

THE ANALOGY OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION WITHIN PANKSHIN LGA, PLATEAU STATE

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Abstract

This paper presents the analogy of homogenous language and culture as one of the most significant components of conflict resolution in a heterogeneous society. Language and culture have over the years played a vital role in resolving conflict among diverse ethnic groups in Pankshin LGA. Basically, human interaction is based on perceptions that capitalize on needs, emotions, interests and fears. People from different environments and communities see the world through the ambit provided by their different languages. Language provides the foundation of words that create different categorizations in which users have divided their world. One can find words that are culturally, contextually and communicatively bound which are of great importance to members of a shared environment. The language spoken by a people and their identity are inseparable. The study used

key informant interview as primary data and journals, newspaper articles, books and online databases as secondary data, and found that despite the inevitability of conflict resulting from people interaction, language and culture are essential component of conflict resolution. The paper concludes that in a country like Nigeria where conflicts stem from political manipulation, alienation and marginalization, religious and ethnic differences are very essential for people to be aware of those common traits in language and culture that unify them. It is therefore recommended that emphasis should be placed in exploring different cultures and uses of language in conflict resolution.

Keywords: language, culture and conflict resolution

Introduction

Language plays a foremost role in human existence. It serves as a means of communication and the medium of instruction in school and other spheres of human endeavours. It is equally a means of maintaining people's culture, sustaining peace and resolving conflict in the society (Cyril, 2019). In demonstrating the power of language, Rosenberg advises: "speak peace; what you say next will change your world". This indicates the literal correlation between language and conflict resolution. Human existence in the world is segmented according to its races which form what is known as language. The term language is a symbol of unity and a means of interaction among persons who share commonalities in location, environment or community that share the same norms as a means of communication and also the unification of its citizens and for their identity. Language serves as the engine room for communication in any society on earth. Language and culture go hand in hand, in the sense that without language, there is no cultural identification and understanding by many people in a society.

Opara (2016) argues that "language and culture not only bring meanings to the world, but also shape one's cognitive process, such as perception, interpretation and judgment". Krocher and Kluckhohn (as cited in Opara, 2016) aver that language represents the spirit of people who speak it; and its grammatical forms have significant effect on the development of human ideas. This is because the language people speak daily and their identity as speakers of that language cannot be separated. This is corroborated by Leonard and Law (2004) "that language acts, are acts of identity". They further maintain that language reflects culture, and when you put language and culture together, they are the primary components of people's social identity.

Cyril (2019) points out that language is the main tool for the expression of culture of which it is a component. It simplifies easy communication between individuals and groups at large. Language is very significant in the developmental processes of any society. People understand one another only when they understand the language they are speaking. Without language there would be no channel of communication between and among individuals in any society. In other words, communication becomes effective only through verbal or written languages. This, therefore, underscores the importance of language and culture in conflict resolution. Culture influences how individuals negotiate, for instance, interpersonal conflict. It often involves the

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appropriate search for cultural traits – general and stable value-orientations – that forecast diverse culturally typical conflict resolution behaviours (Morris & Fu, 2001).

A number of studies show the role of language and culture in the cause of conflict. People's daily interaction makes conflict inevitable, which occurs as a result of verbal exchanges between the conflicting parties. This is because “in every verbal exchange there is the deployment of linguistic resources – words and sentences for good or evil purposes” (Cyril, 2019). Cyril goes further to highlight the two broad forms of language that influence conflict as identified by social psychologists. They are competitive and cooperative forms of language. The former is characterized by behaviours like justifications, illogical debates, abusive languages, and unacceptable demands and threats. Jean-Louis (as cited in Cyril, 2019) further holds that users of competitive language are impelled by what he referred to as “distributive or pro-self orientation”. He argues that pro-self orientation “is associated with a focus on self and a motivation to maximize personal outcome even at the expense of the other party.” Both forms of language cause conflict whether at the interpersonal, intra-group or intergroup interactions. Conflict is part and parcel of people's daily life; it is inevitable as long as people interact within the society. It is pertinent to say that in human existence, the word 'conflict' is a common phenomenon to the tradition of wellbeing in the sense that conflict always occurs among people in the same area known as inter/intra-community conflict. This therefore underscores the need by some scholars to examine the role of language and culture in conflict resolution (Cyril, 2019; Opara, 2016; Vassallo, 2016; Ani, 2015; Cohen, 2001).

It is against the background of the preceding introductory remarks about the analogy of language and culture in conflict resolution that the study seeks to carefully examine such similarity in respect to conflict resolution among heterogeneous groups in Pankshin LGA of Plateau State. The paper addresses noteworthy gaps in scholarly understanding of this topic. Whereas previous research has advanced knowledge pertaining to the importance, role, and influence of culture in conflict resolution, important gaps still exist with regard to the deployment of language and culture as tools of conflict resolution. This includes comparison of various people's culture and languages and the power they have in dispute/ conflict resolution. The paper contributes novel insights on the similarity of language and culture in conflict resolution in the African setting.

Understanding Language and its Role in Conflict

Jean-Louis' two forms of language, namely competitive and cooperative, show that language plays a key role in the cause of conflict. It is very clear that people have their reasons for employing either competition or cooperation or even both at any given time (Cyril, 2019). Cyril maintains that in an interaction between persons, when one is extremely selfish and is not concerned about the other party's feeling, such a person is seen to have employed competitive language which is conflictive. This argument is confirmed by Williams (as cited in Cyril, 2019) who asserts that language as the primary tool of exchange of information may be employed to influence personality; to instigate violent conflict/ war; to incite; to oppose ideas, aim, and actions; to insult, blackmail, destroy, testify falsely, provoke, abuse, etc. Williams further asserts that incorrect use of language such as provocative utterances is one of the most underlying causes of conflict.

Furthermore, Yusuf (2003) argues that in a heterogeneous society, people need to communicate politely; this is because languages in a multilingual society could lead to negative consequences and damage relations among people if not well managed, just as nuclear arsenals do. Gronching (as cited in Yusuf) corroborates this when she argues that a wrongly encoded piece of information could usually put the receivers into confusion. It could lead to a disruption in communication and consequently result in crises such as chaos, killings and destruction of properties.

Opara (2016) holds that language plays a dual role of resolving or escalating a dispute. Cohen (2001) points out that language serves as a window in which individuals are able to organize their understanding and expression of conflict: frequently consistent with cultural patterns and ways a community operates. It is noteworthy to mention that since conflict is part and parcel of daily human interaction, language as a tool of communication is seen as playing a significant role in the cause of conflict.

Culture in the Context of Conflict

Vassallo (2016) notes that the concept of conflict has changed from interstates to intra-states since the end of the Second World War in 1945 onwards. These new wars as Kaldor (1999) characterises them, are mostly internal civil conflicts among various communities or ethnic groups which resulted from the migration movements that brought such groups with different traditions together; and sometimes they come into conflict with one another due to the 'clash of cultures'. Culture can be very broad in scope and it cannot be narrowly seen as language, dress and food; or just traditions or customs.

People of the same cultural groups can share ethnicity, race or nationality, but they equally emanate from different generation, sexual orientation, political and religious affiliation, socio-economic class, language use, gender, ability and disability, etc (Vassallo, 2016). Vassallo further comments that culture can be construed as a solid foundation where people keep building every kind of relationships and experiences; and thus, cultures are flexible. This is why they shape our perceptions, judgements, attributions, and ideas of in-group and out-group. These perceptions and judgements with the dynamics of human relationships and interactions sometimes lead to conflict between cultures.

Moreover, Avruch and Black (1991) differentiate two conceptions of conflict; the first is based on scarcity and power and the second on perception and belief. The former is understood within the context of struggle over resources as human needs theorists argue, and power just as realist scholars posit. This inevitably leads to struggle over perception and beliefs or confrontation which originally relates to what Vassallo (2016) refers to as “symbolic dimension, and therefore culture”.

In corollary, Lederach (1996) avers that conflict is best understood to be a socially-constructed cultural incidence. He further argues that people are responsible for creating situations and interactions they found themselves in as conflict; but in the real sense, conflicts do not just occur to people. This is to say that social conflict occurs as a result of the meaning and interpretation parties in conflict attach to action and incidences. In this regard, Lederach opines that conflict is linked to meaning or interpretation, meaning to knowledge and such knowledge in itself originated in culture.

An overview of Conflict in Pankshin Town

As its name implies, 'Pankshin' is derived from the word 'Pang-chen', “Pang” means Hill while “Chen” means Hoe. During an interview with the present Ngolog Fwor, Nde Cik Dajur, he explained that “during the migration of persons from the Kanem Bornu Empire in the 9th Century, they passed through the present Bauchi State and settled at Pankshin which is full of hills with their main occupation as blacksmithing, hunting and farming”. Pankshin District is the headquarters of Pankshin Local Government Area which is located in Central Plateau in Eastern North Central part of Nigeria with a land mass of 1,524km² and a total population of 190,114 (National Population Commission Census, 2006).

The languages in Pankshin include Ngas, Mupun, Fier, Miship, Tal, Kadung, Pai, Rom and Bijim. The people of Pankshin share the same culture in the sense

that all their cultural activities move hand in hand with one another but with minor differences, as it is found in *Mos wong* traditional marriage, *wwang*, *murgi* festival and hunting etc. This cultural similarity helps in mitigating and managing conflict among the diverse ethnic groups in the local government area. However, conflict as an integral part of human interaction has a long history in Pankshin; it happens between and among various ethnic groups as a result of daily interactions.

Conflict refers to a dispute between two or more persons who do not agree on a solution to a problem. A senior community leader, Nde Bigun Ayuba, the Madaki Fwor, explains the reasons for conflict in their land from the historical point of view. He explains as follows:

Conflict in Pankshin started long ago during our forefathers, which involves the Munvul and Pankshin in 1920s because of border encroachment (Lek Mungvel) and that Kudun and Ngas Gwobi also land dispute, but due to cultural similarities it aided in managing the crisis within the areas. Therefore, culture is always a factor in conflict, whether it plays a central role or influences it subtly and gently. For any conflict that touches us where it matters, where we make meaning and hold our identities, there is always a cultural component. Example are, intractable conflicts like the dispute in the year 1930 as a result of tax collection and remittance to the then Ngolong Ngas and boundary dispute between Fier and Munvul communities in the 1990s in which many lives were lost with the same repeating itself in 2016. The conflict between Mupun and Ngas was the issue of boundary in 1945 and the Freedom fight of 1983 which was led by the then Speaker of the Plateau House of Assembly Late Prof. Dakum Shown, and some other conflicts resulting from political zoning and political appointments. Also the dispute in Pankshin South, between Miship and Mupun on the issue of creation of Local Government Area in 1979 during the regime of then Governor Solomon Lar, caused dissatisfaction in the zone up to date in the field of political development. That makes the ethnic groups in southern Pankshin such as Tal, Dok-Pai and Miship still trying to be united to have a peaceful zone (KII with Community leader, December 10, 2022, Pankshin LGA).

Thus, history shows that conflict in the area dates back to the colonial era precisely around the 1930s which

continued to manifest in modern times. Some community members lamented during interview as follow:

Conflict has been in existence from the olden days, by indication the history of conflict has its origin in the study area in the 1930s among the people in the locality or interstate conflict in society that is caused by selfish interest of individual. A conflict that occurred in the early 1950s known as Hausa vs the indigenous Ngas (*Lek Ngwa'ah*) that caused a serious damage to the people in general; it disintegrated the development as a community; the conflict in the area really affected the progression of the society in terms of development, politics, economy and social strata (interview with community elders, December 15, 2022, Pankshin LGA).

It is therefore pertinent to say that cultures are embedded in every conflict just as it is in Pankshin; this is because conflicts occur in human relationships. Cultures affect the ways we name, frame, blame, and attempt to domesticate conflicts. Cultural messages shape people's understanding of relationships and the way to handle or deal with the conflict and harmony that are always present whenever two or more people come together.

Analogy of Language and Culture in Conflict Resolution in Pankshin

Empirical evidences show that language similarities play a significant role in managing relations among the people in Pankshin Local Government Area and enhancing mutual understanding in their locality. Language also creates unity among the citizenry by the use of words to manage the effect or to avoid conflict within. For instance, some words used are *Nkina* (my Uncle), *Shar* (friend) *Lek war* (avoid fighting) etc. In this light, language and culture are used as conflict resolution tools in resolving conflict that happens between two or more communities.

Language and culture move together as twins because of their inherent roles in resolving conflict in general. An example is the consideration that language similarities really solved problem of conflict in the past as in the case of Ngas and Mupun in the 1980s. As Trains (1995) points out, people create words to describe things or concepts that are important in their environment. Ting and Oetzel (1999) underscore the significance of applying the concept of culture in understanding conflict.

It is noteworthy to mention that difference in value placement between cultures has great consequences in relationships and resolution of conflicts. Misconception can occur when parties in conflict assume that something of great importance to them is automatically important to the other party. Conflicts are culturally, linguistically and contextually bound. Words are better understood to members of a shared social environment than anyone else. Some words do not precisely have an equivalent meaning in the other language. Interpretations of words usually offer nearly exact glosses, not a precise equal (Ting & Oetzel, 1999).

Thus, using language in conflict resolution could be a kind of power given to the opposing parties to come to a truce. The implication is that conflict resolution process may become counterproductive as a result of lack of neutrality in language. Despite that, the significance of culture in conflict resolution cannot be overemphasized especially in Pankshin. In an interview with Nde CIK Dajur, he states that:

Culture plays an important role in solving conflict among the Pankshin people, in the case of conflict that happened between Pankshin and Tal in the 1930s which affected the then King (Late Nde Langkuk Ngwulong Pankshin). The people consider culture similarity in resolution of conflict between them as important, in accordance with the way they dance, worship and communication policy (interview with community ruler, December 18, 2022, Pankshin LGA).

So culture involves the mode of interaction and intervention in enhancing understanding among the conflicting communities. In this case, culture was considered as vital tool in resolving the conflict between Pankshin and Tal in the 1930s as they considered the migration path and communication methods, where the Tal man migrated from Pankshin hills before settling at the present area. Therefore, the two villages saw themselves as brothers and shared common culture according to the history. One respondent further confirmed that "in 1942 there was a cultural purification for Pankshin and Tal which served as symbol of unity in the society for forgiveness of the past crime committed."

As one of the components of culture, intermarriage between different groups has also played a vital role in conflict resolution. A respondent during an interview opined that:

Intermarriage from different communities helps

in resolving conflict between them and their neighbours. This is because most of the communities shared relationship through mother to father as Maternal Uncle (*Nkin or Shir*) in the maintenance of social relationship between the different groups or communities. In 1956, history indicated that intermarriage really intervened in resolving conflict that broke out between Kadung and Fier people at that time. Also, even in this present generation, intermarriages help in resolution of dispute across the ethnic groups within the Pankshin LGA. The most recent conflict is that of Vel and Fwor in 2002 on a border issue but due to consideration of the maternal relationship that exists, the conflict was resolved. By this, it shows that intermarriage really aids in resolving conflict in society (interview with community member, January 13, 2023, Pankshin LGA).

Traditional worshipers have greatly played a major part in the resolution of communities' conflicts in terms of sacrifice for unity between one village and another or between tribes in the LGA. In an interview with Ngwulong Fwor, he narrated that:

In 1970 traditional worshipers organized sacrifices for intervention in the case of a crime that had been committed by Wokkos and Pankshin people, which occurred as a result of trans-border conflict, which means that both villages must take an oath for forgiveness. The sacrifices are *Kum Sirshak* for unity and forgiveness of the wrong doings in the society (interview with community leader, January 7, 2023, Pankshin LGA).

It is to be noted that apart from the modern mechanisms of conflict resolution, there are various traditional methods of ensuring peaceful resolution of dispute, including elders' forum, oath-taking and ostracism. Elders' forum mechanism involves traditional chiefs and leaders in conflict resolution, especially at the community level. This approach dates back to the pre-colonial era in African societies. In African culture, age is accorded a lot of respect and in some areas, it is synonymous with wisdom. As a result, elders are consulted in finding solutions to disputes. However, this approach is hardly used in urban centres today, though it still features prominently in rural areas' dispute settlement processes.

In Pankshin communities, oath-taking is used even in

communal adjudication. A party or parties to a dispute are made to swear to an oath that they are innocent, or will tell the truth and abide by the verdict of the arbiters. However, many people usually refuse or are reluctant to take an oath because of their religious background. Ostracism is another functional traditional conflict resolution strategy. It involves the barring of guilty person or persons who committed heinous crimes or perpetrated violence from social gatherings or the community at large. As rightly pointed out by Airuch and Black (as cited in Ajayi & Buhari, 2014), "it is quite dangerous to relegate culture to the background in conflict resolution". Notwithstanding, culture is a label of social differences; it has been considered as tool of conflict resolution in multi-ethnic/multi-cultural societies.

Owing to its significance to human development and socialization, cultural similarities in our different societies or ethnic groups can unify the people and can be used as a symbol of togetherness and peace building between villages. For example, the Ngas man understands Mupun and other languages spoken in the surrounding communities and also shares the same cultural activities that serve as a key to unity and peace-building among them. Culture forms one's values, norms and style in resolving conflict. People tend to tolerate, listen, understand and cooperate with those who have similar values and belief system. Often, some intercultural conflicts are resolved when the parties realize that their perceptions of divergent interests are erroneous.

Misunderstanding is usually aggravated by the fact that one person/party underestimates or is ignorant of the range of value systems or misinterprets the norms that exist in different cultures and social environments. Numerous scholars assert that interpretations of incidences are bound by sociolinguistic perceptions. Basically, cultural variation has an impact on motivation, cognition and behaviour of citizens in dispute resolution (Opara, 2016).

Furthermore, the manipulation of language in communication can either frequently strengthen or weaken group solidarity. When the cultural groups we belong to are the overwhelming majority in our community, we are less probably to be aware of the content of the messages they send us. Cultures shared by dominant groups often seem to be 'natural', 'normal', 'the way things are done'. We only notice the effect of cultures that are different from our own, attending to behaviours that we label unusual or strange. Though culture is intertwined with conflict, some approaches to conflict resolution minimize cultural issues and influences (Hall,

1993). Hall further notes that:

Since culture is like an iceberg largely submerged, it is important to include it in our analyses and interventions. Icebergs unacknowledged can be dangerous, and it is impossible to make choices about them if we don't know their size or place. Acknowledging culture and bringing cultural fluency to conflicts can help all kinds of people make more intentional, adaptive choices (p. 17).

Cultural fluency is seen as a key tool for disentangling and resolving multi-layered, cultural conflicts. Cultural fluency is referred to as familiarity with cultures; their natures, how they work, and ways they intertwine with our relationships in times of conflict and harmony. Cultural fluency is awareness of several dimensions of culture, including, communication, ways of naming, framing, and taming conflict, approaches to meaning making, identities and roles. It should be noted that ways of naming, framing, and taming conflict vary across cultural boundaries (Avruch & Black, 1991).

It is pertinent to note that third party involvement plays a significance role in conflict resolution especially in the context of language and culture. Lederach (1996) for instance, identifies two third party roles: the formal mediator and the traditional elder. Generally, parties in conflict may not know the actual formal mediator, and he or she is acting neutrally. Traditional elders are accorded great respect for their local knowledge and relationships, and people are dependent on them for direction and advice, and for their skills in helping parties communicate with each other. Like traditional worshippers, traditional elders help facilitate communication between parties in conflict in the process of conflict resolution.

Avruch and Black (1991) hold that culture, as a source of shared symbols for making sense of the world, can constitute collective identities in more harmless ways. But with whatever degree of affective intensity, culture affords symbolic resources for defining group boundaries and within them for effecting political organization and mobilization. Culture is a necessary component of conflict and conflict resolution. Cultures resemble blood vessels that run through people's lives and relationships, giving them messages that shape their perceptions, attributions, judgments, and ideas of self and other (LeBaron & Pillay, 2006).

Like culture, the significance of language in conflict resolution is obvious in the United Nation's proclamation of 2001 as a year of dialogue among citizens. At these occasions Schwartz (2000) declared,

We are convinced that dialogue represents a new paradigm of security, especially in globalizing world with its manifold new challenges to individuals, communities and countries. A commitment to dialogue among civilizations is also commitment against resolutions but pursuing resolution and seeking security through dialogue requires cultural and linguistic considerations.

It is therefore pertinent to say that the role of language and culture in conflict resolution cannot be overemphasized.

Conclusion

In this study, we have examined the analogy of language and culture in conflict resolution in Pankshin Local Government Area of Plateau State. Culture determines the way we view the world, our moral values, as well as the way we deal with conflict using traditional conflict resolution system. Since there is no one-size-fits-all approach to conflict resolution and since culture is always a factor, it is used in that aspect.

We have also examined that cultural similarities for conflict resolution are in line with the interpretations of socio-cultural and linguistic perceptions in peace building. We express knowledge and feelings using language and culture in resolving conflict in our various communities. The study reveals that language and cultural similarities bring most of the communities together in Pankshin LGA; because they are used as a tool in resolving conflict. We argue that an effective conflict resolution should take cultural and linguistic factors into consideration. Thus, the notion of fairness, neutrality, cultural and linguistic awareness should be managed well.

Cultural influences and identities are important depending on context. When an aspect of cultural identity is threatened or misunderstood, it may become relatively more important than other cultural identities and this fixed, narrow identity may become the focus of stereotyping, negative projection, and conflict. This is a very common situation in intractable conflicts. Thus, it is useful for people in conflict to have interactive experiences that help them see each other as broadly as possible, experiences that foster the recognition of shared identities as well as those that are different. Since culture is so closely related to our identities (who we think we are), and the ways we make meaning (what is important to us and how), it is always a factor in conflict.

This study therefore concludes that language and culture may not always be the major cause of conflict but

they are definitely a major tool of conflict resolution amongst the communities that share common boundaries, languages, norms and cultural activities, as examined in Pankshin Local Government Area of Plateau State.

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