

LANGUAGE AND THE MASS MEDIA IN CONFLICT PREVENTION, MANAGEMENT AND RESOLUTION

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Abstract

The role of language and the mass media in conflict prevention, management and resolution in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. In this paper, we shall try to bring to the fore how the mass media uses language to foster its functions, which includes making appeals or campaigns that may pacify the populace in times of crisis. The place of language in conflict management involves a campaign procedure involving appropriate language use through a media/channel of communication. Conflict is a global issues which needs a serious campaign channel to handle and manage. The need for a linguistic approach in conflict prevention, management and resolution can only be summed up in the fact that language is an indispensable code of expression and medium of information dissemination and diffusion. Language is a fundamental factor in the solution of most human problems. The mass media, whether in print or electronic form is a powerful means of disseminating information to the public. The media has been acknowledged as a powerful and influential means of advancing coherence in the world view of its audience. The paper therefore is an appraisal of the uses of language and the media in conflict management, prevention and resolution. The paper will examine the concepts of language, the mass media, their relationship and use in conflict prevention, management and resolution.

1.0 Introduction

The advancement in science and technology and even its non-advancement has been a source of problem to mankind. Man is daily faced with conflicts right from within asan individual and in man’s interpersonal relations with manand society. Commendation plays an essential part in our day to day living. This is one of the key roles of language; communication takes place via a channel/media of information dissemination. Information about conflict prevention, management and resolution can only be passed across through language medium. This information reaches a wider society when passed through the mass media.

Language is a codified system of communication. Human language is a semiotic sign used to communicate the desire or intention of the communicator and is meant to elicit some reaction or feedback from the receiver in response to information transmitted thereby. Human language is often described as semiotic system using certain well agreed upon symbols or signals to convey meaning from one person within a given speech community. Language is essentially a communication of meaning (i.e. the message) with a sign (i.e. sounds or symbols). Summarily, “language is a communication coding system that can be taught..., an integral part of the individual’s identity involved in almost all mental activities; the most important channel of social organization embedded in the culture of the community where it is used” (Wikipedia 2014).

Language has a variety of functions which include:

- i. Information: The most important function of language is for individuals to pass across information from one person to another. Language serves as a means of understanding ourselves and our society.
- ii. Expression role: Language can serve as a means by which one expresses emotions, feelings or desires and attitudes towards one's fellow beings or state of affairs. Exclamations and swear words are some of the examples of this function. Language is used to create emotions in literature, poems, songs, plays, dramas, etc.
- iii. Phatic communion role of language: Language can be used as a means by which one can establish a contact or relationship with other people within ones speech community. An example is found in greetings and exchange of banalities.
- iv. Directive role: we can use language to influence the behaviour and attitude of others. Language can be used to obtain information as in asking questions, to stimulate actions or in issuing orders, commands or in making requests.
- v. Ideational role: Language can be used as a means of controlling or seeking the compliance of the forces of nature in accordance with the people's beliefs or faith. We can find this function in language of prayers, libation, incantations, divinations and some rituals.
- vi. Performative role: Language can also be used to bring about a sudden change in the state of affair in the real world as soon as the utterance is made. Examples, in a wedding ceremony when a priest or pastor pronounces a man and a woman married or joined together in holy matrimony, or in a law court, when a magistrate/judge hands down a sentence on someone for two years or so imprisonment, or in acquitting and discharging someone, etc.
- vii. Persuasive role: Language can be used to persuade, thereby you try to turn someone from an evil way into righteousness, or vice versa. You can use language to turn an evil society to a good one. You can use language to quail crisis or conflicts. It can also be used to dissuade certain societal ills, and promote good behaviour among members of a community. This is found in the use of language in the mass media, church messages, village gatherings/meetings, leaders of opinion, youth assemblies. Language is used to advertise and inculcate a desired behavioural change (language for social change) among the citizenry and to dissuade undesirable or harmful attitudes/behaviours.
- viii. Interpretational function of language: The use of language to establish and maintain social relations, which includes persuading people to do or believe things. Bible or Qur'anic messages/ could be interpreted to the understanding of the layman. Language is used to explain any piece of information for better understanding.

The mass media is a powerful means of communication used in reaching many audiences at a time. The mass media is categorized into two broad headings: the electronic and the print media. The electronic media includes: radio, television, cinemas, the computers, internet world wide web (www), the GSM etc. The print media includes: the newspapers, the magazines, books, pamphlets, leaflets, fliers, bill boards, neon signs etc. The print media flows uninterrupted since they do not depend on electricity supply like the electronic media. The electronic media are known for reaching a wide audience, especially the rural populace, even the illiterate masses due to their reach and coverage. It can be used to mobilize the masses at a very cheap rate. The mass media whether electronic or print is an agent of mobilization. Information about government activities, events and

issues of national importance, national reforms and agenda are disseminated through the mass media. Information relayed through the mass media travels to a wide and distanced audience.

Padbye (1994:17), explains that the media disseminates information “which a man must get in order to survive and get along in a complex society”. This shows that as long as one does not get the correct information about the society or an event, he/she is cut off or disadvantaged. The mass media is a veritable instrument of governance, the fourth estate of the realm, i.e. the fourth arm in governance and administration (because they watch and report on the activities of government). The media disseminates information that is of public interest, especially government actions and inactions. Therefore they provide a viable means of integrating members of the community, state or nation into the national and global information grid.

1.1 Conflict

Conflict is as old as humanity and has continued to be part of everyday life. Hornby Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (6th edition), defines conflict as “struggle, quarrel, fight or bitter argument, a long drawn out disagreement between two people or group of people, employers and workers over opinions, desires, opposition or differences over duties”. Conflict or crisis is a part of human nature that causes disharmony and discord among men. Conflict has entrenched a culture of fear and suspicion among individuals, groups and nations. Conflict is a situation in which people or groups or countries are involved in serious disagreement or argument. Conflict, because of its prevalent nature has become a necessary process of life. Within the individual, there is always conflict of thoughts, choice and interest, to mention but a few. This is known as intra-personal conflict. This not only makes decision taking difficult, but also has been identified as one of the major sources of stress. On the other hand, inter-personal conflicts occur between individuals, among groups, organizations, states or nations. Conflict can also be constructive or destructive.

Whenever disagreement arises, we say there is a conflict. While conflict is universal and occurs naturally, crisis (or violence), are almost always the key by-product of conflicts. If conflict is properly managed, or resolved, there will be peace. If on the other hand, resolution and reconciliation fail, the conflict will degenerate to chaos, crisis or war.

1.2 Causes of Conflict

All over the world, conflicts, crisis and violence are borne out of inordinate desires for political and economic advantage, greed, ego-related problems and plain mischief, injustice and uneven distribution of resources cause resentment, which invariably gives rise to conflicts. These factors are at play in contemporary Nigeria (Peters 2006). Although conflict is considered a natural phenomenon, yet it emanates as a result of disagreement between people or ideologies. Disagreement is sometimes prompted by egoistic desires to get personal or psychological satisfaction or even to achieve personal objectives. “It may be impelled by the blame-worthy in that egoism or selfish desire suppresses all concern for the truth and does not promote goodness”. (Bukhari 2005:4).

1.3 Causes of Conflicts in Nigeria

Peters (2006:2), sums up causes of conflicts thus:-

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and plain mischief. Injustice and inequitable distribution of resources cause resentments, which invariably give rise to conflicts situations. These factors are at play in contemporary Nigeria.

Other causes of conflicts especially in Nigeria can be summed up under the following subheadings:

- i. **Ignorance:** There is a general belief that ignorance is marked by lack of knowledge and as such it is termed a disease. Some people have no knowledge of what is worth doing and what is worth leaving. They don't even know their rights or the rights of others and their duties towards the government and other constituted authorities; and therefore, they behave or act negatively and arrogantly, thereby bringing about crisis.
- ii. **Religion:** Religious bigotry and extremism do lead to crisis. This is because many of the adherents to some religions are not adequately educated about their religion's duties, rights, teachings and proper practices. They rather practice extremism leaving the society in crisis.
- iii. **Problem of Interpretation:** Generally speaking, interpretation requires ability to ponder and reflect on the real importance and purpose of a text or statement. Interpretation is only admissible in matters on which there is no clear guidance in a given statement. The most important problem associated with its process is that sometimes, people adapt the literal or word-for-word meaning of an expression and in that case, adapt a wrong interpretation. This more often than not happens to religious scholars, theorists, theologians, and political analysts or politicians generally. As a result, a lot of controversies and confusion are generated. Indeed, it is erroneous to generalize the various opinions put forth by different authorities or jurist. If any generalization is to be made or attempted at all, it has to be done with utmost care or else, it will amount to erroneous conclusion which may cast confusion in the minds of people, and subsequently, crisis and conflicts.
- iv. **Magnifying desire and material quests:** We should understand that the individualism that stresses complete freedom from any kind of social control is a practical impossibility. This, according to Sayeed A. A. (1979), reviewed in Bukhari (2005:5)
leads to the disintegration of society and gives complete license to the individuals to break or make social institutions at will, over-throw ideals and value assumptions of society according to whatever individual whims or dictates
On the other hand, a complete social control that represses the creative and critical urges of the individual cripples man and leads society to either degeneration or stagnation or sudden and violent social upheavals. (Bukhari 2005:5)
- v. **Tribal and racial problems:** Placing tribal loyalty over collective and common interest can lead to conflicts and crisis. Some tribes attach so much importance to their tribal, racial or clan superiority. The practice is so rampant that ordinary misunderstanding between two people of different tribes or clans can lead to serious conflicts or even destruction of properties and loss of lives. A typical example is what happened in Kaduna between the Kaje or Kataf people and the Hausas on the 6th February and 15th May, 1992. (Bukhari 2005:6).
- vi. **Denial of certain rights and fear of domination:** There are certain cases where rights are denied, for instance, the right to education. In some societies, people are not accorded equal opportunities to either education or social amenities like electricity, potable water etc. Besides, uneven distribution of state income or wealth, education, high level of unemployment, poverty or low level of social development as reflected in health,

education, and living standards and working conditions of the populace, also contribute to the rise of crisis/conflicts. This is heightened by marginalization and domination. The domination of one ethnic group by another local government, state or federal over the other in most cases, causes mistrust and hatred. This has led to a lot of communal clashes in some parts of Nigeria. Also unequal distribution of wealth and amenities and deprivation has led to several reactions from activist groups, especially in the Niger Delta areas. Apart from the above mentioned factors that lead to conflicts, there are other contributing factors such as envy, jealousy, instigation and provocation. Lack of discipline and justice, rumour-mongering, religious extremism and activism, etc.

2.1 Effects of Conflicts

The effects of conflicts cannot be over emphasized. Conflict has far-reaching and devastating effects. Sometimes, it leads to political schism. According to Bukari (2005:7), “many alien notions and developments filter up action. As a result, narrowness of vision and feelings of exclusiveness emerge and even encouraged in such a way that people begin to cling to what they seemed favoured with. In fact, it deters progress of individuals and society at large”.

According to a special World Bank report, crisis and violence arising from unresolved conflicts have very high costs, destroying past development gains, and leaving legacy of damaged assets and corrosive mistrust that impedes future progress. Conflicts, crisis and violence beget more conflicts, crisis and violence. They destroy our past and our future. Besides, all conflicts, especially, - intellectual, religious and communal ones have almost the same adverse consequences, that is, loss of unification, loss of human lives and properties. Normal activities are disturbed because of fear, terror; curfews are sometimes imposed in all affected areas and above all disruption of economic activities. In fact, conflict is an ill wind that blows nobody good and should be avoided because they are evil and dangerous and lead to a sense of insecurity in the society.

2.2 Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution

Conflict prevention, otherwise known as peace building, is an intervention that is designed to prevent the start or resumption of violent conflict by creating a sustainable peace. Peacebuilding activities address the root causes or potential causes of violence, create a societal expectation for peaceful conflict resolution and stabilize society politically and socioeconomically, (Wikipedia 2014), adding that it can refer to:

direct work that intentionally focuses on addressing the factors driving or mitigating conflict”, and” efforts to coordinate a multi-level, multisectoral strategy, including ensuring that there is funding and proper communication and coordination mechanisms between humanitarian assistance, development, governance, security, justice and other sectors that may not use the term “peace building” to describe themselves.

Conflict management refers to the long-term management of intractable conflicts. It is the label for the variety of ways by which people handle grievances – standing up for what they consider to be right and against what they consider to be wrong. Those ways include such diverse phenomena as gossip, ridicule, lynching, terrorism, warfare, feuding, genocide, law, mediation, and avoidance. Which forms of conflict management will be used in any given situation can be somewhat predicted and explained by the social structure – or social geometry – of the case. (Wikipedia 2014)

Conflict management differs from peacebuilding which aims to prevent conflict from even arising in the first place, by engaging individuals, groups, parties and stake holders in processes that ensure peaceful coexistence outside conflict situations. Conflict resolution on the hand deals with settlement of conflicts that may have already taken shape. It can be by “*reconciliation or alienation. Conflicts should be resolved before they get to destruction (or action) phase*”. (Peters, 2006:2)

Conflict resolution otherwise known as reconciliation, is conceptualized as the methods and processes involved in facilitating the peaceful ending of conflict and retribution. Often, committed group members attempt to resolve group conflicts by actively communicating information about their conflicting motives or ideologies to the rest of the group (e.g., intentions; reasons for holding certain beliefs), and by engaging in collective negotiation. (Wikipedia 2014)

2.2.1 Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution Methods

This paper from the onset seeks to point out the use of language and the media in conflict prevention, management and resolution in Nigeria. Here two major methods of conflict resolution are highlighted, - which are regular dispute resolution and alternative dispute resolution.

i. Regular Dispute Resolution

This includes the regular system of reporting a case to the police, getting the offender prosecuted, convicted and sentenced. It also covers civil litigations. This is basically by litigation in court, that is, through legal process. Under this system, the winner takes it all. There is always a winner/loser ending. (Peters, 2006:3)

ii. Alternative dispute resolution (ADR)

As its name implies, this includes the methods that are alternative to the regular system. In this type of dispute resolution strategy, people are encouraged to go for a win-win solution (instead of a win-lose or lose-lose situation). (Peters, 2006:3). Whichever method involved in conflict prevention, management and resolution, employs language either spoken or written, as a means of conveying information. Most of the times, some of the channels of the mass media are also needed to spread the message of reconciliation to wider audience or to appeal to the conscience of warring parties in the form of campaigns, talk shows, advocacy messages, etc. or to report the decisions arrived at on the settlement grounds.

3.1 The Role of Language and the Media in Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution

Having been conversant with the role language and the media respectively, in this section, we shall show how we can apply the functions of language and the media in conflict management and resolution. Language is a functional tool in communication and the choice of language for any situation is directly influenced by these functions. On the other hand, media reports are instance of communication. The media receives the information and relays it to the various audiences situated far and near. A media institution chooses linguistic elements from the language repertoire available to them which best express the communication needs of the times and situation. The media chooses the correct lexemes and syntagmatic relations that address the theme, the mood and tone of the

times and situation and by such usage, it creates empathy or apathy depending on which choice is necessary at the moment. Whatever the media wants to achieve in the society influences its choice of language.

The media is very powerful in creating situations through its use of language and this can build or mar a society or nation. The power of the media is attributed to the use of words. The use of language in the media has a lot of influence on the audience. For instance, the article published by *This Day*, November, 16, 2002 on Miss World Beauty Pageant had a far-reaching consequence that it triggered off a crisis in the Northern and Eastern parts of the country, resulting in massive loss of lives and property. Consequently, the grand final of the contest was abruptly shifted from Abuja to London. You can't beat or under-rate the power of words and the use of language through the media.

In the same vein, political reports by the media can also create or heighten tension or allay it as the case may be. For instance, the choice of language and media reports on the cancellation of the June 12, 1993 presidential elections widely believed to have been won by the SDP presidential candidate, Moshood Abiola, triggered off some reactions across the country. The kind of report and manner of language by the media then heightened tensions across the nation, which nearly threatened the very existence of Nigeria as a nation. Many lives and properties were lost as people were trying to relocate from one part of the country to another.

3.2 The Power of Language

Language use could be persuasive, ideational, creative etc. It can create situations of empathy or apathy. Crystal (1987), states that in primitive societies "the written language appears omniscient when encountered for the first time, adding that writing appears to have 'a voice of its own or perhaps a god lives in the letters, especially writings in religious sectors, politics, advertisements, media, conqueror, etc.'" Similarly in modern society, the way people react to written language even to text labelled fiction, exemplifies the mystical influence of words on print.

3.3 The Relationship between the Media and Language in Conflict Management and Resolution

Both language and the media play very important roles in communication and each can play on the emotion of the audience. The media uses language in its functions. Language on the other hand needs the audience/receptor/decoder of information to be meaningful. Whatever message the media has to pass to the audience or to the receptor/public as an instrument for conflict prevention, management or resolution has to be couched in a language, and the language/message has to go through an appropriate medium of communication to create an impact on the society. It is a two-way action, each rubs off on the other.

3.4 The Role of the Mass Media in Conflicts Prevention, Management and Resolution

Behavioural change is the goal of any conflict prevention, management and resolution communication. The solution to most human problems be they economic, political, socio-cultural or religious revolve around the psychological role of motivation is the vehicle around which they revolve and spread. The role of language as a vehicle of communication and change in conflict prevention, management and resolution cannot be over-emphasized. Linguistic and associated factors that prevent the escalation of conflicts and the psychological information about the dangers

of conflicts in society and the impediments which they constitute are exposed through language use. Behavioural change which be helpful in successful conflict prevention, management and resolution are also put in language and made public through the media. The place of language and the media in the prevention management and resolution of conflicts takes some processes which involve the use of instruments, advocacy materials, whether written or oral. As a global problem, conflict prevention, management and resolution demand some popular methods. The need for a language and linguistic approach towards a more effective conflict prevention management and resolution evolves from the fact that language is an indispensable code of expression and medium of information dissemination and diffusion which constitutes a fundamental factor to the solution of most human problems. Similarly, the media is also strategic, an educational channel, fundamental in communication, addressing human problems like conflicts. Both language and the media are agents and means of behavioural change. They also serve as machineries for peacebuilding in the society, because both communicate information.

3.5 Media Presentation Methods:

- i. **Face-to-face communication** using advocacy groups like opinions leaders, youth leaders, religious leaders, community leaders, non-governmental organisations and other stakeholders, where conflicts prevention, management and resolution are required.
- ii. **Media campaign** using jingles, advertorials, media campaigns, talk shows in the area of conflict. For instance, radio Nigeria (FRCN) and National Television Authority (NTA) use such jingles as, “Radio Nigeria, uplifting the people, uniting the nation”, “Nigeria Great nation, Great people” The NTA also shows several of video clips showing and condemning acts of violence during network broadcast periods.
Also some state -owned media houses like Plateau Radio Television Cooperation (PRTVC) and Peace FM Jos, use some testimonial adverts like “voices of peace”, using some leaders to voice out against terrorism and crisis and the need for people to embrace peace. Most of the advertorial and testimonials are done in the local languages spoken there. This goes a long way in making people reflect on the messages being broadcast. The NTA shows a lot of video clips condemning acts of violence and discourage acts of terrorism like bombing, violent attacks etc.
- iii. **Moral education** using pamphlets and leaflets warning against crisis and its consequences, especially in fully blown crisis and war conditions are parts of the methods of mass communication, exposing the ills of conflict and crisis.
- iv. **Advocacy programmes** through radio/television, bill boards, handbills, newspaper and magazines, and even through social media, etc., using Radio and television commentaries, and documentations, exposing and denouncing crisis, conflicts and terrorist activities. These should be put across in the local languages spoken in the affected areas. No doubt, this has the ability to create a positive change among the populace.
- v. **Social media:** The social media is doing a lot these days to create awareness, in the forms of face book, YouTube, twitters, virtual groups, etc. Each of these social media gets a lot of people involved in contributing to issues of mutual benefits. They also allow people lend their voices to finding solutions to crucial issues on the sport.
- vi. Appropriate and adequate news reports and coverage on issues of violence using the appropriate language and channels give succour in times of conflicts and vice versa.

4.0 Conclusion/Summary

We have so far discussed the use of language and the media in conflict management, and resolution. A positive use of media combined with the right use of language can calm frayed nerves and bring peace to any troubled situation or the society at large. It should be noted that a provocative use of language in the media can heighten tension and create apathy and disaffection within a nation state or in a conflict situation. The media and language are useful tools in managing, preventing and resolving conflicts but such language use and media reports for checking crisis should be balanced in order not to cause crisis itself, because what a person hears and sees affects his/her thinking, actions and reactions.

Languages of the immediate environment should be employed to enable all and sundry understand the message being transmitted. Civic education written in the language should be inculcated early in the education of the child. This helps the child to be well-informed about the norms and values of the community where he belongs.

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