The Role of Language in Conflict Resolution in Nigeria: Implication for Translation

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Abstract: Language is the instrument for the expression of culture of which it is a component. It facilitates communication between individuals and groups. Language has a lot of impact on the developmental processes of any country. This work therefore seeks to establish the role of language in conflict resolution in Nigeria. We reviewed existing literature in the subject area in question. The study revealed that language could be deployed in a positive manner to engender harmony in the society. It could equally be negatively applied to cause chaos and disaffection among individuals and groups. It was therefore suggested that all Nigerians should learn to appropriately use language in a more positive and polite manner to reduce the incessant conflicts among individuals and groups in the country.

Key words: competitive language · Cooperative language · Conflict escalation · Conflict resolution

INTRODUCTION

The Chambers 21st Century Dictionary defines conflict as "disagreement, fierce argument, a quarrel." The same dictionary also explains that conflict is 'a struggle, a fight or battle usually on a lesser scale than a war." In spite of the existence of the Conflict Theory in Sociology which, according to the 21st Century Dictionary states that "conflict and social division are inevitable in all social structures because the mechanisms by which society integrates and exercises control over its members are never wholly successful," the situation in Nigeria is very worrisome. This is because there is conflict in almost every segment of the society. There are conflicts in many homes with couples experiencing emotional turmoil and marriages breaking up. At the level of government, there is conflict among the different arms. It is not unusual to find legislators at all levels converting the seats meant for their comfort into instruments of attack against one another.

Communities are also not spared in this orgy of conflicts. From the north to the south and from the east to the west, the story is the same. Some communities in Ebonyi State and their neighbours from Cross River State have boundary problems that are yet to be resolved and which led to clashes that claimed the lives of innocent Nigerians. Some communities in Anambra State also have problems with their neighbours from Kogi State. Some Fulani herdsmen have recently clashed with their host communities in Imo and Anambra States as well as in Benue and Taraba States. There is also the Ife/Modakeke example in Ondo State as well as more violent cases in some of the states in the north especially Plateau State.

Given the above scenario, one can understand why we say that there is conflict in almost every segment of the society. Life experiences must have taught everyone that there is a precursor to every conflict, verbal exchanges between the two parties in conflict. In every verbal exchange, there is the deployment of linguistic resources-words and sentences-for good or evil purposes.

It is in realization of the above that we have undertaken in this study to examine the role of language in conflict resolution in Nigeria. In the course of the work, we will examine the theoretical basis of the study, forms of language and conflict, language and conflict escalation as well as language and conflict resolution. There will also be discussion on findings, highlights on the major role of language in conflict resolution as well as implications for translation and conclusion.

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Theoretical Basis of the Study: There are two theories that are pertinent to this study. These are Sapir-Whorf's hypothesis of linguistic determinism and linguistic relativity as well as Giles and Coupland's Communication and Accommodation Theory.

According to Adejimola [1], "Sapir Whorf's hypothesis of "linguistic determinism" and "linguistic relativity" has shown that there exists some relationship between language and thought." He further explains that "such relationship clearly indicates that language is the vehicle for thought." This idea was further corroborated by [2] when he said that:

> According to Sapir-Whorf's approach, language embodies an interpretation of reality and language can influence thought. Thus, the notion of relativity indicates that one's perception, interpretation, logic and the categorization and inference of everyday settings as well as events, could be influenced by one's understanding of a language structure.

The ideas of Sapir-Whorf as highlighted above are very instructive. His famous relativity theory has brought to the fore the link between language and thought and it is also very interesting to note that one's linguistic knowledge can actually influence his perception of the realities of everyday life. This perhaps explains why polyglots seem to have some edge over others who are not equally endowed.

We also need to examine the Communication Accommodation Theory which is very relevant to this study. According to [3], the Communication Accommodation Theory was propounded by Giles and Coupland in 1991. This theory stresses that "individuals' use of language is important to the creation and maintenance of the social dynamic between themselves and the other party." Taylor stresses this further when he said that:

> A speaker's lexical, syntactic and semantic choices are part of their cognitive representation of the conflict. Their utterance leads to the activation of a matching representation in the other speaker, which has the behavioral consequences of shaping that person's response.

From the above, so much becomes apparent about the serious link between language and human relationship as well as the direct connection between utterances and responses. The Communication Accommodation Theory makes it clear that choice of language goes a long way in determining the quality of relationship between individuals and groups. The above theory also highlights that in the event of conflict, the choice of words by any party clearly shows the mental representation of the conflict by the party in question and that the utterance of such a party will in no small way determine and shape the response of the other party. Both Sapir-Whorf's "linguistic determinism and relativity theory and Giles and Coupland's Communication Accommodation Theory have clearly illustrated the linguistic implications of any conflict. Against this theoretical background, we can now proceed on this research by examining forms of language and conflict.

Forms of Language and Conflict: Social psychologists have highlighted two forms of language that impact greatly on conflicts. These are "competitive and cooperative" forms of language. Cordonnier Jean-Louis [4] explains that "Competitive Language is characterized by behaviours such as justifications, irrelevant arguments, personal attacks and excessive demands and threats." He goes further to illustrate that users of competitive language are usually motivated by what he called "distributive or pro-self orientation." Pro-self orientation, according to him, "is associated with a focus on self and a motivation to maximize personal outcome even at the expense of the other party."

The same author also explained that "a cooperative language is associated with behaviors such as proposals and counterproposals, agreements, expressions of confidence in the other's ability and humour." He also explains that the user of this form of language has an "integrative or pro-social orientation usually associated with a focus on fairness and a desire to find ways to satisfy the needs of all the parties."

In view of the foregoing, one can assert that social psychology has made significant contribution in unraveling the mystery between language and conflict. It is obvious that people have their motivations for using any of these forms of language at any given time. When one is too selfish and does not care much about the feelings of the other party, such a fellow has the tendency to use competitive language. However, if the motivation

is to engender harmony and peace, there is every likelihood that cooperative language will be effectively deployed, it is equally necessary to highlight that psychologists have identified culture, individual differences, power differences and emotions as key determinants of orientations to communication during conflict [5]. Having discussed forms of language and conflict, we will proceed by examining language and conflict escalation.

Language and Conflict Escalation: When Opara Chika Glory [6] said that "Language is used to resolve or escalate dispute", this implies that there are forms of language that often lead to the escalation of conflicts. Sessions Jeff [7] agreed to this assertion when he added that:

> Language as an instrument of communication may be used to influence personality, to declare war, to provoke, to incite, to oppose ideas, intentions and actions, to scatter, to condemn, blackmail, insult, destroy, tell lies, claim or testify falsely, to despise, abuse and to generate violence.

Shakespeare William [8] added 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.

Ani also quoted Yusuf as having stated in 2003 that "Language in a multilingual society if not well handled could be as destructive as a nuclear arsenal. If words could be described as being as destructive as a nuclear arsenal or gasoline or fire, it becomes obvious that when it is said that the pen is mightier than the sword, it is not the pen per se that is referred to but the words which the pushing of the pen brings forth. Having seen that language use could lead to conflict escalation, we will now examine what has been said about language and conflict resolution.

Language and Conflict Resolution: It has also been argued that more positive use of language could promote peace and engender harmony in the society [9-11]. While stressing that language could be used to promote peace

and engender harmony, [12] said:

> It could be used to entertain, appeal, inspire, comfort, amuse, appreciate, build, enlighten, educate, establish cordial relationship, settle disputes and make peace with people or communities, to generate peace or to resolve conflicts within and among religious, political, community, industrial, ethnic/tribal groups.

In view of the above, it can be argued that language use is key to the establishment of a more peaceful and harmonious society. The revelation above implies that the peace that has eluded so many communities especially in Nigeria can easily be attained with a simple change in linguistic style. In cultivating positive linguistic habits, certain words should be avoided. [13] added:

> People should avoid using words, utterances or vocabulary items that are capable of creating tension, confrontation and conflict between a group of people. Words such as irresponsible, unguarded, arrogant, vandals and inferior are capable of creating tension and fuelling conflict.

The words mentioned above are often used by leaders in Nigeria to describe fellow citizens especially the youth. Who knows whether that is why there is so much bitterness among this class of people in Nigeria. It is obvious that, so long as people do not harbour the tendencies that predispose individuals to adopt competitive language, achieving a peaceful and harmonious society is easy with the use of appropriate language styles. Having examined the forms of language that contribute to escalation in conflicts and having equally highlighted the language use that facilitates conflict resolution, we will, at this point, undertake discussion on major findings in this work while relating same to issues in Nigeria.

DISCUSSION ON FINDINGS

As we observed at the beginning of this paper, there is conflict in almost all segments of the Nigerian society. There is no doubt that language may have played some significant role in igniting or fuelling those conflicts. Let us examine the following pairs of statements to see the

effects they could have had in sustaining relationships at the levels indicated below.

Couples and Friends	
Group A	Group B
You are beautifully made	You look very ugly
I thank the Most High for giving you to me	I curse the day I met you.
I like your dress	I don't like seeing this dress.
You are the best thing that has ever happened to me.	I don't know why I came across you in this life.
You have made my day	You have ruined my day
You are my Angel	You are a devil incarnate
My Queen, I love you so much	If there is any person I hate, it is you

In the above examples, we are examining the relationship between couples and friends. It is obvious that the above positive statements in Group A will surely take the relationship to the next higher level while those in Group B indicate the existence of a very serious conflict. If nothing very urgent is done to save the situation, it is obvious that the relationship in Group B is heading for the rocks.

Among Legislators	
Group A	Group B
This man is indeed an honorable member.	This is one of those masquerading as honorable members
This idea will lead to the development of Nigeria.	This idea is good but he is not from our zone.
I think this man is making some sense	What is this one saying again today?
This is a patriotic Nigerian indeed	Where is this one coming from?

In Group A above, we have statements that indicate that there is harmony in the house while Group B indicates that all is not well with the house in question. The point has to be made that in Nigeria, political leaders at all levels still adopt competitive language as they address the people that gave them the seats they are occupying. This is very unfortunate. It shows that they are not learning anything from their counterparts in more advanced societies of the world, who have since imbibed the use of cooperative language as a way of enhancing peaceful coexistence in their countries. Something happened in America recently which Nigerians should learn from. When President Trump was being investigated by the US Congress over alleged Russian meddling in US elections, a number of Trump's cabinet members were interviewed by the Congressmen. It was very interesting to note the use of polite and decent language during these periods of interview in the Congress. During Congress interview on the 13th June, 2017, the US Attorney General and a former Senator from Alabama Jeff Sessions said, "I'm not able to be rushed this fast. It makes me nervous." A thorough analysis of the above statement will reveal a high sense of humility on the part of this highly placed US official. He carefully chose his words so as not to accuse his interviewer of rushing him. This can only happen in a country where people have a lot of respect for their fellow citizens. The interview sessions continued without anybody reacting angrily or yelling at anybody. It was a very beautiful scene to behold. It was also very interesting to note what cooperative language could do in the lives of a people that have embraced it.

Specific Role of Language in Conflict Resolution: It is very pertinent, at this point, to further highlight the specific role language plays in conflict resolution.

Language serves as conflict indicator. This is perhaps the very first role language plays in conflict resolution. It plays the key role of exposing conflict wherever it exists. This it carefully does by leading the other party into the heart of his opponent. [3] clearly captures this when he said:

> Through language and communication we can see the heart of a people. This implies that language makes it possible to express feelings, emotions, views, ideas, opinions, perceptions as well as judgment about people, objects, places, things, information about conflict and conflict situations can be expressed in language.

The Bible also corroborated this when it stated in Matthew chapter 12 verse 34 that "out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaketh." It was many years ago that Shakespeare through one of his characters said that "there is no art to find the mind's construction in the face." Linguists and social psychologists have, however, revealed that the mind's construction can be found

through the words emanating from the mouth of the character in question. Through the language of the character, a careful observer will always know whether there is conflict or not. Once language gives the clue as to the existence of a conflict, a proactive action could be taken to nip the conflict in the bud before it escalates. Conflicts often degenerate because the clues usually provided by language are not often heeded to or because leaders with ulterior motives often adopt inappropriate measures in handling the conflict.

Language could also serve the purpose of facilitating the resolution of conflicts where they exist. On the form of language that could achieve this [6] suggests that "cooperative language tends to promote conflict resolution and increases the efforts to identify solutions that benefit both parties: while [11] quoted Jija as having said that:

Inflammatory language or wrong and misconceived words should be avoided when referring to our relationship. The best instrument for achieving peace and resolving conflict is the use of languages that honours and respects human dignity, tolerance, truth and national integration.

The above quotations have explained it all. The use of cooperative language which usually takes into consideration the needs and aspirations of all the parties in conflict is highly recommended. As the conflict theory highlighted, the existence of conflict in any society is usually inevitable. It is however, incumbent on leaders to ensure that once conflicts occur, appropriate measures are adopted to ensure their quick and satisfactory resolution.

Implication for Translation: Some revelations in this study have a lot of implications for translation. Seweje in Ani (2015) has highlighted that "having too many languages and diverse dialects within a nation can affect mutual co-existence and understanding and this may lead to conflict." [2] also asserts that:

The greater the cultural gap between the ways of life of society, the greater the potential semantic gap between 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 other words, what one expects of reconciliation will be determined by the local knowledge that informs his understanding of the term.

This is where translation comes in for it is the translator that can find the appropriate equivalent concepts that will provide the basis for the right interpretation and understanding of the terms involved. Translation is a professional activity that ensures that a text written in one language is made accessible to readers in a second language. Consequently, it brings together two different languages [4, 5]. Some translators have equally opined that translation could be described as the passage from one culture to another [6-9].

The translator has been professionally prepared to mediate across two different cultures. Consequently, in the event of any conflict between two groups of people with different linguistic backgrounds, the skills of the translator could be tapped to achieve better results. Earlier there was a reference to "equivalent concepts" that could enhance the understanding of the terms involved. With his professional training, the translator could, after due analysis of the concepts in question in both languages, arrive at the appropriate equivalents that will convey the intended meanings. Whether he is working on documents prepared for the purpose of enhancing reconciliation between the parties in dispute or he is interpreting for one of the parties to bring about effective communication, the same positive effect will be achieved. His contribution as one who fully understands the intricacies of the two cultures in contact will surely facilitate rather than impede the reconciliation process. These are some of the little details that matter a great deal but which is often neglected in this part of the world due to lack of exposure on the part of those saddled with the responsibility of effecting reconciliation during conflicts.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we have examined the role of language in conflict resolution in Nigeria as well as its implication for translation. Theories relevant to this research were reviewed. It was revealed that the language style adopted in any relationship determines to a great extent the quality of relationship enjoyed by the parties involved. We also examined forms of language and conflict. Two major forms were highlighted-competitive language which centres on self and impedes conflict resolution and cooperative language which seeks to satisfy the needs of both parties and which facilitates conflict resolution. The work revealed two major roles played by language in conflict resolution-serving as conflict indicators and facilitating the process of resolution.

The implications of this study to translation were equally examined. It was highlighted that translation could

serve very useful purpose especially in removing the linguistic barriers that could impede or retard the resolution process. The submission of this paper, therefore, is that language may not be the leading cause of conflict but it is certainly a major instrument for the resolution of every conflict.

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