Peace and Conflict Resolution in the Nigerian Environment: The Role of Language

By

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Abstract

Language as the chief means of communication and a unique gift of nature is very vital and key to human mentality and existence. This paper examines some of the characteristics of language such as arbitrariness, discreetness, specie-specific etc, the functions of language such as referential function, abnatural function, medium of thought etc and examines the roles played by Language in resolving conflict and maintaining peaceful co-existence in the Nigerian environments. The paper recommends that Language should be used politely since its meaning is determined by its usage and connotation. It also recommends that the societal behavior should first be taken into consideration which determines the language to be used in a particular time in order to advance the society's co-operation which will suppress conflicts and enhance peace. Furthermore, it recommends that linguistically segregate and divisible terms should be substituted with more accommodating and unity enhancing terms.

Keywords: Peace, Conflict, Resolution, Nigerian Environment, Language.

Introduction

Language is man's most important tool and asset with which he interacts. Language is today an inseparable part of human society. Human civilization has been possible only through language. It is through language that humanity has come out of the stone-age and has developed science, art and technology in a big

way. Indeed, there can be no development without language. The term language has been variously defined by scholars. According to Sapir (1921), language is purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols. These symbols are in the first instance, auditory and they are produced by the so called organs of speech. This definition of language by Sapir is restricted to human beings who communicate their thoughts and feelings using the organs of speech.

In their view of language, Stork and Widowson (1974) affirm that all languages are highly developed and sophisticated communication system, all capable of meeting the demands of the society in which they are used, and the personal needs of the individual of the environment and the society in terms of expressing emotions and giving and receiving information. It is clear from the above that one cannot divorce language from our environment and the society. For an individual to adapt superbly in any society and thus meet his daily needs, the use of language must come to the fore. The researcher's intention here is not to compare and contrast definitions but majorly with sieving out the things that make language what it is. Indeed, scholars trace the circuitous relationship that exists between language and the human beings. This relationship is expressed in the fact that human beings make language and language makes the human beings. To say that human beings make language implies that language belongs to human beings, who invent and make use of it. On this note, the two definitions I noted above emphasized that of all the animals, man has the capacity for language. What do I mean when I say that language makes human beings? I mean that, the human being is what he is, simply and majorly because he makes use of language. This assertion is supported by Fromkin et al (2003) who hold that: "the possession of language, more than any other attribute, distinguishes humans from other animals. To understand our humanity, one must understand the nature of language that makes us humans". This connection between language and human being is well expressed by the Bantu people of Africa. Among the Bantus, new born babies that are unable to speak are regarded as things, (kintu). However, as soon as the child is able to speak, it becomes a person (muntu). Thus, to speak a language is the basis for defining and proving our humanity. In this regard, Chomsky (1957) cited in Fromkin et al (2003) writes that the study of language is the study of man. Consequently, one who raises

questions about language raises question about man seeking to discover his essence, his capabilities, and his limitations and so on.

Language is a possession of a social group, compromising an indispensable set of rules which permit its members to relate to each other, to interact with each other, to cooperate with each other; it is a means of nourishment and developing culture and establishing human relations. This means language promotes a co-existence relationship among its users in a peaceful way; this leads to the concept of peace.

The word "Peace" is derived from the Anglo-French term *pes* which itself comes from the Latin *Pax* , meaning peace, compact, agreement, treaty of peace, tranquility, absence of hostility, harmony. The Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary (8th Edition) defines "Peace" as a situation or a period of time in which there is no war or violence in a country or an area". "According to Cambridge Dictionary (4th Edition), "peace" means freedom from war and violence, especially when people leave and work together happily without disagreement".

According to Wikipedia, peace is a concept of societal friendship and harmony in the absence of hostility and violence. In a social sense, peace is commonly used to mean a lack of conflicts such as war and freedom from fear of violence between individuals or heterogeneous group. If "peace" means lack of conflict, then what is *conflict*?

"*Conflict*" is a situation in which people, group of countries are involved in a serious disagreement or argument.

Citing a review of the definition of organization conflict in 1990 by Robert A. Baron Rakhim, notes the following common elements in the definitions of conflict. Rakhim defines conflict as "an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement or dissonance within or between social entities. To take another definition of conflict, Nicholson (1988) defines conflict "as an activity which takes place when conscious beings wish to carry out mutually inconsistent acts concerning their wants, needs, or obligations. Conflict is an escalation of disagreement, which is its common prerequisite, and it is characterized by the

existence of conflict behavior, in which the beings are actively trying to damage one another.

Characteristics of Language

Arbitrariness

This, as a characteristic of language means that there is no logical relationship that exists between the sound used to refer to a thing in a language and the thing to which the sound refers. This means that the process of naming an object and the reference to it is essentially that of general agreement or convention. For instance, there is no direct connection between the word pen and the object it refers. The same is with the word ***seat*** and what it refers. Finegan (2008) explaining arbitrariness, made references to arbitrary signs and what they signify or indicate and so can be changed. We can exemplify the above points in this way: it is well-known fact that the traffic light sign for stop is ***red*** if the Federal Road Safety Commission decides to use the colour ***purple*** as the signal in place of red, it can do so. The relationship is generally arbitrary between words and what they represent.

Discreetness

The sound segments used in any language differ significantly the sound segments in the word of their language even though it appears to be a continuous flow of noise. In the English Language for example, there are forty-four discrete sound segments. The difference between the words "pit" and "pat" for instance lies in the sound that occur at their position.

Specie-specific

The specie-specificness of a language implies that man is the only animal that uses language in the true sense of it. This ability of language use differentiates him from other animals. No human being is born with a particular language but man according to Chomsky is endowed with an innate capacity known as Language Acquisition Devices (LAD). This enables him to acquire language once he is exposed to it. Giving credence to this, the new Encyclopedia Britannia has that every physiologically and mentally normal person acquires in childhood the ability to make use as both speaker and hearer, of a system of vocal communication that comprise a circumscribe set of noise resulting from movement of certain organs

within the throat and mouth. This means that it is only man that makes use of the organs of speech production.

Functions of Language

Referential Function

Language plays referential function when it communicates information about something. To communicate is the most noticeable function of language and some scholars argue that communication is the purpose of language. It is the foundation of all kinds of expression. A referential user of language only wants to pass information about something. Thus, in referential function of language, what is said must refer to something that can be seen, felt, touched or conceived by the person to whom the language user addresses. For instance, if you tell your neighbor, *take away your tea cup from my table*, you have employed language to perform its referential function because you have referred table. If you are to make the same statement using Igbo language while addressing a Yoruba speaker who does not understand Igbo, you cannot be said to have communicated and you have not also used language referentially.

In their daily interactions, human beings report, ask for and give directions, explain, promise, apologize, bargain, warn, scold and so on. Politicians and leaders of government use language to pass information to the governed about the developmental activities to the people. Whenever they do this, they are using language referentially. You should bear in mind that in playing its referential function, language only seeks to communicate, to bring to the awareness of people what is to be done, what has been done and the real states of affairs. By this, the people are fully acquainted with the basic knowledge of what is happening around them. All forms of education, whether formal or informal are acquired using language. Preachers on the pulpit use language to communicate the words of God to their congregation. Language is indeed the basis for all kinds of communication.

According to Eyisi (2000), we use language to express love, hatred, anger, happiness, praise, satisfaction and dissatisfaction, to comment on the political, social, economic and educational situation in our environment; to confirm or express religious beliefs, to comment on the weather or even to fill a vacuum when

there is nothing else to do especially in the exchange of pleasantries. Human beings, therefore, are naturally endowed with the tendency to always talk, to use words, to employ language for a mutual social relationship with their fellow individuals and for the achievement of their well-being and for the well-being of their environment. People get on well when their communication flow. The same way if there is no proper communication, activities in a given environment will definitely crumble.

Ab-natural Function of Language

Communication of information is not the only reason we use language. Conversely, there are times when you want to hide information from the people or at least from a vast majority of the people. When this is the case, you put such information in codes. Such codes are known to you alone or few individuals who can decode it. When this is done, language has been employed to play its abnatural function. Language scholars view every language, whatever, as a symbol, a public code sort of. For the most part, language as a symbol is devised for communication purpose. When this is the case, language only targets to make clear what is hidden.

However, there are times when language is used as a code to hide something from the public eyes, such languages are often special languages meant only few persons who have access to the meaning of the code. Note that language plays two roles simultaneously here, that of hiding information from a large number of people and conveying information to few people. Laycook and Muhlhausler (2000) writes that abnatural function of language "are attempts to create codes which could provide access to the secrets of the universe and systems for concealment of information, either for the use of small privileged groups or in the case of some of glossolalia only"

Medium of thought Expression

That man is a thinking animal is a truth held ever since the time of the ancient philosophers. The most recent formation of this is found in Arendt (1971) who regards the human person as thought made flesh and writes that: speaking out of the experience of the thinking ego, man is quite naturally not just word but *thought made flesh*, the always mysterious, never fully elucidated incarnation of the thinking

ability neither the product of a diseased brain nor one of the easily dispelled 'errors of the past', but the entirely authentic semblance of the thinking activities itself. Despite the identification of the human person as a thinking being, we only become aware of it simply because we have language with which we bring to light the content of the human person. The implication of this is that all the mental activities that make place in the minds of men, would have no means of expressing themselves in the absence of language. On this note, Deutscher (2007) writes that it is only language that can free our thinking from inaccessibility. Thus, the human person's invention of language, and their learning of it is heavily linked to their desire to express their thought. Indeed, the relationship between language and thought is a little bit wider than we have so far stated it. Thus, it is not only that language is the vehicle for expressing thought, the art of thinking itself is carried out in language. Corroborating with the just noted point, Arendt (1971) writes that: our mental activities are conceived in speech even before being communicated, but speech is meant to be heard and words are meant to be understood by others who also have the ability to speak, just as a creature endowed with the sense of vision is meant to see and to be seen. Algeo (1974) holds that this relationship and thought has generated a great deal of speculations. Some believe that language merely clothes thought and that thought is quite independent of the language we use to express it. Yet others believe that thought is merely a suppressed language and that when we are thinking, we are just talking under our breath. In the final analysis, the truth remains that our thoughts are well understood when we put them into language if not they are likely to remain unknown and unknowable. Indeed, the best way for you to appreciate the role of language as medium of thought is for you to imagine what would happen between a doctor and his patient or between a teacher and his students. The teacher may have so many things in his mind which he will tell the students but without a language, he would just stand in front of them and exchange stares. But with the help of language, he tells them all that is in his mind which he wants them to know.

The Role of Language in Peace and Conflict Resolution in an Environment

Since the basic function of language is for communication, then language should be used politely. Since we acknowledge that the meaning of words are determined by its usage and connotation and language do not exist in isolation as abstract

system of sign but within the culture of the people, words therefore should be used to conform with the acceptable behavior of a group and by so doing, conflict or crises could be avoided and peace achieved in that environment or society. Jija (2012) stressed on this when he stated that language should be carefully, responsibly and politely used so as to advance individual and group co-operation in social affair. He maintained that effective communication capacity or skills are necessary pre-requisite in suppressing conflicts. He opined that terms which are considered as being linguistically segregate and divisible should be substituted with the more accommodating and unity enhancing terms. He also stated that inflammatory language or wrong and misconceived words should be avoided when referring to our relationship. He was of the opinion that the best instrument for achieving peace and resolving conflict is the use of language that honour and respects human dignity, tolerance, truth and national integration.

Jiji (2012) also maintained that people should avoid using words, utterances or vocabulary items that are capable of creating tension, confrontation and conflict between groups of people. He cited as example with the use of words such as irresponsible, unguarded, arrogant, vandals, inferior as words capable of creating tension and fuelling conflict.

Yusuf (2003) emphasizing the need for the use of polite words in communication especially in a heterogeneous society stated that languages in a multilingual society if not well handled could be as destructive as a nuclear arsenal. Gronching (2005) stressed on this when she stated that if a piece of information is wrongly encoded, receivers usually get confused. She opined that the confusion might lead to a breakdown in communication and could result to crises ranging from lawlessness, loss of lives and property.

Having seen some past and present waves of conflicts, how best could these conflicts be peacefully resolved or even further conflicts prevented? The answer to this question is the use of effective stylistic approach to address a contending issue. Cohen (2001) stressed on this when he stated that in interconnected chain of non-verbal and verbal messages, reconciliation can advance only when there is synchronized and consecutive understanding at every stage of the process. He

maintained that for information to be comprehensibly exchanged and the issues at stake to be discussed, the parties must be able to draw a shared store of meaning. The underlying meaning of Cohen's statement is that in some societies, functionally equivalent words may have variations in meaning and when these variations are not explained in an understandable term to the audience, there may be conflict based on the wrong connotation on the meaning of the word. Cohen (2001) further stressed that the greater the cultural gap between the ways of life of society, the greater the potential semantic gap between the concepts and their labels across languages. He opined that since different languages convey different versions of reality, comprehensibility of one's utterance depends on the equivalent concept in his language. In order words, what one expects of reconciliation will be determined by the local knowledge that informs his understanding of the term.

Peace and development only anchor in an environment where people's right and freedom are respected. They rest solidly in an environment devoid of acrimony and hatred which are usually expressed with words. Osam and Ekpo (2009) also remarked that culture of peace is built from values, attitude, behaviors and ways of life based on non-violence, respect for life, liberty, justice, solidarity, tolerance, appreciation of cultural diversity and respect for others.

Language generally performs a lot of functions in any environment. Its usage determines the co-existence of any group in that environment. Jija (2012) ex-rayed this assertion when he opined that misapplication of language brings about disharmony but when carefully and democratically used, brings about co-operation. He asserted that language is symmetrical in nature and could be employed to induce hatred and frictional relationship between groups. On the other hand, language could equally be used to establish harmony. Commenting on the effect of language on human relationship, Jija (2012) stated that misapplication of language especially the use of inflammatory utterances or words is one of the most common causes of conflict. She links the effect of a wrongly used word or misconceived message both at pre or post conflict time to gasoline or fire. Leech (1981) reiterated that all kinds of conflicts and pressure between one individual and another arise mostly from the usage of language.

Conclusion

Language is the totality of human existence. It is a means of communication and business activities. Language when appropriately used promotes peace, enhances economic and social development but when wrongly used leads to conflict, breakdown of law and order in our environment and the society at large. In view of the importance of language in socio-economic development of a nation, it should be given the pride of place in the school curriculum through effective teaching and learning.

Recommendations

This paper recommends that language should be used polity since its meaning is determined by its usage and connotation. The behavior of the people in the environment should first be taken into cognizance and should determine the language to be used at a particular time or period in order to advance the society's co-operation and social affairs which suppresses conflicts and on the other hand enhances peace.

Linguistically segregate and divisive terms such as "fool" "idiot", "nonentity", "animal", "bastard" etc should be substituted with more accommodating and unity enhancing terms such as "wise one", "my friend", "Sir", "Madam" etc. Inflammatory, wrong and misconceived statements, utterances and vocabularies such as "you are stupid", "a nonentity like you", "you are an animal", "you are the biggest idiot", "you father is a bastard", "your is a mad woman" etc that are capable of creating tension, confrontation and conflict in our environment and society should be avoided. To achieve peace and conflict resolution, languages that dignify human should always be implored in our environments.

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