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Language and Communication Conflict in Nigeria: Implications for English Language Pedagogy

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Abstract: Nigeria is a multilingual society. In such a potpourri, language conflict is, if not the norm, inevitable. Human communication assumes the presence of language and the presence of language assumes the existence of communication. Communication engenders language and not the other way round. However, communication is the evidence of language in motion, from the sender to the receiver. Where the receiver receives a message that was not intended by the sender, then there is communication conflict. The paper explores the importance of language in Nigeria, and highlights factors that contribute to communication conflict. The paper anchors on the role of the English language teacher in mitigating language-engendered conflict through targeted pedagogy.

Keywords: Communication, Conflict, Language, Pedagogy

1. Introduction

Human communication is inseparable from human language. Language may not always convey meaning, even when it is recognizable as language. One may not understand Spanish. Yet one can recognize a piece of text as written in Spanish and would know if someone is speaking the language, even though it conveys no meaning. There are languages one hears on the radio without being able to identify what they mean. But the moment, they convey meaning, they become communication. Therefore, in as much as language is closely associated with communication, language and communication are not synonymous. Both may exist independently. In that respect, language is neutral until it becomes communication. Language facilitates communication, even though language seems to be the product of the need for communication. Communication is language in motion from the sender to the receiver. However, where the receiver receives a message that was not intended by the sender, then there is communication conflict. This implies that language per se would not generate conflict until it becomes communication.

1.1. Meaning of Language

Language has many definitions. Dada (2004) defines it as

"an arbitrary vocal system of communication used among members of a speech community" p 2. Essentially, it is a set of contextual codes intelligible and meaningful to those who share the codes.

Language can be verbal, which manifests in speech; non-verbal, that is, gestural and semiotic. Gestural language involves the use of gestures, facial expressions, posture, voice modulation, pitch, stress and intonation. Semiotic language is iconic, that is, the use of specialized symbols or signs to convey information. The traffic signs, religious symbols, scientific and social symbols also populate the semiotic realm.

The importance of Language in communication and communication conflict is a function of different levels of language and meaning. Meaning could be literal or metaphoric. Literal meaning is the surface meaning that is unencumbered by connotations and undertones. For instance, the use of goat when it refers to the animal is literal. The statement: "Eddy speaks French fluently" has a literal meaning, whereas, the expression, "For all I know, she might as well have been speaking French" gives French another connotation, not now as the language of France, but gibberish. At this level, language begins to migrate beyond the literal to the metaphoric.

Metaphoric language is imbued with underlying,

subterranean meanings, connotations, allusions, referents and nuances. For instance, the word “goat” does not always refer to the familiar four-legged animal. Sometimes, it is used in speech metaphorically to refer to a person who is either stupid or stubborn. Amongst the Ibo, for example, when the expression “ewu” is used, it could refer to a goat or it could be a derogatory referent to a person, not an animal. Metaphoric language is idiomatic and figurative.

1.2. Meaning of Communication

What then is communication? There are several definitions of communication. DeVito defines communication as “the act, by one or more persons, of sending and receiving messages that are distorted by noise, occur within a context, have some effect, and provide some opportunity for feedback” (1988: 4). The definition acknowledges that communication is inherently distortable, is capable of influencing the communicators and is context-driven. DeVito’s assumes conflict as inherent in communication since the elements necessary for conflict such as noise, distortion, effect, and context constitute the definition. According to Krause and Morsella (2001) human communication is “the process by which ideas contained within one mind are conveyed to other minds.” (p. 104) Unlike DeVito’s, definition Krause and Morsella’s definition provides a linear view of communication without the benefit of feedback. However, Adejimonla’s (2009) conception of communication, like DeVito’s, contains the vital feedback component. The author considers communication as “a process that involves the transmission of a message from a sender to a receiver and which has the goal of eliciting a reaction or reactions (feedback)” (Adejimonla, 2009, p 003). Feedback is the signal that the message has been received. Conflict is a feedback product.

1.3. Communication Conflict Disambiguated

Conflict is defined as “the process in which one party perceives that its interest are being opposed or negatively affected by another” [10]. Communication conflict would, therefore, refer to conflict arising from or associated with a communication act. In other words, communication conflict is a discord between what was encoded and what is decoded. It is the dissonance between what an encoder intended in a message and what the decoder deciphered. Alrø, Skovsmose, and Valero (2002) acknowledge that:

Conflict is a basic condition of human life. Conflicts are inevitably present in many interpersonal relationships; and their destructive/constructive character depends on the way they are handled. Conflicts can be expressed and handled in communication between the conflicting parties (p. 3).

While DeVito (2008) sees interpersonal conflict as “a disagreement between connected individuals who each want something that is incompatible with what the other wants,” [8] with regard to communication, the conflict is engendered because of misinterpretation and not because of conflict of interest. The concern here is the conflict between the message sent and the message received. This type of conflict can, of

course, result in interpersonal conflict.

2. The Importance of Language in Nigeria

Language is very important in human society, and very much so in Nigeria, a heterogeneous society. It is believed that there are over 250 languages (Aduwa-Ogiegbaen & Iyamu, 2006), each associated with distinct ethnic groups. However, According to the 15th edition of the Ethnologue Report as cited by Dada (2007), in Nigeria, there are about 510 living languages co-existing with one another. In the same report Nigeria ranks as one of the 22 most linguistically diverse countries in the world. Therefore, in such language potpourri, communication conflict is not only expected but also immanent.

2.1. Instrument of Identity

Besides being a vehicle of communication, language in Nigeria is an instrument of self-expression and identity. Thus, “It will be virtually impossible for any group of people to define successfully their common and binding interest without language” [5] Language is important by its very nature as an instrument of identity, identification, classification, branding and labelling. If people speak Ibo language in a market in Bernin Kebbi, a town in northern Nigeria where the predominant language is Hausa, they need no further identification. The primary assumption would be that they are from South Eastern Nigeria, most probably Christian and definitely, of Igbo stock. Similarly, Nigerians who pronounce /dz/ j as /j/, or /s/ as /ʃ/, or /p/ as /f/ are most probably going to be considered as Ibibio, Yoruba or Hausa, respectively. If Arabic is spoken in a religious gathering in Nigeria, one does not need a soothsayer to conclude that the gathering is Islamic.

2.2. Status Symbol

In addition, language provides obvious or subtle information about someone’s level of education and sometimes, social class. Speaking English with certain level of fluency, dexterity and mastery, for instance, can identify the speaker as educated or illiterate, widely travelled or land bound. Amongst the Yorubas of Nigeria, the younger prefix greetings with the vowel /e/ when addressing their elders or superiors. Therefore, if one listens to a conversation between two people, one can guess their power relationship.

2.3. Sociopolitical and Economic Vessel

Language, furthermore, is employed in entertainment. Nigerian artistes have employed language – both indigenous and English in music, drama, stand-up comedy, and film. Many films in the indigenous languages also have English subtitling. Language is overwhelmingly used in literature – whether prose, poetry or drama.

Language is a political tool in Nigeria and elsewhere. It is believed that President Obama won his first term in office

riding on his rhetorical prowess. For political intercourse and administration, fluency in English is a great advantage in Nigeria. During the political campaigns in Nigeria we observed how President Obasanjo used his multilingualism to great advantage. When campaigning in Hausa-speaking states he would speak Hausa; when seeking votes from Yoruba-speaking states he would speak in Yoruba. Similarly, President Goodluck Jonathan while a deputy governor, Governor and later Vice President and President without having to contest any elections seemed not to have had any Igbo middle names. But as soon he needed to campaign for votes, he suddenly had two clearly Igbo middle names: Ebele Azikiwe. How an Ijaw gentleman suddenly sprouted two Igbo names (one of which is the name of the first President of Nigeria, the Nationalist, Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe can only be explained by the power of language in political identification.

Traders have also seen the power of bilingualism in commercial activities. Speaking English in Aria-aria market in South Eastern Nigeria would hardly bestow any favours on one as it would if one spoke in Igbo. Similarly, the Fulani cobbler gives one a better deal if one communicates in Hausa.

2.4. Instrument of Interpersonal Relations

“Language is used for phatic communication, that is, as a special regulator; for ceremonial purposes; as an instrument of action; to keep records; to convey orders and information; to influence people; to enable self-expression; and to embody and enable thought” (Sansui 2001, cited in Adejola, 2009). Adejola (2009) adds further that language may be used positive and negative purposes, to initiate action, set mood, or create an atmosphere. Therefore, language may be deployed to inform or misinform, persuade or dissuade, encourage or discourage, direct or distract, attract or repel, affront or appease, ridicule, or praise, criticize or commend, vilify or eulogize, curse or bless, confound or enlighten, hurt or soothe, comfort or grieve, threaten or reassure. Whether it is for trade, politics or religion, language is a strong resource.

3. The Reasons Why Language Engenders Communication Conflict

No matter how carefully one handles language, communication conflict seems inevitable. Thus, “Language is not neutral” declares [5] The inference is that language always carries with it a tilt, a hint, a position, a point of view and a perception. Some factors in language that cultivate communication conflict will be examined subsequently. Thus, Mojaye (2014) surmises that “Language does not always precipitate conflicts, but its use or misuse does because language is not an end in itself but a means to an end. Language is the golden egg-layer in the resolution of domestic conflicts because domestic conflicts usually occur when language used during intimate or causal communication is not

good enough.” [13]

3.1. Cultural Miseducation

Language is an essential ingredient of culture and low cultural intelligence could exacerbate language conflict. Cultural intelligence has recently been considered an important construct in communication (Bücker, Furrer, Poutsma, & Buyens, 2014). They define cultural intelligence as “is a system of knowledge and skills, linked by cultural meta-cognition that allows people to adapt to, select, and shape the cultural aspects of their environment.” (p. 5) Lack of understanding of the sociolinguistic background of the decoder, or the idiomatic implications of language in translation, can produce communication conflict. Sometimes in the process of decoding or translating, the metaphoric or idiomatic may be construed as literal or vice-versa. A literal decoding of the idiomatic or the metaphoric interpretation of the literal, therefore, can result in communication conflict. To illustrate further, the Efik idiom: “Ibot Okpon mi” (literally “My head is big” could mean “I am terrified” or that the structure that sits on my neck is enormous in size. It can also be an idiomatic reference to “pride.” Someone learning the language but does not understand the idioms, can unwittingly cause conflict through the vehicle of language. Therefore, Morgan (2010) notes, “Language cannot be separated from the social world and context.”

3.2. Encoding Ambiguity

Error sometimes emanate from the source or origin of communication. Consider the expression: The woman sat on a chair with wooden legs. This could mean either that the woman had wooden legs or the chair had wooden legs. Therefore lack of clarity in written or spoken communication can lead to a decoding conflict.

3.3. Decoding Error

According to Ikpe (2011), conflict may be generated in the process of communication. Apparently, conflict in communication is a constant because it requires omniscience to decode exactly what the encoder of human communication intended. Therefore, once there is dissonance between what was intended in a communication setting and what is received or perceived, conflict is born. A popular Efik folktale “Arit Eno” relates how a nanny misunderstood her mistress’ instructions to teach her baby to sit and, therefore, boiled the baby in a pot instead. The confusion came from the Efik word “tem” which means “cause to sit” or “boil in a pot.” Rather than use an ambiguous word that was predisposed to double interpretation, the mistress should have used a sentence: “Kpep eyen oro itie.” (“Teach that child to sit.”). However, the nanny acted out of mischief or genuine confusion.

3.4. Lack of Shared Background

Krause and Morsella (2001) believe that effective communication requires a common ground much of which “derives from a complex matrix of shared cultural knowledge”

which, according to Leavitt (n.d.) is not hereditary but learned because they are not rigid but dynamic.

Without this knowledge, Krause and Morsella (2001) believe, “many utterances will be incomprehensible, or perhaps worse, will be interpreted incorrectly.” [11] They explain further:

“Addressees cannot derive the intended meanings from messages if those meanings reside outside the realm of shared knowledge. Moreover, since what is common ground for a given speaker will vary as a function of the addressee (that is, it will vary from addressee to addressee), the speaker is obliged to generate only those utterances which he believes the addressee is capable of understanding.” [11]

The implication is that effective communication requires a probable knowledge of the socio-cultural background of the intended audience. A knowledge of the beliefs, worldview, ethics, epistemology, norms and values of the audience can leverage the communication in favour of the encoder. It becomes more favourable if the recipient has similar, though not necessarily identical knowledge of the socio-cultural framework of the encoder. A communication situation bereft of such shared knowledge is likely to result in misperception and misinterpretation. The moment utterance or discourse is misinterpreted conflict is afoot.

3.5. Level of Literacy

Sometimes if users of the language have different levels of facility in the language of communication, perhaps one is literate in English and another is not or is only marginally so, conflict is inevitable. It is expected of competent communicators to adapt their vocabulary, speed of delivery, voice modulation, pronunciation and diction to the literacy level of the audience. This is really pertinent on the communicator.

4. Mitigating Language Conflict: The Place of English Pedagogy

4.1. Mass Literacy

English is the official language of Nigeria. It is the language of education, business, social intercourse, mass media, social network, politics and administration. There are facilities and abundant opportunities to learn this language. The Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme has made available and accessible free and compulsory basic education in Nigeria. Parents and all interested persons should avail themselves of this opportunity.

4.2. Communicative Language Teaching

The teacher of language, whether that language is indigenous or foreign, first or second; learned or acquired, has a great responsibility to aim for competence rather than accuracy. This calls for the use of communicative language teaching techniques. According to McCarthy and Carter (2001) Communicative competence refers to “what a speaker needs

to know about how a language is used in particular situations for effective and appropriate communication” [14]. Teachers of English as a second language need to deploy instructional strategies that emphasize authentic communication rather than examination. The use of communicative approaches will reduce the gap between English in the class and in the playground. English learning will be attractive - and the teacher's efforts more rewarding - if the learners can easily see the connection between English in the class and the English they need for everyday transactions in the real world. Richards (2005) identifies certain characteristics of communicative competence to include:

1. Knowing how to use language for a range of different purposes and functions
2. Knowing how to vary our use of language according to the setting and the participants (e.g., knowing when to use formal and informal speech or when to use language appropriately for written as opposed to spoken communication)
3. Knowing how to produce and understand different types of texts (e.g., narratives, reports, interviews, conversations)
4. Knowing how to maintain communication despite having limitations in one's language knowledge (e.g., through using different kinds of communication strategies) [15]

Moreover, Wesche and Skehan (2002) describe communicative language teaching as

- Activities that require frequent interaction among learners or with other interlocutors to exchange information and solve problems.
- Use of authentic (non-pedagogic) texts and communication activities linked to “real-world” contexts, often emphasizing links across written and spoken modes and channels.
- Approaches that are learner centered in that they take into account learners' backgrounds, language needs, and goals and generally allow learners some creativity and role in instructional decisions [16] Therefore, a deliberate application of communicative language teaching strategies allows the language student to learn and acquire skills in the use of language in different circumstances in real life. In this way the student becomes acquainted with the possible conflict situations in language deployment and how language can be harnessed to mitigate such conflicts.

4.3. Bilingualism

The Nigerian Language policy prescribes the use of mother tongue or language of the immediate community in the first three years of school. In addition, the National Policy of Education proposes that a product of Nigerian education system should be literate in at least one indigenous language besides English. Besides, the 2009 secondary school curriculum stipulates that a student should compulsorily study one Nigerian language. (National Educational Research And Development Council, NERDC, 2009)

However, this policy has not been successful because of several factors. First, communities, especially in the urban areas of Nigeria are becoming increasingly heterogeneous. Thus, the expression "language of immediate community is difficult to determine." Also, many parents, both literate and illiterate who send their children to school, expect their children to quickly gain facility in the use of English. This is to make the children competitive in an environment where English is not only the key to access educational, economic, political and social opportunities, but a status symbol.

Another hindrance to the realization of this goal is the dearth of language teachers and the lack of both instrumental and integrative motivation to study other indigenous languages beyond one's mother tongue or English. Even the use of mother tongue is in jeopardy because of subtractive bilingualism where the use of English, especially among the elites, gradually, but inexorably erodes facility in the mother tongue.

Despite the hindrances, it is incumbent upon language teachers to deliberately encourage students to develop positive attitudes to their indigenous languages - whether their mother tongue or one of the Nigerian languages. For instance, in the English Studies class, the students may carry out a project to find out common greetings in their indigenous languages and at least two other local languages. In the phonetic class they may compile a list of sounds in their indigenous languages that have no counterpart in English. Moreover, students could be encouraged to watch indigenous movies and retell in class or give a written summary in English.

4.4. Care in Encoding

Although it is not feasible to eliminate communication conflict completely, we can minimize it by careful choice of words, choice of medium and even deliberate spacing of communication. A careful consideration of the immediate or prospective audience should inform the content, speed and medium of communication. Except one is making a private entry in one's journal, every piece of communication should give consideration to the eventual recipient.

The implication for the teachers of English is that they should provide sufficient opportunities for students to engage in debates, drama, journaling and reflection. Moreover, teachers need to incorporate public speaking in the English curriculum in order to provide diverse opportunities for the use of language helps develop communicative competence.

4.5. Intelligent Decoding

Decoding is a conscious process just as encoding. The receiver of a message must deliberately and intelligently attend to the message. This, of course would demand some level of literacy or competence in the message codes. Where the decoders seem to experience some confusion they can seek clarification or repeat of the information or transmission, where possible. Sometimes it might be necessary to involve a

third party (if confidentiality is not a factor) to translate, interpret or decipher communication to avoid misunderstanding. This measure may not be realistic in a face-to-face or GSM-medium oral communication. However, the expression, "I beg your pardon" is sometimes a sufficient clue that there was "noise" in communication, and the other party is likely to repeat or rephrase.

For the English Language teachers, intelligent decoding can be deliberately taught through reading and listening comprehension training and exercises. The teachers can also use storytelling, debates and class discussion to foster intelligent decoding.

4.6. Careful Choice of Medium

The message is as good as its medium. Medium can constitute distortion in communication. Medium could be direct oral via face to face contact, or recorded oral transmitted via radio or television or voice mail; direct oral via telephone, or tele-presence, audio visual through television.

4.7. Audience Analyses

It is important to carefully study the characteristics of one's audience. Parameters like culture, beliefs, orientation, education, intellectual and emotional intelligence, socio-economic status, psychosocial constitution, etc should be considered in selecting the codes, media and channels of communication.

4.8. Teacher Training

It would be wrong to assume that teachers of English have communication competence. Of course, they are expected to have. But communication is hardly in the curriculum of teacher training institutions. Teachers generally, and teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) in particular should be exposed to courses on communication. Hale (n.d.) has suggested teacher trainees should be taught pair and small-group dynamics in order to be aware of the potential conflict situations in classroom interactions.

5. Conclusions

In view of the multilingual and multi-ethnic nature of Nigeria, communication conflict seems inevitable. This is partly because of the interaction of persons of differing literacy levels, cultural backgrounds, language abilities/competencies, and the psychosocial noises that are inherent in human communication. However, understanding the processes that are implicated in communication conflicts as well as the possible measures of cushioning such conflicts might help individuals and organizations engage in communication with minimal conflict. The teacher can deploy pedagogical strategies to develop communication skills in students as a way of mitigating communication conflicts arising from the use of language in a multilingual and multiethnic society such as Nigeria.

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