

ROLE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Basically, language is a repository or reservoir or custodian of peoples' culture, personality or idiosyncrasy. It also has the capacity to influence social change as it mirrors culture and reflects thought pattern. It is therefore safe to say that language could play a very significant role in crisis management since it also plays a similar role as a major avenue or channel of communication. Conflict itself or crisis is as old as society itself. There has always been rebellion, anarchy, bloodshed and war. In Nigeria for example, each ethnic group has always been at one another's throat. The two major religions in Nigeria not only hate each other but are perpetually having mutual mistrust and suspicion against each other. Again, the above mentioned scenario has metamorphosed into the birth or creation of very militant and belligerent militia groups in Nigeria, each championing the course of its own ethnic group. They include the Odua People's Congress (OPC), representing the Yoruba Nation; the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), for the Igbo Nation and the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) for the Hausa/Fulani. Among the groups that have been associated with violence in Nigeria include the Boko Haram, the Shiite Movement and the Herders. The existence of these and other groups in Nigeria is an indication of a country under the strangle-hold of conflict. No country is without conflicts, hence, conflicts cannot be wiped out but can be mitigated. One weapon for doing this, to our mind, is the use of indigenous language as a tool for conflict resolution. The means through which indigenous languages can achieve this feat is what this paper will unravel.

Keywords: Indigenous language, Conflicts, Conflict resolution

Introduction

Language according to Okpara, et al, (2012), is a system through which human beings use arbitrary signs and symbols to express feelings, thoughts and ideas. In other words, it is a human instrument of expression through sounds. No matter how language is defined, a common idea that runs through is that "communicating ideas within a social context is one of the chief ends of a language", (Okpara et al 2012: 1).

Language therefore embodies the spirit of people who speak it. The language somebody speaks and his identity is inseparable, hence, according to Leonard and Law (2004), language acts are acts of identity. Language reflects culture and when both come together, form a major component of social identity. Culture is therefore, a shared organization of ideas that include the intellectual, moral and aesthetic standard prevalent in a community. Thus, according to them, the process of acculturation lays the foundation for shaping our minds' frame and defines what is appropriate or not, good or not, rude or not and what is right or not. This is very important in determining conflict resolution policy and process. Still on culture and language, Amaechi (2015) brings in mother tongue or indigenous language which according to him, is the language spoken by people who belong to the

same language community or linguistic group. A language spoken at birth or arterial language. The role of language especially indigenous language as a tool for conflict resolution could only be comprehended or valued against the background of seeing language as an integral part of people's culture. It is a tool for expressing thoughts and feelings. According to Cohen (2010) members of a community possess a set of shared meaning, which enables them to make coherent sense of the word. He posits that this stock of meaning constitutes the common sense of the community and undermines all communication and organized activities. Again he stresses that mother tongue is the main repository of a community's common sense. Still on language and conflict resolution, Cohen (2010) concludes that as long as language is the key to all human activities, especially at the communal level, and as long as it is the main medium of explaining human socio-economic activities, as long as it is an integral part of the community culture, then it becomes imperative to accept indigenous language as the only instrument for peace and conflict resolution.

According to Amaechi, (2015) indigenous language or arterial language refers to the language a person has learnt from birth or within the critical period, or that a person speaks best, and so is often the basis for sociolinguistic identity. According to Lloyd (2013), it is the language of one's ethnic group, rather than one's first language. According to him, there can be more than one mother tongue, for example, when a child's parents speak different languages, in which case, the child is bilingual. Furthermore, he explains that the indigenous language is the language a person is proficient in as a native of that languages base country or is proficient in as the average person who speaks no other language but that particular language.

According to Huntington (1996) conflicts are contentions, quarrels, disagreements, involving real or apparent fears, interest and values in which goals of the opposing groups must be opposed or at least neutralized to protect one's own interest, prestige, employment, political power, etc.

Conflict resolution refers to the removal of the root causes of a conflict and the progression, transformation or amelioration of the relation between the parties involved in the conflict. Truth, justice, and objectivity are veritable tools for sustaining peace. Resolution may involve a third party through negotiation, mediation or arbitration. According to Miller (2003) conflict resolution is a variety of approaches aimed at terminating conflicts through constructive problem-solving approaches, rather than just management or transformation of conflicts. Miall (1999) is of the opinion that through conflict resolution, it is expected that the sources of the conflict which are deep-rooted, will have been redressed and resolved. Again behaviours will have been rendered non-violent and attitudes less hostile. Therefore, conflict resolution connotes a sense of finality in the sense that the gladiators would be satisfied with the outcome of the settlement.

Causes and Faces of Conflicts

The major known causes of conflicts in Nigeria are not far-fetched. They include religious intolerance, political instability, economic hardship, embezzlement of public funds by government officials, looting, racial discrimination, gender inequality, marginalization, unbalanced allocation of resources, non-payment of salaries, self determination, minimum wage and nepotism. Others are disunity, mutual suspicion, fear of dominance, poor demarcation of borders etc. There are numerous faces of conflicts in Nigeria, ranging from herdsmen-farmers clashes, youth restiveness, industrial

actions, students' riots, religious riots, military-civillian clashes, boko haram, gunmen's attacks etc. However, our opinion in this paper is that conflicts are whirlwinds that do no one any good.

Stakeholders should be proactive in settling disputes before they snowball to full-blown crisis. There can never be any development (either socially, economically or politically) in an atmosphere of crisis. Peace is priceless and must be maintained, no matter what. As a matter of fact, incidence of crisis in Nigeria has led to the emergence, along ethnic lines, of such militant and belligerent groups as the Arewa People's Congress (APC) which is northern based, Odua People's Congress (OPC) which is western-based and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), which is eastern-based. Others are Ijaw People's Congress (IPC), the Niger Delta Patriotic Front (NDPF) etc. It is unfortunate that in Nigeria, there's mutual suspicion and outright hatred among the ethnic conflagrations. Each one is at each other's throat while Muslims and Christians do not see eye to eye. The Hausas, Igbos and Yorubas live like cat and dog.

Impact of Crisis on Society

When two elephants fight, the grass suffers. Crises in different parts of Nigeria have led to the death of thousands of people and loss of houses and farmlands. Presently, there are uncountable Internally Displaced People's (IDP) camps nationwide. It has also created so many orphans, widows, and widowers. Nigeria's population has no doubt been affected by these man-made carnages. Above all, it has affected the economy greatly, thereby reducing our Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Huge sums of money which should have been channeled to other areas are spent fighting insurgency. In worst hit areas, people have lost their jobs, their ancestral homes and their homes. They sleep with one eye open. Above all, the high rate of unemployment in Nigeria is attributable to crisis, according to Miall, et al (1999).

Role of Indigenous Languages in Crisis Resolution

There seems to be a very heavy relationship between society and language. Language cuts deep into life and in language, life realities are perceived, hence, language, especially; indigenous language is a strong tool for conflict resolution, (Atolagbe, 2004).

According to him, this is especially so, when the two or more contenders or gladiators understand very well the context of the language in resolving the conflict. Even the mediators in that conflict ought to have a mastery of the target language before they can play a major role in the resolution of conflicts. According to him, the mediator must also point out consideration factors such as social status, gender, age into consideration as well as fashion out appropriate registers if he wants to bring lasting peace to crisis- torn communities. Both linguistic and communicative competence are ingredients in this regard. Elders play a major role in conflict resolution, using indigenous languages as media. This is because these senior citizens are versed and experienced in the use of idioms, figurative expressions, proverbs, folklores etc. They also rank very high in both language and communicative competence. Local language (which rural dwellers cherish more) should be used to preach in churches and mosques for peaceful co-existence.

According to Atolagbe (2004), citizens are more at home, listening to mediators who articulate their views or who preach peace in their own languages rather than English. This is because in the process of translating, meaning is lost significantly. In most cases the interpreter interprets wrongly.

Furthermore, Cohen (2010) again throws more light on indigenous languages being potent in conflict resolution. According to him, members of a community possess a set of shared meanings which enables them make coherent sense of the word. According to him, this stock of meaning constitutes the common sense of the community and also undermines all communicative and organized activities. He stresses that indigenous language is the main repository of a community's common sense. He adds that religion, culture and non verbal behavior, among other variables and constructs are other systems of symbolic meaning that characterize communities. In conclusion, he says since language constitutes a community's shared stock of meaning, and then it is safe to conclude that language, especially, indigenous language, may provide an excellent entry point for investigating how members of a group understand and handle conflicts.

Cohen (2010) is not done yet in his advocacy of local language being the major tool in conflict resolution in Nigeria. He opines that for information to be comprehensively exchanged and the issues at stake effectively discussed, the warring parties must be able to draw from a shared store of meaning. In other words, in some societies, functionally equivalent words may have variations in meaning, which if not explained thoroughly, may breed conflicts based on the wrong connotation on the meaning of the word. The greater the cultural gap among society, the greater the semantic gap between concepts and their labels across languages. Different languages convey different meanings and different versions of reality; therefore, the comprehensibility of one's utterance depends on the equivalent concept in his language. That is to say, what one expects from reconciliation will be determined by the local knowledge which informs his understanding of the term. What all these point at is that mediators in conflict must have explicit language and communicative competence of the warring community's language, so as to interact with them effectively. Furthermore, this paper advocates the use of non-offensive, non-abusive or non-derogatory terms in the course of conflict resolution. Such words could engender tension and spark off conflict. Gronching (2005) says indigenous languages have less of such words, as against English which is replete with them. According to him, local languages are more humane and have more polite words, and should be employed in conflict resolution, especially in heterogeneous societies. He also cautions on wrong encoding which often results from faulty interpretations from English to local languages. This according to him, breeds confusion and lawlessness.

Again, so many indigenous words have no English equivalents, hence cannot be interpreted from English to local language. Furthermore, most English words, phrases, clauses and sentences have more than one interpretation; hence, indigenous people are bound to misinterpret such during conflict resolution. All these give indigenous languages some advantages over English as far as conflict resolution is concerned.

Recommendations

Using indigenous languages, the citizenry, especially, the youths, should be taught the culture of respect, tolerance, peace, unity, love and co-operation. The church, mosque, religious festivals, cultural festivals, sports competitions are all avenues to achieve this. In view of the huge role indigenous language plays in conflict resolution, it should be given a pride of place in the school curriculum through effective teaching and learning. Our culture should also be given a pride of place in the curriculum, since language and culture are inseparable. We should play down the role of English in resolving conflict and give our local languages a chance.

Conclusion

Major variables in this paper such as indigenous language, conflict and conflict resolution have been adequately X-rayed. We were also able to beam our searchlight on causes and faces {types} of conflict. The role of mother tongue in conflict resolution has also been analyzed. Finally, we proffered some recommendations on how mother tongue can perform this role.

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