

THE ROLE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN RESOLVING CONFLICTS FOR A VIABLE NATIONAL ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Conflict is the consequence of human existence and relationships; and is therefore, unavoidable. The prevalence of conflict the world over has been a major concern to individuals, groups, societies and nations. This is against the backdrop of the effects of these conflicts in the socio-political and economic life of these nations. Nigeria has had a fair share of ethnic and religious conflicts. These have made the Nigerian market an arid region for both local and foreign economic investments. The consequence is the country's relapse into economic recession with its attendant hardship on the populace. There is the need to employ every strategy capable of effectively resolving conflicts without recourse to military might and violence as these are as destructive as the menace itself, and the result is far from positive. Language is fundamental and critical as well as plays significant and crucial roles in all human endeavours. Its employability in conflict prevention, management and resolution can never be over-emphasised. This paper therefore, proposes how the English Language can be employed in managing, resolving and preventing these conflicts in Nigeria for a viable economic environment that would attract massive investments.

Keywords: Language, the English language, conflict, conflict resolution

For any country to remain focused and committed to achieving its set national goals as well as pursue sustainable economic growth, it must find ways to resolve and manage conflicts which naturally must occur as a result of human interactions.

Nigeria is a third world country struggling to achieve economic growth. A lot of factors such as bad leadership, corruption, ethnic and religious crises have hindered any economic growth in the country. Nigeria, being a multi-ethnic and religious nation, has witnessed numerous ethnic and religious crises. These have crippled economic activities, sent foreign investors packing, and discouraged further investments. The result is that Nigeria is groping and wallowing in serious economic recession. Several solutions have been made by different people in different quarters; steps taken to ensure that social conflicts in Nigeria are curtailed and managed to help Nigeria out of her economic quagmire. This paper would explicate the key concepts in the paper as well and situate the paper on the Interactionist conflict theory. It would finally discuss the role of the English language in conflict resolution.

Language

Language, according to Crystal (2008), is the concrete act of speaking, writing or signing in a given situation. Mbata (2008) sees language as any means or method employed by human beings (whether spoken, written or signs) to effect communication. Fischer (2005) cleverly depicts the power of language thus: language is both the foundation and building material of the social house. Society's final architecture and subsequent remodeling are also measured from and through language. Language gives all human action voice, achieving this in complex and subtle ways. Multiple levels of social interaction, from international relations to intimate relationships are borne, enabled and empowered through language.

The English Language

The word "English" is used to denote the name of a people. By the time of the Northern Conquest (1066), English was the name for all the inhabitants of English (Uchechukwu, 2008). Of all the heritage left behind in Nigeria by the British at the end of the colonial administration, probably none is more important than the English language. The English language is now the language of government, internal, business and commerce, education, the mass media, etc. Since independence from the British people, English has been enjoying a high status and has served various roles within the Nigerian society.

The English language is not only used in Nigeria but also has domains of usage in international levels too. The language is flexible enough to be used for the most trivial conversation or for transacting the most important affairs of the day. Thus, it is the English language that gives Nigeria the opportunity to take part in the deliberation and decisions in international organizations such as the United Nations Organization, Commonwealth of Nations, World Health Organization, etc.

The English language is the language of integration in Nigeria. Amidst the compounding complexities of Nigeria, especially in relation to the language question, the only language that indexes the spirit of togetherness is the English language

(Enahoro, 2002). More often than not, activities conducted in indigenous languages are seen as being ethnic or tribal, except in cultural celebrations or entertainment displays. This explains why even during the first republic and even the colonial era, when English had not attained its present level of ascendancy in national and international affairs, political parties were formed in English. Though, the parties might have regional bases, the fact that they were named in English entailed their collective import. The Northern People Congress (NPC), the Action Group (AG), the NCNC (National Council of Nigerian Citizens, after the excision of Southern Cameroon), National Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), etc. were formed to integrate all Nigerians and give them a sense of belonging. This trend has necessarily survived till today with all the national political parties formed and sloganeered in English (Enahoro, 2002).

The English language has been used as a tool for conflict transformation, as a link language, a connector, for conflict-prone societies where national languages have traditionally become social or ethnic dividers. In Nigeria, the English language has replaced local languages as the official language for policy and secondary education, although local language is still the first language.

Since the English language is now widely used as a global *lingua franca*, the preferred language of international organizations, science, and the Internet, many English language speakers tend to assume that it is free of idiosyncrasy and cultural bias. It may even be thought of as a meta language beyond culture, depicting the world in a completely objective way, like a system of mathematical notation. (Lederach, 2016). The English language is a highly effective medium of exchange when used as a common technical language by engineers, bankers, soldiers, lawyers, and diplomats. As long as experts, who draw on an accepted vocabulary of defined terms, use a language in a precise "thin" sense, scope for cross-cultural misunderstandings is limited. When aviation specialists negotiate an air traffic, linguistic and cultural (but not necessarily political or substantive) gaps are unlikely to have much salience. But these are restrictive conditions that hold because experts "speak a common language" and are members of a professional culture. The less these circumstances apply, the less self-evident the case for the universal validity of English language (Wierzbicka, 2007).

Conflict

According to Vayrynen, (1991), conflict refers either to a violent dispute or an incompatibility of positions. As such conflict is normal, ubiquitous and unavoidable. It is an inherent feature of human existence. It is even useful. In consonance, Ojinmah (2008) sees conflict as warfare between opposing forces; disagreement or clash between ideas, principles or people; psychological state of unconscious opposition between simultaneous but incompatible desires, needs, drives or impulses. Mancha (2008) observes that conflict is a natural part of life brought about by our different beliefs, experiences, values and perception. In the words of

Yakubu (2007), conflict appears to be present in all human relationships and in all societies. There have always been conflicts between husband and wife, children and parents, neighbours, ethnic groups, fellow workers, organizations, citizens and their government and nations.

The traditional view of conflict assumes that conflict is bad, always has a negative impact, and leads to declines in performance as the level of conflict increases. According to this view therefore, conflict must always be avoided. In this view, conflict is closely associated with such terms as violence, destruction, and irrationality (Tidwell, 1998). The response to conflict in the traditional view is to reduce, suppress, or eliminate it.

Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution, otherwise known as reconciliation, is conceptualized as the methods and processes involved in facilitating the peaceful ending of conflict and retribution. Often, committed group members attempt to resolve group conflicts by actively communicating information about their conflicting motives or ideologies to the rest of the group (e.g., intentions; reasons for holding certain beliefs), and by engaging in collective negotiation. Dimensions of resolution typically parallel the dimensions of conflict in the way the conflict is processed (Forsyth, 2009). Cognitive resolution is the way disputants understand and view the conflict, with beliefs, perspectives, understandings and attitudes. Emotional resolution is in the way disputants feel about a conflict, the emotional energy. Behavioural resolution is how one thinks the disputants act, their behavior. Ultimately, a wide range of methods and procedures for addressing conflict exist, including but not limited to negotiation, mediation, diplomacy, and creative peace building (Mayer, 2012).

Boullé (1996) sees conflict resolution as the process of resolving a dispute or a conflict by meeting at least some of each side's needs and addressing their interests. Conflict resolution sometimes requires both a power-based and an interest-based approach, such as the simultaneous pursuit of litigation (the use of legal power) and negotiation (attempts to reconcile each party's interests). There are a number of powerful strategies for conflict resolution. Knowing how to manage and resolve conflict is essential for having a productive work life, and it is important for community and family life as well. Strategies include maintaining open lines of communication, asking other parties to mediate, and keeping sight of your underlying interests. In addition, negotiators can try to resolve conflict by creating value out of conflict, in which you try to capitalize on shared interests, explore differences in preferences, priorities, and resources; capitalise on differences in forecasts and risk preferences, and address potential implementation problems up front.

The concept of "conflict resolution" is also open to many interpretations. On the one hand, conflict resolution can be regarded as any process that resolves or ends conflict via methods which can include violence or warfare. Alternatively, it can be

viewed as a non-violent process that manages conflict through compromise, or through the assistance of a third party who either facilitates or imposes a settlement or resolution. Conflict resolution processes are many and varied and can be seen as a continuum ranging from collaborative, participatory, informal, non-binding processes (such as mediation, reconciliation, third party negotiation) to opposed, fact-oriented, legally binding and imposed decisions that arise from institutions such as the courts and tribunals (Boulle, 1996). Typically, non-opposing practices such as mediation, negotiation, arbitration and reconciliation are practices which have been associated with conflict resolution or alternate dispute resolution (ADR), procedures rather than hostile institutions such as courts and tribunals where a settlement is imposed on the disputants by an external authority (Boulle, 1996). In contrast, mediation, reconciliation or negotiation are activities that facilitate communication between participants who are seeking to resolve their differences in a cooperative way.

Attempts at problem solving and creating peace is often done through the medium of language. This is true because language is at the core of man's existence; it is at the centre of any mobilization of a group of people. It is indeed a crucial socio-political and cultural resort for groups seeking to achieve social integration and cooperation. Therefore, it means that to live in peace and harmony, we must be very hygienic in our use of language, especially as it concerns resolving our deep rooted mutual suspicion and conflict among the ethnic groups in Nigeria. Whenever poor verbal expression begins to manifest in the form of biased language, in the process of mediating for unity and peace, then achieving conflict resolution may not be possible. Maggio (2004), posits that biased language can powerfully harm people.

To resolve conflicts and ensure social cohesion in the society as well as the socio-economic development of the nation, language must be employed, and the English language as has been discussed, is an employable and effective tool in this regard.

Interactionist's Theory

This paper is hinged on the Interactionist's Theory that see conflict as a natural consequence of human interaction that can be managed and not avoided. Interactionist Theory sees interaction as a face-to-face process consisting of actions, reactions, and mutual adaptation between two or more individuals. The interaction includes all language (including body language) and mannerisms. Interactionism is a theoretical perspective that derives social processes (such as conflict, cooperation, identity formation) from human interaction. It is the study of how individuals act within society (Hall, 2007). Interactionist theory has its origin in the social psychology of early Twentieth Century sociologists, George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley. Mead and Cooley examined the ways in which the individual is related to society through ongoing social interactions. Interaction, according to them, rest on three basic premises. The first is that people act toward the

things that they encounter on the basis of what those things mean to them. Second, we learn what things are by observing how other people respond to them, that is, through social interaction. Third, as a result of ongoing interaction, the sound (or words), gestures, facial expressions, and body postures we use in dealing with others acquire symbolic meanings that are by shared by people who belong to the same culture, and that the meaning of a symbolic gesture extends beyond the act itself. <https://en.wikipedia.org>

Language in the Resolution of Conflict

Language builds the nation. It is in language that we perceive realities in life. That is why scholars believe that language pervades every aspect of life. Based on this proposition, language is a formidable tool for conflict management. It is used to resolve conflict quicker especially when the parties involved understand the context of the language used. Language can be intimate, educative, informative and persuasive as the case may be. Therefore, a mediator in a conflict management must be articulate and deeply rooted in the mastery of the language and must know how to handle the languages in the attainment of the desired goal. He must also put into consideration the social class, age, sex, religious background, etc., in fashioning appropriate registers to mediate effectively in a conflict. This is necessary because linguistic incompetence may result in bad usage, which will negatively affect communication and attract unfavourable reaction from the people concerned. Subtle use of language is necessary in a conflict resolution.

Indigenous languages play vital roles in conflict resolution through effective use of the power of words (Uzochukwu, 2002). Nigerian indigenous languages employ different media in resolving conflict such as idiomatic expression, figurative expressions, local adages, proverbs, etc. These expressions are normally used by elders or whoever acts in such capacity as mediators to resolve conflict in the society.

The Integrative Function of the English Language in other Spheres of Nigeria

The integrative role of the English language cuts across virtually all the strata of Nigerian life. In sports, the function of English as its language gives room for integration as it remains the only area where the syndrome of ethnicity/tribalism has not permeated. The use of English facilitates the absence of ethnic sentiments in this regard. English is also acceptable to all – even to those who clamour against its irresistible dominance. It is the language that is not fraught with suspicions in any formal or literate context. It is the only language that does not generate suspicions of having a skeleton in one's cupboard or a 'hidden agenda' in inter-ethnic relationships or transactions.

The English language also serves as the language of nationalism, concerned with political integration and efficiency (Bamgbose, 2001). It is the language that brings all the supposed 'nations' of Nigeria to function as one. It has been deemed

that each ethnic group in Nigeria is a nation on its own with the Hausa nation, the Ibo nation, the Yoruba nation, the Edo nation, Jukunland, Tivland, Urhoboland, Ogoniland etc. as examples. But, the cohesion of all under the subsuming Nigerian nation is possible through English. In other words, without English, the ubiquitous violent ethnic groups like Oodua Peoples' Congress (OPC) Egbesu Boys, the Arewa Peoples' Congress (APC), Ijaw Youth Solidarity (IYS), Bakassi Boys, and other militant groups would have found more justification for desiring to secede from the Nigerian federation (Bamgbose, 2001).

Ironically, the English language is also the language of nationalism. This is because the love for the country as a whole has to be manifested through the language intelligible to all and sundry, lest the 'ethnic agenda' be implicated. This reason accounts for why nationalists like Herbert Macaulay, Obafemi Awolowo, Ahmadu Bello, Nnamdi Azikiwe had to use the English language as a weapon of nationalist struggle. A patriot is a nationalist based on expressing his patriotic views in the English language. If English is not used to express the same ideas for which he is known as a nationalist, he becomes an ethnic jingoist or a tribal apologist.

According to Babatunde (2001), the English language as a Language of Wider Communication (LWC), is used for phatic communion, ceremonial purpose, instrument of keeping records, information dissemination, self-experiment and embodiment of thought among the various linguistic groups of Nigeria. The common linguistic basis that is essential for the existence of any nation is provided by the English language. So with the English language as the common tongue to all the ethnic groups, the collective sentiment of belonging together despite the individual or ethnic differences is further advanced (Babatunde, 2001).

Related to the roles discussed is the fact that Nigerianism or collective identity is stamped on national institutions through the medium of English. The army, the navy, the air force and the police that all safeguard the territorial integrity of, and peaceful existence in, Nigeria are controlled with English (unadulterated or adulterated – pidgin). The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) is aimed at creating a peaceful co-existence amongst Nigerian youths with a view to reinforcing the sentiment of oneness. The constitution of Nigeria is written in the English language to create a level ground for all Nigerians to play.

Using the English Language in Conflict Resolution for a Viable National Economy

The importance of language in conflict resolution is evident in the United Nation's proclamation of 2001 as United Nations years of dialogue among citizens. Part of the proclamation reads:

“We are convinced that dialogue represents a new paradigm of security, especially in a globalizing world with its manifold new challenges to individuals, communities and countries. A commitment to dialogue among civilizations is also

commitment against resolutions, but pursuing resolution and seeking security through dialogue requires cultural and linguistic considerations”.

The question is what language is adequate in conflict resolution since people culture and language are inseparable? In fact languages are not merely means of communication: they stand for or symbolize people.

It is clear that the English language takes a central stage in the national relationship between groups in Nigeria. Since it has also been established that the English language has such integrative power in the different fields of Nigeria, this paper therefore proposes that the English language be employed in conflict resolutions in Nigeria especially in cases where the local languages are not mutually intelligible by the conflicting groups or communities. In this regard, the acquisition of good communication skills and indeed, communicative competence in the English language becomes fundamental. Acquisition of good communication skills and communicative competence in the English language entail both the linguistic, cultural and cross-cultural competence. A comparative study of conciliation vocabularies reveals that concepts that seem self-evident and straightforward to the native English language speaker may weigh significantly different in other languages or not exist at all. Divergences that will affect the culture and the language of the conflicting speech communities or groups have to be considered in any dialogue in English in a bilingual and multilingual setting as Nigeria. It is advisable that the use of terms which are considered as being linguistically segregate and divisible need to be substituted with the more accommodative and unity enhancing terms like *co-existence*, *rural neighbours*, *fellow indigenes*, and so on in reference to people who do not live in their original place of birth both for commercial or official reasons in Nigeria for example. Diction and structure should be carefully chosen and responsibly and politely used so as to advance individual and group co-operation in social affairs.

From the premise that language constitutes a community’s shared stock of meaning, we can conclude that language may provide an excellent entry point for investigating how members of a group understand and handle conflict. Cross-cultural differences in the depiction of reality are hard to accept, precisely because we take the picture of the world conveyed by our native language to be self evident and project it onto everyone else. In English language, a given word occupies a certain space, which then becomes the common sense meaning of the word to native English language speaker. The foreign language equivalent may cover more or less space, including meaning not prevalent in the first language, while excluding others. The connotations of the word also may differ across languages for religious, historical, or environmental reasons. If a map of a word in the English language is placed over a map of the word, say, in Igbo, they may be seen to occupy overlapping but not identical areas. The very art of comparison provides insight into how the two societies separately understand and value the segment of the world referred to by the word.

Worthy of mention too is the need to underscore the pragmatics of the use of English in conflict resolution; the consideration of prosodic features such as tone; the choice of paralinguistics or gestures that go into the use of the language, etc. In all, care should be taken to avoid the use of inflammatory language. This has to do away with wrong and misconceived words while referring to ourselves in our relationships. This can be done through self control during argument for care to be taken and not to inflict embarrassment on aggrieved parties. The language users on either side of contention must think before they speak. Such speech should be without rage, emotion, irrationality but must reflect calm and humanity. Emphasis here is on turn taking, appropriate diction, the language of respect, that is, one that honours and respect human dignity, tolerance, truth; the language of national integration as against disintegration.

In this regard, policy makers, curriculum/course developers, textbook writers and language educators must incorporate aspects of the use of the English language that are conflict resolution oriented. Since the English language is the national and official language, cultural competence in the use of the English language in a second language setting of the existence of other local languages that are cultural bound in their use, must be considered. Not only must the grammar of the English language be emphasized in the teaching learning process, comparative and cross-cultural implications must also be considered.

Conclusion

Among the most crucial activities of the Nigerian community is its handling of conflict; for unless it can contain disagreement and control violence, it has little hope of surviving and progressing as a nation. It would neither provide a viable and conducive economic environment nor attract both local and foreign investments. The English language has proven to be a binding force in the different nations that make up Nigeria. This paper reiterates that the language could be employed in all these ethno-religious group conflicts that have made the Nigerian economic environment leprous and deserted.

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