

## LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY: THE INDISPENSABILITY OF LANGUAGE IN SOCIAL CONFLICT PREVENTION, MANAGEMENT AND RESOLUTION

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper 'Language and Society: the indispensability of Language in Social Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution' looks at the concepts of language and society and their relationship. The discussion covered culture which happens to be at the centre of the discourse. The relationship between language and culture was established unveiling the fact that culture affects the language spoken within the immediate society. However, we discovered in the study that language is personal and based on social behaviour and thus society has been classified into groups based on certain social variables such as age, sex, class, race, religion etc. The paper took a look at conflicts and what factors are usually give rise to conflicts and it finally examined certain linguistic parameters that could either abate or hinder aggrieved parties from going to war and suggested measures of linguistically preventing, managing and resolving conflicts.*

**Keyword:** *Language Society, Social Conflict Prevention, Conflict Management and Resolutions.*

### Introduction

In recent years, cases of violent conflict seem to occupy the media across the globe. The conflict are either instigated by political opponents and/or ideologies or religiously motivated. Nigeria and indeed Africa has been overwhelmed by spat of conflicts ranging ... “upheavals in Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea including the numerous conflicts in Nigeria’s Niger Delta region, the incessant Benue-Taraba crisis, the Zangon-Kataf, Jos, Ife-Modakeke”, the incessant Kano religious crises, the Niger-Delta crises to the recent Boko Haram conflicts in the north as well as a horde of others. These conflicts, Ikenga (2006: 218) affirms that “... conflict has been a scourge of humanity from the earliest times. The contemporary world has witnessed not a few intra and interstate conflicts which have resulted into among other things, the loss of lives and property, internal displacement of people, the flow of millions of refugees and general destabilisation of human beings”. The consequences of these on peace and national unity are only circumstances of imagination.

Little wonder then that language is often neglected when discussing factors that cause conflicts. Language plays or performs several functions in any given society and so its importance cannot be over-emphasised. Language performs a social function which when properly managed could trigger conflicts. Jija (2012) cites Orjime (2002: 56) as saying that “the misapplication of language is a sure way of bringing about disharmony and by extension, underdevelopment. When carefully and democratically used, language brings about co-operation; the misuse of it brings about confrontation”.

It is in view of this that this paper seeks to look at language and society and the role language plays in preventing, managing and resolving conflicts. The important point here is to establish the fact that the effective use of language in society can foster harmonious co-existence irrespective of the social differences of age, sex, religion, class, and race.

### Language and Society

The relationship between language and society can be best described as the relationship which exists between the husband and wife and hence inseparable. Language defines the society while the society shapes our view point. There is a variety of possible relationships between language and society.

Four of these have been identified by Wardhaugh (1998). One, he says, is that social structure may either influence or determine linguistic structure and/or behaviour. Second, linguistic structure and/or behaviour may either influence or determine social structure. Third, language and society may influence each other.

Dittmar (1976: 238) argues that speech behaviour and social behaviour are in a constant interaction and that material living conditions are an important factor in the relationship. Fourth, that there is no relationship at all between linguistic structure and that each is independent of the other. Social structure, according to Wardhaugh, may be measured by reference to such factors as social class and educational background, and verbal behaviour and performance.

Adebite and Akindele (1999) say that language 'is situated within a socio-cultural setting or community. There is a necessary connection between language and society'. Trudgill (2000) observes that there are two aspects of language behaviour very important to society. "First, the function of language in establishing social relationships; and, second, the role played by language in conveying information about the speaker". He opines that the diffusion of a linguistic feature through a society may be halted by barriers of social class, age, sex, race, religion or other factors. It is clear at this point that both these aspects of linguistic behaviour are reflections of the fact that there is a close inter-relationship between language and society

In a related situation, Davies (2007), notes that there are two distinctions between language and society: "The influence of society on language (society in language) and the influence of language on society (language in society)". He stresses further that:

By society in language is meant the systematic influence of social forces on language (e.g. a language variety unique to a social class such as the royal court ...); by language in society is meant the influence of language on various social institutions (e.g. language planning for education, the choice made by the media – newspapers, broadcasting, television, or the internet – or which languages to use in various settings).

A language is seen as one of many social practices that operate interactively in a society to represent and make meaning (Halliday 1978: Hodge & Kriss 1988: Furlough (1996). Language is centred on meaning: it is the most powerful and persuasive means used by human beings for communication. Because language is centred on meaning which is shared culturally, it follows that it is rooted in the culture of the group that uses it. It makes no sense to think of a language used by only one individual.

To make sense out of our world or environment we learn language and to do this we use verbal and/or non-verbal systems. For instance, speech, gestures scribbling, drawing and writing are all used for communication.

### **Language is Personal and Socio-cultural**

Language is used for a whole range of purposes; different people use language for different purposes. However, it is learned and used in socio-cultural contexts. The language one learns has been developed by the tribe or clan one belongs to but is redeveloped by the individual. The individual use of language influences the group and vice-versa. Also, as we are most interested in language, we need to know that language is a social process, and the environment, in which it takes place, is a social institution.

Knowledge of language is transmitted in social contexts, through relationship, like those of parent and child, or teacher and pupil, or classmates, that are defined in the value system and ideology of the culture, Halliday & Hasan (1985). Hence, it is important that we understand what is to be learned as language, how an individual learns it, also how socio cultural factors influence an individual's language and how groups use language. Our thinking and language is shaped by our culture, hence the current focus on sexist and racist uses of language.

Language is part of culture: what the language is and how it is used depends on the culture. You cannot know a language unless you know the culture. This socio-cultural view of language pervades all knowledge of study of the concept language. Language holds us together as group, differentiates us into groups and controls the way we shape concepts how we think, how we perceive, and how we judge others. Successful communication with someone from another culture involves understanding a common language without which communication problems may occur when a third party, the translator or interpreter, attempts to convey both the verbal and non- verbal intent of a message.

### **Relationship between Language and Culture**

Language is the key to the heart of a culture, so related are language and culture that language holds the power to maintain national or cultural identity. Goodenough (1957) considers culture “whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members ... culture being what people have to learn as distinct from their biological heritage, must consist of the end-product of learning: knowledge, in a most general ... sense of the term. Given the definition of culture as ‘socially acquired knowledge’, it is easy to see that culture is one part of memory, namely the part which is ‘acquired socially’, Hudson (1995). This social knowledge acquisition is only possible through the use of language. Language is important in ethnic and national sentiments because of its powerful and visible symbolism; it becomes a core symbol or rallying point. The impact of language as a strong symbol of national identity may be seen in the history of the Basques, an ethnic group in the North of Spain. The Spanish government from 1937 to the mid – 1950s made desperate attempts to destroy the Basque culture and forbid the use of the Basque language. Books in the language were publicly burn, and Basque names could not be used in baptism ceremonies. All Basque names in official documents were translated into Spanish, and inscriptions on public buildings and tombstones were removed.

Because of this relationship between language and cultural identity, steps are often taken to limit or prohibit the influence of foreign languages. Costa Rica for instance, recently enacted a new law that restricts the use of foreign languages and even imposes fines on those who break it. Under the law, companies that advertise in a foreign language also must include a Spanish translation in large letters. Likewise, Iran has banned companies from using Western names. Turkey’s government is considering fining anyone who uses foreign names on the airwaves.

The multilingual and multicultural fragmentation of the Nigerian society makes the nation complex. In a case, therefore, conflict situations are prone to occur.

#### **Definition of Conflict**

The perception of threat, or actual occurrence of conflict, is necessary for the initiation of conflict prevention or management measures, and hence it is essential to address the concept of conflict before exploring how to prevent and manage such occurrences.

The first step is to understand what a conflict is made up by exactly. Traditionally, and according to Ernst-Otto Czempiel (1981), a conflict is the result of opposing interests involving scarce resources, goal divergence and frustration. This paper suggests that conflicts should not only be defined simply in terms of violence (behaviour) or hostility (attitudes), but also includes incompatibility or “differences in issue position” (*Positiondifferenzen*), party affiliation and religious inclination. Such a definition is designed to include conflicts outside the traditional military sphere and is based on behavioural dimensions. It is my candid opinion that the current state of insecurity in the country is essentially due to misconception and misinterpretation given to speeches made by public figures which most often are either astute, or indictful and inciteful.

A conflict has generally been defined as a situation in which two or more parties strive to acquire the same scarce resources at the same time, Wallenstein (2002). Scholars generally agree that there needs to be more than one part to have a conflict, and that the time factor is important. What does cause concern is the term *scarce resource*. The central point in this argument is scarcity, but resources need also be included in the discussion. Wallenstein (2002) has pointed out that resources are not only economic in nature, and that the terminology might miss conflicts involving economic orientation, human security, environment, historical issues, etc. Such conflicts are not necessarily about resources, and when they are, these resources are, more importantly, not necessarily scarce. A conflict is, moreover, in many cases based on perceptions, rather than on attitudes or behaviour as it has generally been defined, ( Niklas L.P. Swanström and Mikael S. Weissmann ,2005).

#### **Social factors and Conflict creation**

We noted earlier that perception is a central concept to conflict creation, prevention, management and resolution. Perception whether subjective or objective is behavioural and hence affects the social disposition of the individual. It is with this regard therefore that this paper shall discuss the social linguistic factors and how they affect the society in creating conflicts.

#### **Social Class**

According to Kerswill (2007) Marx relates social structure to the position of individuals in relation to the means of production. He defines *capitalists* as those who own the means of production, while those who must sell their labour to the capitalists are the *proletariat* (Giddens 2001: 284). This theory is grounded in the circumstances of mid-Victorian industrial Britain, with its extremes of exploitation and control by many factory owners.

Giddens (2001) cites Weber who agreed with Marx in seeing class as 'founded on objectively given economic conditions', though class divisions 'derive not only from control or lack of control of the means of production, but from economic differences which have nothing directly to do with property' (Giddens 2001: 285). Weber saw people as having differing 'life chances' because of differences in skills, education and qualifications. In a capitalist society, 'status' not directly derived from Marxian 'class' must be recognized, and this leads to differences in what Weber called 'styles of life', marked by such things as 'housing, dress, manner of speech, and occupation' (Giddens 2001: 285).

The integrated models of social class stratified the society into status hierarchies, people's different relationships with the means of production (employers and employees) and cultural factors which are characteristics of different social groups as well as choice of life-style, Kerswill (2007). Labov (1966) introduced a sociolinguistic variable in his classification of the society based on the pre-existing social factors such as choice of life-style, people's relationships, status hierarchies etc. According to Kerswill, Labov grouped his subjects in socio-economic classes based on the index scores of lower class, working class, lower middle class, and upper middle class.

In a related classification, Bernstein (1960) postulated that there are two language varieties available to speakers. These he referred to as 'elaborated code' and 'restricted code'. The elaborated code is associated with the elite in society who use it in formal situations. According to Adegbite and Akindele (1999),

*the elaborated code is characterised by accurate grammatical order and syntax, complex sentences with conjunction and subordination, frequent use of I, wide range of adjectives, adverbs and prepositions which show relationship of both a temporal and logical nature.*

On the other hand, restricted code is associated with the common man in society and is employed in informal situations usually common among family members or friends. It is, however,

*signalled by a high proportion of personal pronouns, particularly 'you' and 'they', by tag questions soliciting the agreement of the listener such as 'wouldn't it?', 'aren't they?', etc. It consists of short grammatically simple and unfinished sentences of poor syntactic form, uses a few conjunctions simply and repetitively, employs little subordination, rigid and limited in the use of adjectives and adverbs ... Adegbite and Akindele (1999).*

Social classifications of whatever sort is capable of creating conflict situations not just among individuals, but among communities. Social class breeds sentiments when a fellow human being is looked down upon that he cannot communicate in English. In most cases such a community of illiterates is marginalised and even wiped out through violence.

### **Sex**

Sex does not exist in language, but man has created language to indicate the difference between the sexes. Krammer (1977) reported that men's speech (particularly the native English speakers') is forceful, efficient, blunt, authoritative, serious, effective, sparing and masterful. He notes on the other hand that 'there is the belief that women's speech is weak, trivial, ineffectual, hesitant, hyperpolite, euphemistic, often characterised by gossip and gibberish'. Hartmann (1976) is of the view that 'the language of women is 'flowery, tentative and qualified and therefore a lesser or deficient form'. Adegbite and Akindele note Hartmann as stating that 'female used more quantifiers than men, and that men used more absolutes'. Women were also claimed to use intensifiers and this is responsible for the lack of precision in women's speech (Jesperson, 1922).

Feminist writers such as Burr et al. 1972, Bosmajian 1972, Estrin and Mehus 1974 etc have over the years challenged the 'power structure' in the traditional trend of male supremacist languages particularly English language. According to Adegbite and Akindele the feminist writers argue that the item "mankind" is a

generic term for all the people, while “woman kind” is not; this is equally true of the generic meaning of the items ‘man’, ‘man-made’, ‘he’, etc. According to Bosmajian (1972), there is a ‘housewife’, but no ‘house husband’; there is a ‘kitchenmaid’ but no ‘kitchenman’. In addition, occupational terms ending in ‘man’ such as airman, cameraman, statesman, chairman etc give false impression that certain vocations are only meant for men whereas women are also involved in them. These properly illustrate conflict situations.

### **Race**

Race is a social factor which greatly affects the society. Man has been created by God with different complexities and lives in different regions of the world and has varying cultural belief systems. Each racial group also speak a language that remains mutually unintelligible to people of other racial groups. W. E. B. DuBois defines race as:

a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life. ([1897] 2000:110)

Omi and Winant (1994), look at race as “a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (1994:55). In other cases, race and ethnicity are deliberately separated by some criterion, the most frequent one being elements related to physical appearance:

*“[R]ace” is a social category based on the identification of (1) a physical marker transmitted through reproduction and (2) individual, group and cultural attributes associated with that marker.*

Defined as such, race is, then, a form of ethnicity, but distinguished from other forms of ethnicity by the identification of distinguishing *physical* characteristics, which, among other things, make it more difficult for members of the group to change their identity. (Smelser et al. 2001:3)

Although all the citizens of Nigeria belong to the same race, they do not belong to the same ethnic group or nationality. Nigeria has well over four hundred ethnic nationalities posing several challenges in governance. Interestingly, Smelser et al. do not actually provide a separate definition of ethnicity that can be referenced as part of the explanation above. Here is another definition linking these two terms:

*Common usage tends to associate “race” with biologically based differences between human groups, differences typically observable in skin colour, hair texture, eye shape, and other physical attributes. “Ethnicity” tends to be associated with culture, pertaining to such factors as language, religion, and nationality. (Bobo 2001:267)*

Race or ethnicity breeds conflict where a particular group consider themselves as superior to the other. Language, it should be noted, is at the centre of race or ethnicity. This is so in that the hausa language shapes the culture of the Hausa ethnic group and so is the case with others. The misunderstanding by other of the practices which defines the Hausa culture is what generates into conflicts.

### **Language as a tool for conflict prevention, management and resolution**

It is clear from our discussion that all conflict situations whether social, political or religious are motivated by language. We have looked at possible conflict situations with regard to the social factors of class, sex, and race and did realise that if language is used in all cases effectively, conflicts or crises could be prevented. This state of affairs is injurious to peaceful co-existence and growth of the nation. The paper, however, suggests that language should be cautiously, conscientiously and politely used so as to press on individual and group co-operation in social affair. Linguistic parameters such as effective communication skills, avoidance of inflammatory statements, and tone of speech could be employed in this regard.

### **Effective Communicative Skills**

When language is used effectively, it becomes a paramount veritable instrument in curbing conflicts. Words and expressions considered linguistically injurious to the peaceful co-existence of the society should be substituted with more accommodating words that foster harmony. Jija (2012) cites Adamu in Ihua (2010:23) who “provides a more positive vocabulary that: all the tribes in the state are bound together with the accord of common destiny. No tribe can be uprooted from here. The Kanuris cannot, the

Fulanis cannot. The Eggons cannot. And the Tivs cannot. The sooner we all realize this, the better for all of us. We are all indigenes of this state, not settlers”.

### **Avoidance of Inflammatory Statements**

No matter the situation or occasion, the choice of words or diction/register employed usually goes a long way in either fostering or curbing tensions particularly during crises periods. Our leaders at all levels should imbibe and exhibit self control during an argument in order not to inflict pain on the aggrieved parties. Jija notes that “such speech should be devoid of rage, emotion, irrationality, but must reflect calm, reality and humility. Emphasis here is on the language of respect; that is one that honours and respects human dignity, tolerance, truth; the language of national integration as against disintegration”. This is the kind of linguistic crusade being canvassed for by then Governor Abdulahi Adamu of Nassarawa State who fervently believes that:

*We all need each other and we must accommodate one another to be able to maintain the needed multi-ethnic state like ours. Hatred of peace and solidarity without which it is impossible to achieve development and progress in a neighbour will be the beginning of our downfall as a state... there is no viable alternatives in tolerance and good neighbourliness. We must seek to be our neighbours keeper. This is precondition for our progress as a state (Adamu quoted in Ihua 2010:22).*

### **Tone**

This linguistic feature plays a critical role in the nature of meaning passed across. Tone influences the pitch of the voice which invariably could send a different impression/message to the listener. Speech characterised by a high pitch is noted to be ‘anger’ and this must be when seeking ways of de-escalating or resolving conflict or crisis, nothing, among other things, that disarming and conciliatory statements and utterances would strengthen and enhance peaceful intentions between disagreeing parties.

### **Conclusion**

Efforts have been made in this paper to establish the role language plays in society in not only preventing, but also managing and resolving conflicts. It is demonstrated in the paper how society and language are inseparable; for one affects the other and vice versa. For the individual, the paper establishes that language is personal and informs the behaviour of a person with consideration to the classification of the society using social factors such as age, sex, class, race, religion etc. could either abate or add salt to injury. We also establish that language and culture shape each other. The language spoken by an ethnic group is shaped by its immediate environment and, therefore, it has great influence on conflict situations. In order to live in a peaceful co-existence, and harmonious relationship between all tribes and national advancement to prevail in the country, courteous, conscientious, careful and appropriate use of language, one that is devoid of arrogance, disrespect for human dignity and abusive or inflammatory language is desirable. As Hayakawa emphasizes, “when the use of language results, as it always does, in the creation or aggravation of disagreements and conflicts, there is something linguistically wrong with the speaker or listener or both”.

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