. In addition, awa-awa (green colour) is also represented by pumpkin leaves by an all traditional abre dance group. In this context, the awa-awa symbolizes fertility.

2.4 Colour in Contemporary Society of Ibibio

The meaning of colour has undergone some paradigm shift. Black no longer stands for sacredness or sadness. Instead, black is beautiful because of the freedom cry of the black people and trending fashion which crept into our culture, media and religion. This new concept can be seen across different strata of the society.

2.4.1 Colour Perception by Pupils in School

Eleven English shades of colours were shown to twenty five pupils aged 6 – 7 years of age which were selected for this study. They were asked to choose:

- (i) The one they like most.
- (ii) Why they prefer such colours and
- (iii) To identify by name.

The outcome of this exercise is as shown in Table 2

Table 2

Colour	No. of Response	% of Respondent
White	3	12
Black	1	4
Red	-	0
Green	-	0
Yellow	-	0

Milky	3	12
Orange	4	16
Blue	-	0
Purple	6	24
Brown	-	0
Pink	8	32

As can be observed from table 2, only six of the colours were preferred. It was noticed that their reasons cut across colours and were not gender or tribe influenced. The summary of their responses is as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

	Reasons	Colour Choices
1	It makes me look beautiful	3 pink, 3 purple, 1 milky
2	That is the colour of my xmas dress	3 pink, 2 purple, 2 orange and one milky
3	I like it (no reason)	1 pink, 1 purple, 2 orange
4	It looks good on me and is a fine colour	1 milky, 1 purple, 1 pink
5	It is colour of my church choir uniform	1 white
6	It does not get dirty easily	1 black
7	It is my mother's uniform (her mother is a nurse)	1 white
8	It is my sister's wedding gown	1 white

From the above responses, it can be safely concluded that the perception of colours by children (ages 6 – 7) is based on the happenings in their environments. It is therefore believed that (language) colour can only be learned and not acquired naturally. This is because out of the 25 pupils, 2 were Ìgbò, 3 Efik and 1 Edo and 19 from Akwa Ibom State, none of the pupils could identify the colours by local word-terms except white and black.

2.4.2 The Symbolism of Colour in Churches

In the inquiry into four churches in Akwa Ibom State: on how members perceive the colours: red, white and black, with reference to their religious belief, it was discovered that, these colours speak different things to different people. Their responses are as summarized in Table 4.

Table 4

	Churches	Colours	Perceptions
1	The Apostolic church	<p>Ndàidàd 'Red'</p> <p>Àfià 'White'</p> <p>Óbùbìd 'Black'</p>	<p>Ìyìp Áyìn (Jesus) Ábàsi 'Blood of Jesus'</p> <p>Èdisánà 'Holiness'</p> <p>Mfùhò 'Sorrow'</p>
2	Glorious Rock Christian Church	<p>Ndàidàd 'Red'</p> <p>Àfià 'White'</p> <p>Óbùbìd 'Black'</p>	<p>Èdisánà spirit 'Holy Ghost'</p> <p>NsánànmàÁbàsi 'Purity of God'</p> <p>Nwàtìdèmekim 'Demonic manifestation'</p>
3	Word Warfare church	<p>Ndàidàd 'Red'</p> <p>Àfià 'White'</p> <p>Óbùbìd 'Black'</p>	<p>ÙwèmyèNkàiso 'Life and Continuity'</p> <p>Ntìmkpò 'Good things'</p> <p>Àndidiok 'Satan'</p>
4	Apostolic Zion Church	<p>Ndàidàd 'Red'</p> <p>Àfià 'White'</p> <p>Óbùbìd 'Black'</p>	<p>Ìyìp Áyìn (Jesus) Ábàsi 'Blood of Jesus'</p> <p>ÈtìÁbàsi Goodness of God</p> <p>Ídiok 'Devil'</p>

By personal interaction with the respondents, the researcher deduced that the outcome as depicted in table 3 were surreptitiously influenced by the leadership of these churches. Consequently, the culture of a particular class elicits different interpretation of the language of colour.

2.4.3 Colour Representation in Cake Designing

In this section, five designers were interviewed about their perception of colours and the use of such colours in designing cakes. Their choices and meanings of colours are represented in Table 5.

Table 5

Designer	Colours	Meanings
A	Ndaidad 'Red'	Ákwàìmakendo 'Great love in marriage'
	Purple	Ubongufokndo 'Marriage royalty'
	Golden	Nsongondakendo 'Stability in marriage'
	Ndom-ndom 'Milky'	Emem'Peace'
	Pink	Adiwatukponokendo 'To show respect in marriage'
	Afia 'White'	Obufaeditono 'A new beginning'
B	Ndaidad 'Red'	Ukponokendo 'Respect'
	Purple	Uworufinkeikpong 'Freedom from singleness'
	Pink	Ndiwutinemesitkebangaufando 'To show excitement in new marriage'
	Afia 'White'	Uworufinkeekim 'Freedom from evil'
	Gold	Nsongondakeesitufokndo 'Stability at home and in marriage'
C	Blue	Akpanikokendo 'Faithfulness in marriage'
	Purple	IsoAbasikendo 'God's presence in marriage'
	Afia 'White'	Nsanammakendo 'Purity in marriage'
	Ndom-ndom 'Milky'	Edidianakietkendo 'Togetherness in marriage'
	Ndaidad 'Red'	Useenyinkendo 'Care in marriage'
D	Sky blue	IsoAbasikendo 'God's presence in marriage'
	Ndaidad 'Red'	Unwamkendo 'Support in marriage'
	Purple	Nkaisokendo 'Continuity in marriage'

	Pink	Adiwutimakendo ‘To express liking or love for someone in marriage’
	Lemon	Nshekendo ‘Fruitfulness in marriage’
	Afia ‘White’	Edisanakendo ‘Righteousness in marriage’
E	Afia ‘White’	Enwongoakpanikokendo ‘Promise of faithfulness in marriage’
	Lemon	Emem kendo ‘Peace in marriage’
	Purple	Akwa inemesitkendo ‘great joy in marriage’
	Ndom-ndom ‘Milky’	Nsuhoreidemkendo ‘Calmness in marriage’
	Golden	Ndiongoidemkendo ‘Maturity in marriage’
	Red	Ubuanaiyipkendo ‘Blood vis-à-vis family relationship’.

It is observed here that even in the same Profession, colour stimuli elicit different perception in different people. Also while most of the colours are used, black colour is completely avoided as they tend to believe that black colour is synonymous with evil

2.4.4 Colour Symbolism in Social Groups

In social set ups, colours also speak in different speech form. This is illustrated in Table 6.

Table 6

	Social set up	Colours	Perceived meaning
1	MbohoMkparawa Ibibio	Ndaidad ‘Red’	Edidianakietye Edibonokiet ‘Unity and togetherness’
		Afia ‘White’	Nkaiso ‘Progress’
2	Uyai Ibaan Ibibio	Ndaidad ‘Red’	Ediyoo ye Idorenyin ‘Endurance and hope’
		Afia ‘white’	Ima ‘Love’

We notice in organized set ups or institutions, that colours are unique and mean the same thing to all members.

2.4.5 Application of Colour in Traffic in Cities

In most cities, colours are used to control traffic. It is common knowledge that red emission signifies a warning for one to stop, yellow stands for get ready to move while green represents a command to move on. This appears to be a peculiar situation in which the colours: red, yellow and green, communicate the same information to all motorists irrespective of location, race and gender.

2.4.6 Colour Representation in other Languages/Dialects

It is a well known and undisputed fact that languages differ in the number of basic colour term that they have (Lyons, 2009:313). Lyons further asserts independently that, word-for word translation of colour terms across languages is frequently impossible because no word in the one corresponds exactly to a word in the other. For example there is no word in French that covers exactly what brown does in English. Besides, there is no single word in Russian, Spanish or Italian that corresponds to blue. Again there is no single word in Hungarian that corresponds to red.

This pattern is also noticeable in our local languages as illustrated in Table 7.

Table 7

English Colours	Ibibio	Annang	Ekid	Oro
White	Afia	Afia	Afia	Afie
Red	Ndaidad	Adada	Ndide	Arara
Green	Awa-awa	Awawa	Awawa	Awa-awa
Black	Obubid	Oweiwen	Abubre	Ebribre
Orange	Nsan-nsan	-	Efian-efian	
Pink	-	-	-	-
Purple	-	-	-	-
Brown	-	-	-	-
Yellow	Uto-uto	Utouto	Utouto	Uto-uto
Milky	Ndomndom	-	Ndo-ndo	Ndon-ndo

From Table 7, it can be concluded that while the four languages/dialects under consideration have no corresponding words for pink, purple and brown, all of them have words for white, red, green, black and yellow.

It is insightful to observe that Berlin and Kay (1969) postulate concerning the existence of a significant correlation between the cultural and technical complexity of the

society and the number of colour terms used in their language is a truism. This claim is partially supported with reference to Orọ (Oron) which has only six colour terms even though it is endowed with a complex cultural heritage. This is premised by the fact that the Orọ nation, being partly riverine and partly bordered by a large expanse of land, the people engage in three major occupations namely, farming, fishing and external trade with neighbouring countries such as Cameroon and the Spanish Island of Asouga.

3.0 Conclusion

This paper focuses on languages and colour in Ibibio. The linkage between language and colour via, the instrumentality of culture was highlighted. Colour as a veritable tool of communication was examined. By the use of interview approach, data was gathered and tabulated. The analysis of data so generated revealed that the language of colour is not acquired naturally but has to be learned independently of the language traditionally and within the same social group. It also revealed that there is a strong correlation between colour and the language. Again, it revealed that different people perceive colour stimuli differently except when used in social set ups, institutions or traffic control. At both traditional and contemporary set up, colours may speak definite and unique information to all its audience. Furthermore, there is no word-terms for pink, purple, brown and blue in Ibibio.

Since colour and its conception is a complex phenomenon, the researcher suggests the use of an elaborate data base for its analysis.

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