
LANGUAGE AND CULTURE AS CONFLICT RESOLUTION TOOLS: RETHINKING ENGLISH AS LINGUA FRANCA

Chika Glory Opara

Federal University of Technology Owerri

ABSTRACT: *Language as a structure of meaning giving and reality creation is composed of words, phrases and sentences. Humans' communications are based on these features to describe an event, explain one's emotions, needs, interests and fears etc. Language is used to resolve or escalate dispute. People from different culture and social units perceive the world through the lens provided by their distinctive languages. Meaning that language provides repertoire of words that name the categories into which the language users have divided their world. In fact, definitions of words are linguistically, culturally and contextually bound. This is because words carry meanings that make sense to members of a shared social environment. Dispute resolution relies heavily on words (language). However, there is an underlying assumption in Nigeria that all these words should be in English – the second language. The researcher posits that if English is to be a conflict resolution tool in Nigeria. It must accommodate the diversity of culture and language usage. The paper therefore explores the challenges of English language in intercultural conflict resolution, and emphasizes the need to consider the different uses of the language in national and transnational conflict resolution.*

KEYWORDS: **Language, Culture, Conflict Resolution, English , Lingua Franca**

INTRODUCTION

Language and culture not only bring meanings to the world, but also shape one's cognitive process, such as perception, interpretation and judgment. Krocher and Kluckhohn (1962) affirms that language embodies the spirit of people who speak it; that grammatical forms have influence on the development of ideas. The language spoken by somebody and their identity as speakers of that language is inseparable. This fact must have prompted the claims in Leonard and Law (2004) that language acts, are acts of identity. Language reflects culture and language and culture combined are major components of social identity.

The link between language, culture and identity is often so strong that a single phonemic feature suffices to identify someone's membership in a giving group. For instance, on the battle field after their victory over the people of Ephraim the Gilead applied language test to sort out friends and foes of the nation. All the soldiers were asked to pronounce "shibboleth" those who pronounced the first consonant as /s/ were friends, those who pronounced it as /S/ were enemies and therefore killed (Judges 112 V6). In fact a single phonemic feature may be sufficient to resolve an issue, include or exclude someone from any social group. Again the Nigeria identity as "Niger" reveals those whose intonation (speech) sounds like any of the dialects in Nigeria – Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Effik, and Ibibio among others. Most often the reference "Igbo man" "Yoruba man" "Hausa man" etc meant more than naming, it sets the frame within which the relationship will start and progress. It implies both that they are different from us and we are different from them. All these mind-frames are often bounded by one's social and cultural upbringing.

Over the years the field of cognitive linguistics had demonstrated that language influences peoples' thought, feeling, reasoning and ways of communication in everyday life (Triands, 1995). Many abstract concepts are inherently structured to varying degrees by language and metaphors arising from recurring embodied experience in the cultural world.

In the famous linguistic relatively theory, the prominent linguist Sapir-Whorf affirms that beneath the surfaces of the iceberg of word that we use in everyday communication lays a complex and intriguing set of interactive ingredients that make up a language. We express our knowledge, using language we also gain meaning using language. According to Sapir-Whorf 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. According to Froman (1992), there are obvious disadvantages to imposing a language and restricting the use of a foreign language in conflict resolution. In his book entitled "Language and Power" Froman stressed; 'those who control language control what knowledge, meaning and reality are taken to be, power is located in the linguistics system which we are members'. Hence in a multicultural and multi lingual society that we now live in, we often take language for granted by using English as a tool for negotiation and conflict resolution.

Indeed the English language allows communication to occur across national boundaries. It plays a crucial role in facilitating dialogue across cultures and nationalities. Yet it entails the promotion of one language (English) and culture (western, individualistic culture) at the expense of others, the implication is the homogenization of world culture and language. The researcher observed that the use of English language in national and transnational conflict resolutions is not only hegemonic but also ethnocentric.

Language, Culture and Conflict

For the purpose of this study we adopt Tidwell (1998) definition of language as an external behavior that allows the identification of a speaker as a member of some group. For example a native speaker of English will identified Nigerians as foreigners by their ways of speech. Livine and Adelman (1993) defined culture as a shared organization of ideas that include the intellectual, moral and aesthetic standard prevalent in a community and the meaning of communicative actions. Triands (1995) declared that the process of enculturation, lays the foundation for shaping our minds' frame and defining what is appropriate, what is inappropriate, what is good; what is rude or polite, and what is right or wrong, this is very important in determining the policy for conflict resolution and its process. Thus cultural values can narrow or broaden one's perceptions of an event, focus and diffuse ones sense of logic or discard certain information as irrelevant.

Conflict is defines here as contentions involving real or apparent fears, interest and values, in which goals of the opposing group must be opposed, or at least neutralized to protect one's own interest –prestige employment and political power etc- Huntington (1996). This paper posits that ignoring or denying linguistic and cultural diversity in global conflict resolution and implementation is not only a problematic issue but could also perpetuate a system imbalance. This needs to be addressed and considered. Thus in National conflict resolution the idea of using English as the international language could be a form of power given to the English speaking countries.

The Roles of Language and Culture in Conflict Resolution

Language plays a crucial role in causing and resolving conflict. Culture has an influence on communication in in-group and out-group relationships. Culture forms one's values, norms and style in managing conflict. People tend to tolerate, listen, understand and co-operative with those who have similar values and belief system. Most often some intercultural conflict are resolved when the parties realize that their perceptions of divergent interest are erroneous. Misunderstanding is usually aggravated by the fact that one person/party underestimates or is ignorant of the range of value systems or misinterprets the norms that exist in different cultures and social environments. Leonard and Law (2004:16) noted that in a context of international conflict, perceptions of and emotional reactions to an event could be bound by one's social-cultural assumptions. Many scholars claimed that interpretations of an event are bound by social-linguistic perceptions. In fact, cultural variation has an impact on motivation, cognition and behavior of citizen in dispute resolution.

Similarly, language plays a crucial role in causing and resolving conflicts. The manipulation of language in communication can often strengthen or weaken group solidarity. It can also be used to categorize individuals into in-group members. For instance, it will be difficult for the native English speakers to negotiate on equal terms with the non natives.

The prominent linguists Sapir-Whorf emphasised that language influences thought processes. According to the source, individuals from different cultural and social units perceive the world through the lens provided by their unique vocabulary. Sapir-Whorf further explains that those who are monolingual, bilingual or multilingual that is, people from multi-cultural nations like China, Nigeria, and India etc place greater emphasis on maintaining relationship, particularly long term relationships than people from monolingual and from individualistic culture. (cf Butter & 2002). In other words Nigerians perceive relationship differently from the Aglo-Westerns. 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. At these occasions Schwartz (2000) declared 'we are convinced that dialogue represents a new paradigm of security, especially in 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.

Case Study on Nigeria English

English language in Nigeria is a second language because Nigerians already had their first language or mother tongue (L1) before the acquisition of a second language – English. In this instance the English language left it's native environment and met with Nigeria indigenous languages. Language is culture" (cf Tidwel; 1998) and they are inseparable. When two languages met, then two cultures had met. There are bound to be divergences in such societies – divergences that will affect the culture and the language of the speech community and these have to be considered in any international dialogue in bilingual and multilingual settings.

The English language is a second language in Nigeria. It is a visiting language which has been converted and nativised by Nigerians to suit their communicative needs. The question of what language is to be used in international conflict resolution, and who controls that language are thus of fundamental importance.

Many scholars claim that English is the world language. But to describe English in such terms ignores the fact that majorities of the world's citizen do not speak English as the first language. There are many varieties of English. People who use English as their second language often read and write English differently from native speakers. For instance, the Nigerian expression *I want to ease myself* does not exist in British English. Again if the native English speaker wants to impute that another person has an undue corrupt advantage he speaks of the later having *a long arm*. While Nigerian usage would subscribe to his having *long leg*. Thus for English language to be used as a universal tool it has to accommodate the diversity of language.

Beneath the surface of the iceberg of worlds that we use in every day communication, lays a complex and intriguing set of interactive ingredients that make up a language. We express our knowledge and feeling using language. We also gain meanings using language. Beyond the surface meaning of individual words are deeper semantic meaning hidden behind phrases and expressions. Furthermore, the following expression familiar to western native speakers will be completely confusing to non-native speakers-Nigerians who may speak fluent English. In the same vein some expressions in Nigeria may also be regarded as uncultured within western English speaking community; example:

Hang in there- (An American meaning of 'keep trying and don't give up')

Belt up-(An Anglicanism meaning, 'shut up')

Bob's you under!-(An Anglicanism meaning, 'it has been accomplished')

Coffee money (Singaporean English mainly 'a small bribe')

Yellow culture-(Singaporean English –meaning 'pornography' (Butter 2002)

Similarly in Nigerian context most expression has deep meaning for instance:

We will look into it-(Nigerian English-we will handle the problem)

Government pipeline (Nigerian English – "Government next point of action.

Peace talk- (Nigerian English- settling conflict through dialogue).

Let me land (Nigeria English – let me conclude).

More so, studies on Nigeria cognition observed that Nigerians are strongly influenced to be respectful and obedient to elders at home or at work. The presence of an elder invokes respectful and obedient behavior. Such norms guide the planning and execution of activities in the country. Again Nigerians have collective tendencies, but those from English speaking countries such as England, Australia, North America, etc have individualistic tendencies. The prominent linguist Sapir-Whorf notes that those who are monolingual, bilingual and multilingual see the world differently. This is because people create word to describe things or concepts that are significant in their environment, for instance there are twenty five words for snow in the intuited languages for the ESKIMOS (of Trains 1995).

Ting and Oetzel (1999) emphasised the importance of applying the concept of culture in understanding conflict. According to the source, difference in value placement between cultures has profound consequences in relationships and management of conflicts. Misconception can occur when disputants assume that something of great importance to them is automatically insignificant to the other party. Conflicts are culturally, linguistically and contextually bound. Words carry meanings that may only make sense to members of a shared social environment. There are words that do not have an exact equivalent in the other language. Translations of words usually offer approximate glosses, not an exact equivalent. Thus the notion that English serves as a neutral lingual Franca is therefore a dangerous myth. In fact conflict resolution using English as international

language could be a form of power given to the English speaking parties. The implication is that human conflict resolution process may become ineffective due to lack of neutrality in language.

CONCLUSION

Language and culture are effective tools for conflict resolution. This is because interpretations of events are bound by socio-cultural and sociolinguistic perceptions. We express knowledge and feelings using language. It is often claimed that English is bringing the world together, by increasing communication over geographical barriers, the question is, is this communication homogenous or does it favor one culture over another? If English language is to be used as a tool for transnational conflict it must accommodate the diversity of language usage. An effective conflict resolution tool should take cultural and linguistic factors into consideration. English language must be structured in such a way that it can enhance cultural awareness, because it takes more than fluency in English to negotiate one's interests' successfully. Thus the notion of fairness, neutrality, cultural and linguistic awareness should be managed well if English language is to be used as the global tool in managing dispute across national borders.

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