LANGUAGE AS A PANACEA FOR PEACE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Language plays a dominant role in human existence. It is a means of communication and the medium of instruction in school.. It is also a means of preserving people's culture, enhancement of peace and conflict resolution in the society. Language is also used for regional integration, means of public enlightenment, debate and addressing socio-economic problems in the media. Unfortunately, some factors hinder the use of language for peace, conflict resolution and national development. These factors are high illiteracy level in the country, lack of local or indigenous language, poor recognition of indigenous language as people's culture and inadequate time in the media to address social problems using appropriate register that promote peace and national development. This paper therefore recommended the inclusion of indigenous national language in the school curriculum, implementation of mass education programme by the government through free education, the recognition of indigenous language as the most significant aspect of people's culture and the creation of enough time in the media to address social problems using appropriate registers that enhance peace and development.

Keywords: Language, Peace, Conflict, Resolution

Introduction

Language may be defined as a complex communication system of human involving sounds, symbols, signs and meaning used globally or universally to express thoughts, feelings, ideas, etc. among human beings. Suleiman, (2012) viewed language as "the expression of

communication of thoughts and feelings by means of vocal sounds, and the combination of such sounds to which meaning is attributed". According to Ajayi and Oyetayo as cited by Charles and Musa (2015), language is a veritable vehicle of interaction and a means of education through which human beings pass their culture from one generation to another. Language makes it possible for human beings to think together, feel together and to act together. Prasad (2009) viewed language as a "system of conventional, spoken or written symbols by means of which human beings as members of a social group and participants in its culture, communicate". Similarly, Anthony, Richard and Obiajulu (2016) defined language as a "system of structured arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which human beings make meaning and communicate with each other in a given community".

Going by the various definitions made, language can be referred to as a means of communication which has to do with the transfer of messages from the sender to the receiver with the intention of getting feedback. However, the concept of language based on this paper, connotes two meanings. The first meaning indicates the group that uses a particular language for expressing actions and inactions, intentions and demands for what they need at a given time or moment or the use of words that convey meanings to the intended expressions and understood only the user. This aspect of language represents good governance. The second indicates the use of words or expressions by

One of the things for which Nigeria is known is that it is a multi- ethnic society. The difference tribes and ethnic groups that make up the nation have their own languages. Thus, multi- lingualism is one of the defining features of Nigeria. Over the years, socio- linguistics have tried to estimate the number of languages spoken in Nigeria but, till date, no research findings have given the exact number. Nevertheless, there seems to be a consensus among

scholars that there are well over 520 indigenous languages in Nigeria. These languages have been in existence before the advent of English language here. However, today, the English language, which is a second language to many Nigerians, has assumed a domineering position among the hundreds of indigenous languages in Nigeria. The supremacy of the English language over the indigenous language is such that a good command of the language is seen as a proof of good education. Often times, when a graduate could not express himself in Standard English, either in written or oral form, his education is called to question. Besides, it is common place today to have a parent say, "We do not speak Hausa, Yoruba or Igbo in the house". Similarly, another version of this is "My children do not understand our native language". All these point to the prestige accorded to the English language in Nigeria.

However, since the amalgamation of the northern and the southern protectorate in Nigeria dated 1914, there have been direct and indirect crisis ranging from cultural practicing, religious to political quest. Even with the freedom granted that had led to the creation of 36 states of the federation, the worst of these anomalies persist and gradually becomes insecurity which seem to have eaten deeply into the fabric of our society. Some of the challenges of insecurity in Nigeria are caused by political leaders due to the quest for political attainment. Sometimes for the purpose of political status, they utter inflammatory and derogatory statements that cause violence and destruction just for the aim of shifting in political power from one region to another.

Language is a means of expressing thoughts and feelings Nnamani (2012). She states that human beings use language to structure and organize their experience in the society where they live. Odo (2003) defined language as something associated with what people do, eat, wear, produce, sell and buy. He stressed that there is hardly any human activities that is

not attributed or explainable to language. Achilike (2007) also remarks that language is appreciated as a means of preserving the people's culture and promoting national interest and unity. She therefore, defines language as human and non-instructive method of communicating ideas, feelings and desire by means of a system of sound, symbol used by a nation or race. She re-states that it is a system and a convention that characterize interaction of one or more communities of human being. Igboke (2001) remarks that language is a basis of communication and a major tool for a child's effective learning which begins from home to the school and even within the larger society where the same medium of language, cultural values are passed on from one generation to another Cohen (2001) ex-rays the value of language beyond communication. He states that it is also a window in which people organize both their understanding and expression of conflict, often in keeping with cultural patterns and ways of operation of a community. Hayakawa in Jija (2012) also states that language is of immense relevance to humanity and a crucial medium of information and effective conveyor of individual feelings on certain issues. He asserted that the tone of the voice and rhythm are important and effective element of language that are used in expressing feelings. The literature reviewed shows that language is the key for human existence. It is a way of expressing all human activities. Above all, language is a unifyingfactor especially in a heterogeneous community with diverse culture.

The Role of Language in Peace and Conflict Resolution

The role of language in peace and conflict resolution could only be appreciated when we recognize that language being an integral part of people's culture still stands out as a medium of interaction and ways of expressing thoughts and feelings in a society. Cohen (2010) gave more light on this assertion when he states that communal life is possible only

because members of community possess a set of shared meanings which enables them to make coherent sense of the world. He stated that this stock of meaning constitutes the common sense of the community and undermines all communication and organized activities. He stressed that mother tongue is the main repository of a community's common sense. He is also of the opinion that the other systems of symbolic meaning that characterize communities are religion, popular culture and non-verbal behaviour.

Since it is an indisputable fact that language is the key of all human activities, it is the main medium of explaining human socio-economic activities. It becomes imperative to accept that language is only instrument for peace and conflict resolution. Cohen (2001) threw more light on this when he stated that from the premise that language constitutes a community's shared stock of meaning, we can conclude that the study of language may provide an excellent entry point for investigating how members of a group understand and handle conflicts.

Seweje (2005) commenting on the role of language as peace, war and conflict resolution stated that language can cause war and breed peace. She remarked that having too many languages and diverse dialects within a nation can affect mutual co-existence and understanding and this may lead to conflict.

Seweje's statement above in addition to corruption seems to provide reasons for some ethnic crises and frequent social unrest in Nigeria. Kanola (2006) reiterated on this when he stated that today, rather than integrating into cohesive community, citizens of Nigeria are returning more and more to primordial affliction of forging a united front with a concerted effort to face the challenges of development in an increasing competitive and globalized world, Nigerians are busy waging ethnic andreligious war.

Ekere (2013) identified some major security problems in Nigeria to include armed robbery, kidnapping, Boko Haram insurgency, Niger Delta militancy. Jija (2012) also identified some places that had conflict to include Benue-Taraba crises, the Zongo and Kataf, Jos crises, the Aguleri and Umuleri crises.

Having seen some past and present waves of conflicts, how best could these conflicts be peacefully resolved or even further conflicts being prevented. The answer to the above 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, conciliation 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 in meaning 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 greaterthe 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 order words, what one expects of reconciliation will be determined by the local knowledge that informs his understanding of the term.

Since we acknowledge that the meaning of words are determined by the usage and connotation of the words, and languages do not exist in isolation as abstract systems of sign

but within the culture of the people, words, therefore, should be used to conform with the acceptable behaviour of a group. 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 languages that honours and respects human dignity, tolerance, truth and national integration.

Hayakawa in JiJa (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 an example with the use of words such as irresponsible, unguarded, arrogant, vandals, inferior as words capable of creating tension and fuel 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 properties.

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 community. Its usage determines the co-existence of a group. Orjime in 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. Also, commenting on the effect of language on human relationship. Akin in 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) re-iterated that all kinds of conflicts and pressure between one individual and another arise mostly from the usage of language.

Factors Preventing the use of Language for Peace and Conflict Resolution in Nigeria

Many Nigerians still operate at illiteracy level and this makes it difficult for them to communicate effectively with other ethnic groups in English language, the national language. Besides, Nigeria has not adopted any local language as national language and this makes communication between one ethnic group and the other difficult. It is important to note that in a heterogeneous community with diverse culture and language, communication gap or misconception of ideas usually leads to conflict. Bamgbose (1992) stressed on the above

assertion when he stated that differences between languages keep people apart, encourage ethnic hostilities weaken national loyalties and increase the danger of sentiment. Ochochaba in Osam and Ekpo also remarks that culture of peace (language) brings together an atmosphere marked by intercultural understanding, tolerance and solidarity.

The supreme roles of English language as medium of instruction, language of trade, industry and national language, international language have helped to create low recognition of local languages such as Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa language as languages that do not have the same magnitude with English language as medium of communication, instrument for achieving peace and socio economic development of a community. The relegation of local language to a dustbin seems to be more noticeable in Igbo speaking communities who would always like to speak the language of colonization, the Queen's English.

The non-functional civics education in our school curriculum contributes to many moral delinquency in our society. Civics education enlightens people on the acceptable mode of behaviour especially when appropriate linguistic register is used as the medium of discourse.

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 the society. In view of the importance of language in socio-economic development of a nation, it should be given a pride of place in the school curriculum through effective teaching and learning.

Recommendations

Based on the discussion above, the following recommendations were made as follow;

- There is need for mass literacy programme in Nigeria. Government should make education tuition free from primary to secondary schools to enable those living in penury to embrace formal education and acquire the skills on the usage of languages.

- There is need for a local national language in the school curriculum. The local national language will not only foster common sense of identity, integration but will also create unity in diversity.

- Enough time should be created in the media for the use of languages to address social problems that bring conflict and lawlessness in the society.

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