

The Language Factor and the Peace Agenda: A Reaffirmation

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Abstract

Since interaction between humans takes place through communication and language being the major channel for communication, it can easily be said that language is indispensable in human development. Yet one of the negative recurrent elements in human interaction is the tendency to have disagreements mostly triggered by the wrong use of language. Conflicts are essential components of social life. They can be observed in family tussles, domestic emotional spats, communal disagreements, inter-tribal differences, etc. When a dispute arises, often the best course of action is negotiation to resolve the disagreement. Conflict resolution is a way for two or more parties to find a peaceful solution to a disagreement among them. This article explores the role of language in shaping the way our conflicts unfold and are resolved. It examines the functions of language in conflict and how the different communicative acts relate to speakers' motivational goals and conflict outcome. It considers different forms of cue response sequences and their role in managing information exchange and structuring relationships in conflicts. It also examines how episodes of language might escalate a conflict or move it towards a resolution. It then explores the link between speech management, thought and verbal expression, showing that basic language choices have a profound effect on the other party's perception and the cooperation that ensues. It finally explains how to better use language to resolve or avoid conflicts.

Key words: Interaction, Disagreement, Conflict, Speech management, Resolution

Introduction

As the main tool for communication, language has always played the role of developing the human race. From the process of education through that of society building and promotion of culture and civilization down to technological advancement and improvement on the quality of life, language remains both a development tool when properly applied and a disintegrating element when poorly applied.

What defines humanity is language, a vehicle of communication emitted either verbally, non-verbally or in writing. Language has been variously defined. But the diverse definitions have a common feature: that it is an indispensable factor in human development.

The Advanced Learner's Dictionary (5th Edition, 1995), defines language as *a system of sounds and words used by humans to express their thoughts and feelings*. According to Kwofie (2000:17):

Language helps to express interpersonal relations and the "inner world" of the user's consciousness,

the ideational, the experience of the speaker. It is vital to human life and is man's most important and most efficient way of communicating.

Hjelmslev (1968:9-10) aptly observes that language is "the ultimate and deepest foundation of human society, the instrument by means of which man fashions his thoughts, feelings, emotions and actions. It is a wonderful vehicle for expression of ideas, wishes, commands, conveyance of truths and lies, etc."

A human group literally cannot cooperate in most circumstances without a common language. Language remains indispensable in this world of words and continued eruption of conflicts or disputes. In its social role or function, language has the characteristic of a double-edged sword especially in circumstances of crisis or conflict. Its misapplication is a sure way of bringing about disharmony and by extension, underdevelopment. When carefully and democratically used, language brings about cooperation, harmony and progress. People engage in communication for many reasons and for the purpose of this paper, we shall examine

the roles and function of language as one of the non-violent methods of conflict resolution.

Conflict in Perspective

A conflict arises when people develop varied interests, opinions and thought processes and are just not willing to compromise with each other. It is seen as the pursuit of incompatible interests and goals by different groups. The search for causes of conflict and ways and means of avoiding or resolving it have engendered the use of such terms as peace-making, conflict prevention, and so on. These gestures are realized through the language channel by way of discussions and suggestions. Language therefore remains a tool for managing and resolving disagreements. Language-oriented non-violent methods of management and resolution of conflicts include negotiation, dialogue, mediation, adjudication, arbitration as well as the use of the mass media. Language thus serves as the base for finding out the root causes, effects and then managing and resolving conflicts in the society.

Patterns of Language Use

Symbolically, most world leading languages, like individuals, are made up of parts that work in agreement for comprehension to take place. In the French language, for instance, there is the *accord*, which means agreement, where the parts of speech do agree so as to make sense. In the sentence: **Le garçon et la fille sont des enfants de Dieu.** (The boy and the girl are children of God), the parts of speech agree one with the other. The nominal subject (**le garçon** (**le**, masc. article, (the), **garçon**, masc. noun (boy) and **la fille** (**la**, fem. article, (the), **fille**, fem. noun, (girl), the plural **le garçon** and **la fille** (**ils**, they) agree with the verb (**sont**, are) (also plural) so is the complement (**des enfants** (plural) **de Dieu**) (the determinant and the noun both marked with the plural 's' at the end (children of God). Without this agreement, the sentence becomes grammatically meaningless. Such agreement is also possible among humans. To agree, all that is required is the proper application of language, choosing words that are appropriate, friendly, kind, and correct, in the course of interaction.

In a broader perspective, the basis of much of the psychological research on language and conflict is the patterns of language use where there

is the distinction between competitive and cooperative language in communication. Competitive language, when applied in conflict situations, is characterized by behaviors such as justifications, irrelevant arguments, personal attacks, excessive demands and threats. In contrast, cooperative language is associated with behaviors such as proposals and counterproposals, agreements, expressions of confidence in the other's ability and humor. A person's use of these two forms of communication is dependent on the individual's orientation to the conflict. The use of competitive language is associated with a focus on self and a motivation to maximize personal outcome even at the expense of the other party. On the other hand, the use of cooperative language is associated with a focus on fairness and a desire to find ways to satisfy the needs of all parties. Cooperative language tends to promote conflict resolution and increases efforts to identify solutions that benefit both parties while competitive language is associated with conflict spiraling and a failure to identify areas of common ground.

The extent to which these orientations in communication are used during a conflict has been found to depend on a range of factors. These include person factors such as culture and individual differences, and situational factors such as power differences and emotions. However, the associations between language and outcome are not clear-cut. On some occasions, the use of cooperative language has negative consequences, such as when a shrewd counterpart takes advantage of a cooperator's goodwill. Similarly, in certain low-stake scenarios, use of competitive language such as expressions of anger, may lead to preferential outcomes, at least for self. Yet in high-stake scenarios, the use of aggressive language often leads to reciprocal aggression and conflict spiraling. Thus, depending on the context, the use of cooperative and competitive language does play a determinant role in resolving a conflict.

Approaches in Resolving or Avoiding Conflicts

It is assumed that most conflict situations arise as a result of perceptions, assumptions, stereotype attitudes as well as remarks which have been built up by the parties over time. Unfortunately, most of the times when matters which focus on conflicts

are discussed, little or no consideration is given to how the use of language affects the outcome of such misunderstandings and as stated by Timothy-Asobele (2010), “misunderstanding most often leads to war.” For instance, the escalation of the Niger Delta crisis in Nigeria which erupted since 2000, was traced to socio-economic factors such as the demand for commensurate rewards for the exploration of oil and its attendant hazards experienced in the area. These legitimate demands were supported with inflammatory expressions, threats and concomitant violent attacks on pipelines and other oil exploration facilities. It took the then Head of State, Musa Yar’Adua, a measure of wise palliative comments to assuage the grievances of the insurgents. While addressing the issue, the President applied fine words, such as “dialogue towards amnesty,” “lay down arms and engage in discussions to resolve the issue,” “you are potential contributors towards the country’s development; training programs are to be organized for you both locally and overseas to enable you acquire skills, improve your personal economies and contribute towards the advancement of your fatherland.” That was how excellent use of words brought about the successful handling of the Niger-Delta imbroglio at that time. The central word proposed as the solution to the crisis was “participation,” a term that was acceptable to all since it captured the desire of the agitators. The stakeholders and shareholders, the youths, the elders, are to be carried along in the unfolding events and they are to participate fully in the discussions, dialogue, mediation, adjudication, interpretation of the problems and together proffer solution to them.

Compare that scenario with a situation sometime earlier when someone in a similar position rather than engage in discussions with the agitators, issued an order to the army to descend on the community destroying both human and materials on ground. Later, a meeting was called to douse the tension and then language was used to conduct the exchanges which brought about peace in the area. The question is, why was the exchanges not undertaken at the initial stage which would have prevented the loss of life and property that had resulted?

Another personality in the same office faced

with another agitation, reacted by stating that “these ones are just like a drop of water in an ocean.” Of course, the people had to react by shutting down their area from others within the country on a particular day every week. It is clear that application of fine language remains the best workable option in tackling conflicts.

A one-time President of France, General de Gaulle won the heart of the entire former French colonies by the very endearing words he used in addressing subjects of these nations. He called them “My Children” and the Heads of State of these countries were addressed by him as “My Sons” and with this approach there was scarcely any disagreement between himself and these sovereign states. He always requested them to feel free to come to him at any time they had issues bothering them.

Under normal circumstances, a statement such as “Don’t be stupid” could mean a friendly advise when rendered with a smile, but when used in a yelling tone, certainly becomes an insult. Rather than saying “don’t be stupid,” why not use “be wise?” We all agree that the latter expression is more peaceful though the sense may appear the same. There are many examples of soft and friendly expressions that are available for our use, if our objective is to seek peace whenever there is a disagreement.

Choice of Words

Linguistically, the lexicon of many world languages, and especially English and French are replete with words that have several homonyms and synonyms and many milder counterparts to the inflammatory ones. Selection of the friendlier options from this lot for any situation will provide positive reactions that would make for peaceful co-existence. In effect, the distinction between competitive and cooperative language is a broad one that captures a person’s overall orientation to conflict. Consider a case of a land dispute between two families of the same community. One of the parties accused the head of the other family of encroaching on his land and went ahead to address him as “a shameless thief who has been stealing people’s property.” The other party was the peaceful type. Rather than join issues with the man, he decided to approach the Chief of their community who knows the history of that

piece of land. The accusing party was invited and the chief confirmed to him that the man he is accusing was the rightful owner of the land. The issue was thus resolved though the tradition required that the accuser pay a reasonable sum as fine for labeling the other a thief, without any evidence.

Examining the words used by this accuser will reveal that the matter would have been settled without the intervention of the chief if the accusing party had used more friendly words on the other party. In the place of “shameless thief who has been stealing people’s property,” he could have simply stated: “you have encroached on my land, can I have it back?” In this case, even if he had requested the intervention of their chief, it would not have resulted in the imposition of a fine on the accuser. When Opara (2016) said that “language is used to resolve or escalate dispute,” the implication is that there are forms of language that often led to the escalation of disagreements and other forms that would lead to resolution of the disagreement.” Session (2017) agrees with 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 condemn, blackmail, insult, destroy, tell lies, claim or falsify, to despise, abuse and to generate violence. It can also be used to prevent all of the above.”

The peaceful option will always win any day.

Language Intensity

Another important facet to consider when examining the nature of language in conflict is the role of language intensity. This aspect of language is often overlooked in studies that examine utterance content alone rather than content alongside the form of delivery. High intensity dialogue includes anger and threats, profanity, obscure metaphors, dramatic changes in intonation, and so on. For instance, relentlessly threatening action if a demand is not met signifies a high degree of one-sided concern for a substantive issue, and does not allow communication to consider alternative possibilities. Similarly, leaders of ideologically

motivated groups tend to increase their expressions of anger, contempt, and disgust in public speeches immediately before acts of violence. Interestingly, while strategic use of intensity can direct the other party’s attention to an issue of personal concern and can enhance message clarity, overuse of language intensifiers can reduce the credibility of an argument, particularly when this use contravenes the receiver’s expectations.

Pinkley (1990) states that:

Individuals are shown to adopt an avoidant, competitive or cooperative orientation to interaction and, sometimes, pursue either identity, instrumental or relational goals with varying degrees of intensity. As such they progress through a conflict, ideally towards a cooperative interaction.

Over time within a conflict, dialogue may be characterized as being focused on the different areas of the subject matter as the only means of regaining peace. On some occasions, for example, a couple may yell abuse and insults as they thrash out competitive-identity related issues. When they discuss their child, however, they may revert to more cooperative, instrumental behavior as they seek to do what’s best for the child. The subject-matter structure highlights other important aspects of the nature of language in conflict.

Language and Conflict Management

Disagreement management plays a very important role in preventing conflicts among individuals. A conflict starts when individuals think on different lines and find it very difficult to accept each other’s ideas. Conflict must be avoided as it destroys the peace, lowers productivity as well as de-motivates individuals. All the factors leading to a fight must be explored and efforts must be made to prevent or to contain them by proper use of language. It must be added that a conflict is not very easy to control; individuals need certain skills to do so. Let us study some of the skills, beginning with possible better options in expressions available for use for peace to reign in place of some inflammatory ones.

Expression

You are a liar
You are a thief
You are mad
Don't be stupid
Get away from my sight
I will deal with you
You are a betrayer
You are so dumb
You are so corrupt
You are wicked

Better Option

What you said is not exactly correct
You have with you something belonging to someone else
I think your action is rather unusual
Be wise
I wish to be left alone
I may have to react seriously about this
My trust in you is shaken
You need to do more
Be more careful in using what is entrusted to you
Be a little kinder

We can see that none of these options can easily ignite a disagreement or escalate a misunderstanding. It is advisable that we explore more of such friendly options in our choice of words while interacting with others especially when tension begins to rise over an argument.

Effective communication Skills

Effective communication skills are of utmost importance to prevent conflicts. While interacting with others, one has to take special care of one's speech and the way one speaks. Never ever shout at anyone, even if you do not agree with him. Always speak in a polite but convincing manner. Greet others with a warm smile. Be very specific and precise in your choice of words. Do not use complicated words and confuse others. Keep a control on your tongue and do not use words which might hurt the sentiments of others. Avoid using abusive language.

An individual must not give his expert comments unless and until he is very clear what the other person wants. Always be a good listener. Don't just jump into conclusions and assume things on your own. Always listen to the other side of the story as well.

Don't just follow the rumor mills blindly, do discuss with others as well. Differences can crop up anytime but fighting would provide no solution. It is always better to sit and discuss the issues in an open forum. All the participants must make their inputs and efforts must be made to find out a ground for agreement. Invite all the members involved and never ignore anyone as it would never solve the problem. Everyone has a right to express his views and a middle way has to be found.

One needs to be very patient to avoid conflicts. There would be people at your work-place and even at your home who would try to provoke you to fight. Never ever get influenced. Always follow your instincts and support what is right. Be very sensible and patient. Learn to keep a control on your emotions. Do not ever lose your temper as it would only make the situation worse.

An individual has to be impartial to avoid conflicts. Do not always support your friend. Stand by what is correct and never support what is wrong. Any individual, even if he is your friend must be corrected if you feel he is wrong. Listen to everyone and never ignore anyone just because you don't know him.

Make the other person understand if he is wrong. Don't criticize him as it would definitely hurt his sentiments. The other person might not be as intelligent as you are, but you have no right to make fun of him. Others will look up to you if you guide the other person well and make him realize his mistakes.

Positive attitude is essential to avoid fights and conflicts. In offices, never ever play the blame game. No one is perfect and if you have done anything wrong, have the courage to accept it. Human beings are bound to make mistakes but never try to put the blame on anyone else's shoulders. Avoid backbiting as it only spoils relationships. If you don't agree with anyone's views, discuss with him personally, he will like it. Don't always find faults in others and be a little more adjusting as life is all about adjustments.

Individuals must try to adopt the middle path approach which considers the interests of one and all. Don't unnecessarily waste your energy on a

person who is too adamant and is not willing to compromise at all. Ignore the person who is too demanding as it would only solve part of the problem.

Traditional Peace Process

The use of fine language in conflict resolution is not limited to the conventional methods of dialogue, mediation, arbitration or adjudication. The African or traditional means of settling disputes within communities is replete with communicative words of wisdom that encourage people to pursue peace at all times. In some states of the country, governments have established Peace Advocate Corps that are charged with the responsibility of conflict resolution. The use of language in communicating in this setting is an enabling factor in convincing the opposing parties to accept amicable settlement the traditional way rather than resorting to the use of the police and the law court. The first incentive of this approach is its neutrality and then its thorough physical investigation of claims of the parties after the matter had undergone the various processes of being first reported to the elders of the community, the village head and then to the traditional ruler. Where an impasse persists, the conflict resolution team would be called upon. According to Ohagwa (2018):

People should adopt the African way of conflict resolution. They should avoid rushing to the police stations on civil matters that should be resolved amicably by kinsmen according to tradition. When one reports the other to the police over a civil matter, the police will arrest the defendant after which a bail will be granted when the requirement is satisfied. In some cases, after the bail, the police either refer the matter to the kinsmen for settlement or the fellow is rearrested and the parties try to outsmart each other and at the end instead of resolving the differences, an enmity is created between the parties and the problem escalates and sooner or

later, the individuals or families involved perpetually live with hatred between them. In Igbo tradition, when there is a conflict in the family or between communities, the matter is referred to the kindred elders. If they could not settle it, the matter is presented to the village head who, if there is a failure in arriving at a settlement, further refers it to the community traditional ruler who with the Nzes, custodians of the tradition of the communities and restorers of peace, would endeavor to find a solution to the imbroglio. If these avenues yield results that are not satisfactory to all the parties, the matter is brought to the Conflict Resolution Bureau, where every effort would be made to arrive at an amicable settlement.

The success of this unorthodox method of conflict resolution is hinged on excellent application of language that inspires all and sundry to accept the path of peace and amicable settlement. Needless to say that proper use of language through excellent choice of words play a vital role in attempts towards maintaining peaceful co-existence.

Opara (2016) 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 on fire. Leech (1981) re-iterated that all kinds of conflicts and pressure between one individual and another arise mostly from the usage of language. Therefore, proper use of language is a *sine qua non* to peace in everyday life.

Conclusion

There are no sacrosanct language strategies for settling disputes the world over. Experience, cognitive abilities, unquestionable personalities, tolerance, coupled with effective communication are what many conflict researchers consider as

foremost in mediating on conflict resolution. However, some language and communicative strategies are practiced during dialogue, negotiation, arbitration, etc. The same must be practiced as a daily habit during interaction with one another so as to maintain cordiality and friendliness at all times. The common language in all conflict situations should be that of peace – kind words that assuage, encourage and pacify.

Expressions such as ... *please, kindly consider, I appreciate your stand, you are right on this ...* are harmless but encouraging expressions that if applied habitually would prevent hostility and keep conflicts at bay, and where there is a conflict, this approach together with others highlighted in this work would certainly pave the way for peaceful settlement.

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