

# A Language Analysis of the First Cry Made by a Newborn

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**Abstract:-** Anxiety often grips everyone present when a new baby makes his/her first appearance to the world. With the appearance, there are expected vital signs that would confirm the baby's healthy working lungs and the subsequent survival in the world. The first cry is eagerly anticipated by the midwives, with the mindset of allaying all fears and anxieties that could follow the delivery. The questions that may necessarily come to mind are: why is so much importance attached to the first cry? What message does the baby communicate when he first makes the first cry? Can any linguistic meaning be deciphered from such a cry? Is this first cry expressed in any particular language or is a mere sound made through the vocal cord? The crux of this paper is to examine the relationship between the mother and unborn fetus on one hand, and to argue the significance of the first cry of a newborn with a bid of giving a linguistic connotation to the sound on the other hand.

**Keywords:-** language, cry, newborn, gestation.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Euphoria may be aroused on how spoken language is activated, whether it is acquired through learning or is innate in every child. Linguists often argue that babies learn the language they speak in the environment they live. This argument may be interpreted to mean that if a baby is born in a particular environment and culture, and he is brought up in a particularly different environment, the language of the original place of birth may be completely forgotten and the new language will be taken up and adhered to.

However, have we ever taken a time out to ask why the sounds of almost all the newborn babies are similar to the hearings? Do we give the sound any meaningful interpretation? Are newborn babies communicating any message with the first cry? Can we say that the catch of the first glimpse of this world has a lot of influence on the first cry? Is there any consequence on any newborn child who makes no cry at birth?

In the light of this, we shall examine in this paper the meaning of language, how a baby is conceived and born, the meaning of the first cry made by the baby, first cry of newborn in Yoruba culture and the language analysis of the first cry made by a newborn baby. We shall then evaluate and conclude the paper.

## II. CONCEPTION AND DELIVERY OF BABIES

Every sexual intimacy that is aimed towards making of babies is often greeted with the anxiety of whether conception has taken place or not, and the eventual delivery

of the baby if the woman becomes pregnant. A woman's delivery date is calculated from the first day of her last menstrual period, and there is every chance that conception could occur two weeks before or after the due date. Only one out of the millions of sperm that swim upstream fertilizes the egg. The gestation period is averagely within 40 weeks of pregnancy (Cruz, 2012).

Pregnancy is measured in trimesters from the first day of the last menstrual period, totaling 40 weeks. The first trimester of pregnancy is week one through week 12 (3 months). The second trimester runs from the 13<sup>th</sup> week through 27<sup>th</sup> week. And the third trimester of pregnancy spans from week 28 to the birth of the baby. Out of the three trimesters, the most critical one is the first trimester. This is the period where all of its functions have begun to form like the major organs and nervous systems, heartbeat, arms, fingers, legs, toes, hair and buds for future teeth. In the first few weeks of conception, the woman's hormone level changes significantly and the uterus begins to support the growth of the placenta and the fetus, the body adds to its blood supply to carry oxygen and nutrients to the developing baby (Stickler, 2020).

The discomfort and the pregnancy symptoms tend to reduce in the second and third trimesters. Though new ones may resurface such as leg cramps but cannot be compared to what the woman experienced at the first trimester. A normal full term pregnancy can last anywhere from 37 to 42 weeks. Anxiety seems to increase on the part of the expectant mother concerning how the baby would look and the first cry to be heard.

During the period of the conception, the fetus relies on the mother for the supply of oxygen in the womb. A forceful cry at delivery helps the baby breathe on his own. It expands and fills up his lungs and clears any amniotic fluid from her nose, mouth and lungs. The doctors clamp the baby's placenta the moment he is born. The baby's body starts stimulating the lungs to begin functioning once the body senses that there is no supply of oxygen from the previous source (Sharma, 2018). A baby's cry can also give us clues about his health, for instance higher pitched cries have been associated with infants who are at risk for autism (Curejoy Editorial). How do we then make a synergy between the wellness of the newborn and the acceptance of the new environment in the first cry of the baby?

## III. THE FIRST CRY OF A NEWBORN BABY

Before delving into the first cry of a newborn, it is paramount for us to know the meaning of crying as well as the droplets that fall from the eyes when one cries.

Philosophers and scientists have made frantic efforts to explain weeping as part of a shared human language for emotional expression. When salty droplets cascade down our eyes, others can tentatively infer the reason for such an emotional expression even without deciphering the mental, social and narrative backgrounds that gave rise to the droplets. These droplets might occur when one is sad, grieving, happy and even laughing. This is made lucid in the words of Thomas Dixon that “a tear is a universal sign not in the sense that it has the same meaning in all times and all places. It is a universal sign because it can signify just about anything (Dixon, 2012). Be that as it may, we can therefore say that crying is a universal sign and a means of communication or expression.

It is often with great expectation that a baby ought to cry as soon as delivery takes place. As stated above, this hearty cry wakes up his lungs and helps him breathe. That is why in some advanced countries, some tests are carried out on the baby immediately he is born. One of such tests is *apgar* which is a test given to babies at one minute and five minutes past birth. At one minute, the test tells you how well the baby went through the birthing process; and at five minutes it tells you how well he is doing in the world out of the mother's womb. The tests enable the baby's colour, respiratory efforts, heart rate, reflexes and muscle tones to be observed and scored. The score the baby gets determines whether he would need medical assistance or not. If the baby is not breathing, he gets a score of 0; if his cry is weak and sounds like grunting or whimpering then he gets a score of 1; and a strong cry gets a 2 (Curejoy Editorial).

From the foregoing, it must be noted that the medical importance of crying in new baby cannot be overemphasized. Besides the obvious fact that the baby is introduced into a new world of reality outside the enclosed mother's womb, it also tells on the medical functionality of the child. The cry kick starts some of the vital organs of the baby and signals his independence from total reliance on the mother for breathing. Little wonder the tempo of the cry determines the score he gets after the test is carried out within the first to fifth minutes of birth.

In Plato's allegory of the cave<sup>1</sup>, the freedom given to the prisoner to see the world of reality could shed more light on why a baby cries as he suddenly comes into the new world. Being in a dark comforting place and suddenly being turned out into a strange, cold, bright world might be adduced as one of the reasons why a baby cries at the first feel of the new world. Before a baby is born, he takes in oxygen from the placenta through the umbilical cord, but as soon as he leaves the womb, he must breathe on his own. A forceful cry expands and fills up his two lungs. The

inevitability of the baby's first cry makes the doctors take immediate action by slapping or massaging the back of the baby with a warm towel if the baby does not cry.

At latter stages, the cry of a baby can tell us when he is in pain because non-pain related cries may be different from pain related cries. Pain cries usually have a somewhat longer pause between the first and second cries. Experts suggest that a baby is already picking up sound signals from the outside world while in the womb during the last trimester. Studies indicate that babies who are just a few days old can imitate the intonation patterns of their mother tongue. (Gavin, 2019). So paying attention to your baby's cries can help you figure out what he is trying to say. A serious attention therefore should be given to the first cry the baby makes which happens to be the first sign he gives upon arrival in the new world. We must be guided not to lose focus of the nub of this paper which pays utmost emphasis on the first cry and not the subsequent cries.

Recent scientific study has shown that the first cry of a newborn is marked by the maternal language, especially in tonal languages where pitch fluctuation determines the meaning of a word. The use of tonal languages is completely strange to European languages where the sound of a word can be completely different from the meanings. In Africa, we see a good number of tonal languages where one could easily decipher the meaning of the words through the sound. How do we then establish the fact that if a pregnant woman speaks such a tonal language that it would reflect in the crying of their newborn infants? Can we necessarily interpret the melodic chanting of newborns as expression of tonal language? One thing that must be called to mind is the fact that, like tonal language, crying sounds like chanting. As the scientists would say:

Building blocks for the development of the future language are acquired from the moment of birth, and not only when the infants begin to babble, or to produce their first words. Having had the ample opportunity to become acquainted with their mother language in their mother's womb during the last third of pregnancy, neonates exhibit in their crying characteristics melodic patterns influenced by their environment- precisely by the language spoken by their mothers, and that even before they coo the first sounds or try out speech-like syllabic babbling. (Maximillians, 2016)

Across cultural boundaries, it would not be out of place to say that newborns exhibit a high degree of universality in their crying which may be tantamount to saying that their crying seemingly intends to communicate almost the same message, especially among the cultures with tonal languages. Since study has shown that newborns are acquainted with their mother's language right from the womb, there is no gain saying that there is every possibility that the newborns could have learnt the way to register their presence in their new world in their mother's womb. This they do with their melodic cry as a result of their inability to utter out the appropriate words. Study done in tonal

<sup>1</sup> Plato made an allegory of the cave to depict his theory of knowledge, where some prisoners from childhood had no access to the world of reality but only shadows and darkness. Imagining a scenario where one of the prisoners was released and walked into the real world where he would walk with eyes lifted up toward the light of fire. He argues that all his movements will be exceedingly painful.

languages such as Mandarin of China, Yoruba Language in South-West Nigeria, Benin language of South-South Nigeria, Hausa of Northern Nigeria among others, showed that the melodic cry of newborns apparently projects almost the same chanting which can comfortably fit into the these different language and producing almost the same meaning. In our later discussion, we shall examine the first cry of a newborn in Yoruba culture in relation to some other cultures.

#### IV. CHILD DELIVERY IN YORUBA CULTURE

In Yoruba land, particularly newborn babies delivered through the traditional mid-wives (*iyagbebi*), are sprinkled with water to make them cry. No word may be spoken until the infant cries and no one younger than the mother is allowed to be present at birth. The infant is taken to the backyard where the umbilical cord is bound tightly with thread. The child is bathed with a loofah sponge on the placenta burial spot and rubbed with palm oil. The child is held by the foot and given three shakes to make him strong and brave. This action may seem scary to the onlookers who might in their mind consider this as being barbaric.

The traditional midwife in Yoruba culture ensures that the birthing environment remains healthy for the safe delivery of the baby. She prepares some concoction for the expectant mother to aid the smooth delivery and to energize the new born to respond to the immediate challenge the baby might meet in the new world. One must also acknowledge the fact that there are instances in which the concoction taken by the expectant mother, probably due to lack of accurate measurement results in complications, which may call for referral to orthodox delivery. Such complications often include non-stop bleeding, the refusal of the placenta to be delivered after the birth of the baby, rupturing of the womb, the hanging of the baby at the womanhood especially when the baby brings out leg instead of the head first (*Ige* as it is called in Yoruba culture), the breasts of the mother refusing to lactate and finally, the newborn's inability to accept the reality of the world by not making his first cry. Should any of the above happen, the *IyaAbiye* goes panicky, tries everything within her means to salvage the situation, with eventual referral to orthodox medicine if no immediate remedy is reached.

As it were, child bearing in many cultures especially in Africa stands completely different from the western counterparts. The local midwives tending the babies acquire such skills through learning from their predecessors who had a huge depth of skills in that field. Such skills are passed from generation to generation so as to keep the practice intact. Unlike the orthodox midwives who would need to undergo formal training in reputable institutions before being certified as professionals.

#### V. A LANGUAGE ANALYSIS OF THE FIRST CRY MADE BY A NEWBORN

A baby's first cry is very important in helping his transition from depending on his mother for oxygen to using his own. That is why doctors or traditional midwives as the

case may be, take immediate action if a baby does not cry. Such babies could be held upside down and slapped at the back to make them cry. The traditional practice sometimes results in damage to the spinal cord of the newborn baby which may affect the growth in later years. A more subtle measure is thereby assumed by massaging the baby's back with a warm towel or tapping his soles in which he will be stimulated to cry under such circumstances (Curejoy Editorial). It must be noted that this paper is not aimed at interpreting the pitch of the baby in order to state his health/physical condition but to interpret what the baby intends to communicate when he makes the first cry.

Experts have suggested that a baby is already picking up sound signals from the outside world while in the womb during the last trimester. Working with this resumption, it would not be out of place to say that when the baby who might have picked some sound signals from his mother's womb makes the first cry, is not just all about a sign of protestation about the change in the place of abode but an acceptance of the new place he finds himself. What then does this first cry mean? Is the cry made in any language? Are all the first cries produced by newborns with the same or similar sound? Is this first cry communicating a message to the people around there? Are all these first cries of newborns made in the same language?

In attempting to do justice to the above questions, it will be pertinent to clear some air concerning whether humans generally perceive everything around them in the same way. If the answer can be answered on the affirmative, this would imply that the discernment of the first cry of newborn will be same for all, irrespective of the race, colour and cultural dispositions. If the answer is on the negation, then there will be the need for us to bridge the possible lacunar that could be found among different cultural dispositions. This would guide us to relate the first reaction of the newborns with what they might have learnt from their environment while still in the womb. However, we must call to mind that we do not intend to undermine the position taken by some scholars that the newborns at this stage cannot be said to be fully human. This is better relayed in the words of Nisha Poonia that:

Not all human perceive in the same way. Perception depends on the physical stimulus as well as on the information saved in our memory. Our eyes, ears, nose and the taste receptors on tongue take the physical stimulus, convert it into electro-chemical signals and send them to our brain. How we further perceive the stimulus depends on our past experiences with respect to the context in which we are perceiving it (Poonia, 2015).

Consequently, the experiences I had gathered through witnessing the birth of some newborns furnished me with reason to assert that the sounds I have heard were perceived to be almost the same. If one is present when a baby is newly delivered at the South Western part of Nigeria for instance, the first cry heard sounds like "*mowa, mowa, mowa*". Should this be interpreted in Yoruba



language which is a language that belongs to the Congo-Kordofanian language group, it will be translated literally to mean “I come, I come, I come”. It will not be out of place to state that there are so many dialects in Yoruba land and the speakers can understand one mother when the dialects are spoken. Yoruba is a tonal language, with the same combination of vowels and consonants having different meanings depending on the pitch of the vowels. As it were, the tonal sound produced through the first cry of a newborn seems to always produce the same combination of vowels and consonants which necessarily leads one to the same interpretation earlier stated. If my perception is anything to go by, I would say that the tonal sound produced through the first cry is a sign of acceptance of this new world which I would interpret to mean “I come” or to be better put “I have come.”

A lot of thought would have been provoked with this position and the interpretation of the newborns’ first cry. We need to bear in mind as well that the newborns’ first cry is shaped by their native languages. The human fetuses are able to memorize auditory stimuli from the external world by the last trimester of pregnancy, with a particular sensitivity to melody contour in both music and language (Mampe&Wermke, 2009: Pp: 1997-1997). With this presupposition and with the perceptual preference for the surrounding language, the pitch production of newborns in different surrounding may be greeted with slight variations but almost the same rhythm and message. The onus falls on the elders of that environment to align the sound produced by the newborn in order to decipher the voice of acceptance of the new world. For instance, an Igbo man could interpret the first cry to sound as “*abiam*”, when translated would mean “I come.” The same goes for Benin language in Edo State Nigeria *ire*, or Hausa Language, *nazo*, with both translated as “I come.” One thing that is very common in the first cry of a newborn is the fact the sound is rhythmic and it comes in form of bi-syllabic tone. This makes it somewhat easier for us to give an interpretation to those languages that are tonal by nature that, the cry is not just meant to kick-start the internal organs of the baby but a sign of accepting the new and strange world found outside the womb. It will not be out of place to say that if a woman undergoes her gestation period in a completely different environment with a language different from her native tongue, such a newborn could make a cry that would be interpreted in this different language. This position is assumed with the mindset that the fetuses are able to memorize auditory stimuli especially in the area of language in the last trimester.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Taking a cursory look at the above discourse, we would discover that the first cry made by a newborn is not just a mere exercise of the vocal cord but an expression to accept the reality of a new world, having been held in a dark place for the last nine months as the case may be. The analysis on the first cry may raise some intellectual eyebrows especially by scholars who may be alien to the language in which this paper has interpreted it to mean. This foreseen intellectual eyebrows really expected because

every scholar would want his language celebrated. This tension can be relatively doused with the belief that this interpretation stems from influence the environmental could impose on the fetuses especially in the last trimester. It is to be recalled also that we had earlier mentioned that not all humans perceive things in the same way. This paper is borne out of the perception of the newborn first cry, which depends on the physical stimulus as well as the information saved in the memory.

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