

The English Language and Conflict Resolution in Nigeria

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Abstract

To an average Nigerian, the incessant conflicts experienced in the society are worrisome. The different conflicts in Nigeria are related to different circumstances. The occurrence of these conflicts has further culminated in mistrust among individuals in the country. Besides, Nigeria is a multilingual, multicultural and multifaceted society with many ethnic groups and each speaking its own language. As humans coexist together in a speech community, conflict is inevitable. This means that there will always be one conflict or the other as long as people coexist. The heterogeneity of the country thus implies that there is need for a language in conflict resolution. English language as the official language performs

different functions in Nigeria. This article examines the role of the English language in conflict resolution in Nigeria. It shows how the English language 3 second language 3 is as old as Nigeria itself and has attained a prestigious position in the country. This is because the indigenous languages are yet to achieve the prestige accorded the English language. It is the opinion of this paper that the English language should be considered to be significantly effective for conflict resolution and uniting the country.

Key words: English, Language, second language, Conflict resolution, indigenous languages

Introduction

Language as a means of communication plays important role in the society. Through the use of Language, members of a speech community communicate effectively with each another. Language allows people to interact with each other and to write their thoughts and ideas in the society (Mathews 2014). VanPatten (2015) and Yule (2017) describe language as “uniquely human”. The uniqueness of using language in any speech community distinguishes human beings from animals. Perhaps one can say that only human beings are able to express their thoughts and ideas through communicating meaningful utterances through the use of language. The English language has a long history of development from Old English (700-1100) to Modern English (1800-1920) with its speakers in England (Burnley 2000). It is evident that the English language has improved considerably over a period of time from old English

to contemporary English and it has variations (Hughes, Trudgill, & Watt, 2013). This shows that the English Language has for long existed in the world and it is the native language of the British people.

Nigeria is linguistically blessed with different languages. It is estimated that Nigeria has a population of 170 million people (Ezeonwuka & Igwe 2016), and 250-500 ethno-linguistic entities (Onyemelukwe & Ogbachie 2015). With this diversification, Nigeria is an unequivocally multilingual, multi-ethnic and multicultural country. However, the country has witnessed series of ethnic and religious conflicts. These religious conflicts are often traced to Christianity and Islam (Ayodele 2013; Aliyu Moorthy & Idris 2016). These two religious groups have experienced incessant conflicts over the past decades. Thus, whenever these incessant conflicts occur, conflict resolution is immediately considered appropriate. According to Tinuade and Fadekemi (2015), conflict resolution is concerned with post conflict matters and the way forward for “reinsertion, reintegration, and rehabilitation....” The English language and conflict resolution could be defined as the medium which allows people to interact with each other in

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the course of resolving conflicts. Accordingly, language, humans and conflict resolution are inextricable. With Nigeria as a heterogeneous country, conflict is inevitable. The aim of this essay is to examine the role of the English language in conflict resolution in Nigeria.

The Linguistic Situation in Nigeria

Nigeria is a multilingual, multicultural and multifaceted society with many ethnic groups and each speaking its own language (Foyewa, Adebajo & Ogundepo, 2016). Each linguistic group is totally identified by the language and culture of the speech community. The linguistic situation in Nigeria is markedly associated with the arrival of the colonial masters (Jacob, 2014). In order to understand the linguistic situation in Nigeria, the era of colonization is worth mentioning here. Historically, the country had an organized speech community with people communicating with one another within the same linguistic groups before the advent of the British imperialists (Akinwale, 1999; Nnamdi-Eruchalu, 2012; Danladi, 2013; Opara, 2016). It may be further stated here that the multilingual and multicultural situation in Nigeria is unique. The uniqueness of each linguistic group makes language important to the speakers. The fact that the people had a language that enables them to communicate with families and other members in the communities provided a sense of pride among the speakers of the language.

It is convenient to say that the language of the people was a common force that united them in the speech community. Moreover, each linguistic group enjoyed this diversity and held unto its own language with high esteem because it was a heritage that tied the society together. Interestingly, the nation called Nigeria was formed from the 1914 amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorate under the British colonial rule (Adegami & Uche, 2015). The amalgamation led to the recognition of the dominant languages in the country. In the same vein, the amalgamation created Nigeria as a nation with Hausa as the dominant language in the northern region, Igbo language in the eastern region and Yoruba language in the western region.

Be that as it may, it is pivotal to note that the three languages are not the only linguistic groups in

the country struggling to survive. There are other linguistic groups existing in the country. In Nigeria today, there are three languages that are recognized as the major languages in the country, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (Akinwale, 2011; Aliyu, Moorthy & Idris, 2016). These three languages are officially and nationally established to be used for Government functions with the English language as the official language as declared in the 1979 constitution of the Federal Government of Nigeria (Adewumi, 2012; Obiegbu & Njemanze, 2015). Of course, since the decision for the adoption of these languages as the major languages is from the Federal Government, speakers of other minority languages have always been equivocal about such a decision.

The adoption of the three major languages for official functions in the country has created a negative impact on other minority languages (Obiegbu & Njemanze, 2015). The minority groups view the adoption of the three languages as being imposed on them. Moreover, most of the children raised in those parts of the country where the three dominant languages are spoken cannot speak their own indigenous languages as fluently as the major languages (Obiegbu, 2015). For example, most of the children in the northern part of the country are unable to communicate in their language but are fluent in the Hausa language. It is because Hausa is the dominant language in the north.

Consequently, Jacob (2014) points out that the Hausa ethnic group has an estimated population of twenty-one percent (21%), Igbo has eighteen percent (18%) and Yoruba has eleven percent (11%). The Hausa people as an ethnic group are located in the northern part of Nigeria, the Igbos in the eastern part of the country and the Yorubas in the western part of Nigeria. Other indigenous languages in the country are classified as minor languages. Omoniyi (2012) notes that languages in Nigeria are classified according to functions. He classified languages and functions into three:

- i. Indigenous or native language: Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo.
- ii. Exogenous or non-indigenous: English, French, Arabic, German and Russia
- iii. Pidgin Languages.

The three major languages mentioned earlier are the dominant languages in the country. These

languages function at the national level with the English language. For the exogenous or non-indigenous groups, the English language is the official language in Nigeria performing different functions. The other languages have limited functions to perform as foreign languages in the country. French is studied as a course in some universities. Arabic is used in the Koranic schools and studied as a course. German and Russian languages are recognized as foreign languages with limited speakers. Pidgin English in Nigeria is the language of wider communication. Hence, it is widely spoken in the Southern part of the country, especially in Warri, Calabar, Port Harcourt, Onitsha, Benin City, and Sapele; Army barracks, post offices, commercial centres and public service, and Magistrate courts in the country use Pidgin English for communication.

The linguistic situation in Nigeria has been described as a complex one (Obiegbu 2015). This means that the indigenous languages are not mutually intelligible. Also, as people coexist in a multilingual community with diverse languages and religions, conflict is inevitable (Danladi 2013). Yet, when conflicts occur in the society, there has to be a solution to the conflict through the use of language. Therefore, language becomes a tool for conflict resolution. In the case of Nigeria with diverse indigenous languages, the choice of the adoption of one indigenous language for conflict resolution could lead to another conflict. Since the different languages in the country are not mutually intelligible.

In addition, Ani (2015) notes that the heterogeneity of Nigeria as a nation precludes the adoption of any of the indigenous languages as a national language. The English language is second language in Nigeria. It is important in conflict resolution and unity in Nigeria (Danladi 2013). The English language is mutually intelligible to an average Nigerian. Hence, its use for conflict resolution is appropriate in order to avoid any linguistic group having a feeling of being marginalised.

Conflict: Religious and Ethnic Conflicts in Nigeria

Conflict has varying definitions and confusion exists in delineating the scope of conflict. It means

different things to different people and can range in intensity from minor difference of opinions through crises of many kinds of war between nations. Nigeria is a country with diverse languages and religions; because of this diversity, there is bound to be conflict among the people. According to Mojaye (2014), conflict is a universal phenomenon experienced in all human settlements. Conflict is both inevitable and a necessity in the society (Adesanya et al., 2015). Similarly, Ajayi (2014) also affirms that conflict as a concept is a natural phenomenon that exists even in African societies. Nigeria as a developing country has witnessed series of religious and ethnic conflicts.

The different conflicts in Nigeria are related to different circumstances. Ethnicity and religion serve as a form of identity in Nigeria (Adegbami & Uche 2015; Ahmed Moorthy & Idris 2016). One can say that the struggle for identity has led to the incessant occurrence of religious and ethnic conflicts in the country which has for long disrupted the peace and stability of the country. The conflicts in Nigeria occur because of religious and ethnic bigotry (Salawu 2010). Agbiboa (2013) and Adegbami and Uche (2015) have rightly observed that most of the conflicts in Nigeria are often attributed to religious factors, economic factors and ethnic factors. The most prevalent conflicts in the country are triggered by religious and ethnic factors.

According to Ajayi (2014) and Jacob (2014) conflicts occur among individuals with varying opinions through interaction and each group striving to gain at the end. When conflict arises as a measure for changing some societal ills, then it will have positive effect on the society. It can motivate people to find solutions to problems that occur in the society. However, when it arises as a means of selfish interest, then it will have a negative effect on the society. Religious conflict in Nigeria is common among the two major religions: Christianity and Islam (Salawu 2010; Agbiboa 2013; Aliyu Moorthy & Idris, 2016). The most common religious conflict is between these two religions.

Agbiboa (2013) reported that Nigeria was ranked in February 2004 as “the most religious people in the world with 90 percent of the population believing in God, praying regularly and affirming readiness to die on behalf of their belief”.

Paradoxically, religion in Nigeria has led to the untimely death of many innocent people. The Boko Haram sect that detests western education is bent on destroying lives and properties (Ajike 2015). These conflicts are usually incited by extremists with little knowledge of the religion. Undoubtedly, the conflicts between Christians and Muslims have a long history from the 1980s to the present Boko Haram era (Salawu 2010, Fawole & Bello 2011; Bagaji et al., 2012; Agbiboa 2013; Alimba 2014). Sadly, these religious conflicts have further led to mistrust among Christians and Muslims in the country.

Furthermore, ethnic conflict arises in different forms among ethnic groups. Adegbam and Uche (2015) note that language, family, and religion are associated with ethnic groups. Historically, Nigeria has witnessed several ethnic conflicts in the past and in recent times (Musa, 2010; Alimba, 2014; Nwaoga Nche & Olihe 2014). There is no part of the country that has not experienced one ethnic conflict or the other, apart from the religious conflict that has bedevilled the northern part of the country. The north central which is sometimes referred to as middle belt has had its share of ethnic conflict too. Indeed, all these conflicts have increased the level of disorder and insecurity, which has reached a worrisome point.

The Role of The English Language in Conflict Resolution in Nigeria

In resolving conflicts of any kind, language plays a very pivotal role (Osimen, Aniga & Bateye 2015). This implies that language and conflict resolution are inextricable. The language of focus here is the English language. In Nigeria, the English language is as old as Nigeria itself. It is a language that was introduced into the country in the past decades by the British imperialists for communication and interaction with the Nigerian society (Daramola 2012). In the words of Adewumi (2012), there is no accurate date to trace the introduction of English in Nigeria. However, the English language in Nigeria had existed since the arrival of the British imperialists to the country. Adewumi further affirms that the English language has existed with the people for long and a Nigerian variety of the English language has emanated from the British English. In support of this, Opara (2016) points out

that Nigerians have “converted” and “nativised” the English language to suit the Nigerian environment. It is clear that the English language in Nigeria has more speakers today as the lingua franca in the country.

According to Ifejirika (2013) and Opara (2016), the English language is a second language to majority of Nigerians today. As a country with English as the second language, Nigeria is placed under the outer circle (Kachru 1982 cited in Owolabi & Nnaji 2013). In fact, the English language has become the official language or lingua franca in the country (Nnamdi-Eruchalu 2012; Ifejirika 2013; Olowoyeye & Richard 2014; Ani, 2015; Opara 2016). Essentially, the English language performs different functions in Nigeria. It is the language of instruction in schools, administration, media, commerce, law, business, the National Assembly, etc. (Nnamdi-Eruchalu 2012; Danladi 2013; Ifejirika 2013).

In Nigeria, ethnic and religious conflicts are occurrences that have precipitated immense havoc (Fawole & Bello 2011; Jacob, 2014). However, as conflicts occur as a result of differences among the ethnic groups, language has a key role in resolving conflict among disputants. Therefore, conflict resolution is geared towards negotiations between disputing groups and finding lasting solutions for peaceful coexistence in the society (Nzekwu & Nnuta, 2014). For resolution to take place, language becomes a necessary tool for resolving conflicts in the society. It is therefore important to choose the language that both parties are familiar with. Now, the language to be used for resolution becomes the major concern in a multilingual, multi-ethnic and multicultural country like Nigeria. Besides, Nigeria is yet to have an indigenous language that could serve as a national language. The quest for an indigenous language as the national language has for long been debated among Nigerian scholars (Danladi 2013). One may suggest that the English language should serve as a tool for conflict resolution in Nigeria.

Danladi (2013) stresses that the “complex language situation” in Nigeria has resulted in the adoption of the English language as the official language. This indicates that none of the indigenous languages can be adopted for conflict resolution in Nigeria. In addition, it is not

surprising to see people from the same towns or villages whose languages or dialects are incomprehensible (Olusuji 2012) to each other. This obviously is the language situation in Nigeria. Ordinary, every ethnic group would prefer their language to be adopted for conflict resolution. But, the aim of the resolution will be defeated because communication will be difficult. Hence, it is impossible to adopt any of the indigenous languages for conflict resolution because there will be no trust in the process. It is essential to consider the multilingual nature of the country. Considering the lack of mutual intelligibility of the indigenous languages, Ifejirika (2013) and Ajepe and Ademowo (2016) believe that the only language that is mutually intelligible and neutral in the country is the English Language. The English language seems to have gained a prestigious status that no indigenous language can compete with it.

Although Udosen (2013) and Obiegbu and Njemanze (2015) have noted that the indigenous languages have paved way for the wide spread of the English language in Nigeria as a result of their reluctance to developing to the status of a national language, one may argue here that, even if one of the indigenous languages developed to the status of a national language, mutual intelligibility and neutrality would have to be considered before its adoption. Hence, the English language in Nigeria, be it the Standard English, the Nigerian English or the Nigerian Pidgin English "(diluted or doctored English)", is mutually intelligible and neutral to all ethnic groups. Thus, an average Nigerian can interact with people in the society (Olowoyeye & Richard 2014; Ajepe & Ademowo 2016). Moreover, no ethnic group can claim ownership of the English language.

Furthermore, the English language cannot be associated with any of the geopolitical zones in the country. Foyewa (2014) observes that in the six geographical zones, the English language is used as a second language for communication among the different ethnic groups in their respective domains. So, it cannot be referred to as the language of a particular geographical zone (Danladi 2013), unlike the indigenous languages that are categorised into one of the six geopolitical zones as created by the National Assembly: North Eastern Zone North Central Zone Middle Belt Zone, South

East Zone South West Zone and South South Zone (Tinuade & Fadekemi 2015). Accordingly, the English language has become the language of unity in Nigeria. One language that binds Nigerians today is the English language. Ajepe and Ademowo (2016) attest to the fact that the English language is a pillar that has fostered unity among Nigerians. Without the English language in Nigeria today, unity is improbable, following the reoccurrence of religious and ethnic conflicts.

With the religious and ethnic conflicts that have ravaged the country. These conflicts have caused fear and mistrust among the different ethnic groups. However, to have a united and safe Nigeria where people can coexist freely and interact with other members of the society. We need to engage the ethnic groups in dialogue and the English Language is the only language that is readily available for dialogue among the different ethnic groups. Yusuf (2012) is of the opinion that the English language has a significant role to play in conflict resolution in a multilingual country like Nigeria. Each zone has representatives at the Local, State and Federal level. It is easier to engage in dialogue with the representatives using the English language in resolving conflicts among the different ethnic groups.

In Nigeria today, the utmost desire of the people is to have a united Nigeria. The English language promotes unity in the country. Adewumi (2012) and Obiegbu (2015) observe that the English language has contributed eminently to the promotion of peace and unity among the different ethnic groups in the country. Obiegbu (2015) further states that even in the face of conflicts, the only language that Nigerians understand better for the promotion of unity in the country is the English language. Even with the incessant religious and ethnic conflicts escalating in the different parts of the country, Nigerian people are still ready to settle their differences using the English language. One language that is capable of uniting the people is the English language.

For integration and unity in Nigeria, the English language has the status of accommodating the different ethnic groups. According to Omotoyinbo (2016), the English language not only performs functions in the academic, political, communication and religious sectors, but has

promoted unity and integration in the country. In a situation whereby people are no longer willing to coexist today because of religious and ethnic conflicts, only the English language is ready to unite all the ethnic groups. Although resolution may sometimes take long before the conflicting ethnic groups come to a final agreement we are optimistic that with the English language in conflict resolution, Nigeria will continue to be great.

Conclusion

Language and humans are inextricably linked in the speech community. The English language in Nigeria has a key role to play in conflict resolution. In a multilingual, multi-ethnic and multicultural country like Nigeria, religious and ethnic conflicts are inevitable (Fawole & Bello 2011; Jacob, 2014). The reality is that the incessant religious conflicts in the country have claimed the lives of many innocent Nigerians. Also, the aftermath of the conflicts creates anger and fear among the different ethnic groups. Today, Nigeria has an estimated population of 170 million people and 250-500 indigenous languages (Ezeonwuka & Igwe 2016; Onyemelukwe & Ogbechie 2015).

The three major languages are Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, the other indigenous languages are classified as minority languages. Despite the recognition of the three major languages at the local, state and Federal level, none of these languages has been able to attain the status of being considered as a national language. Also, these indigenous languages are not mutually intelligible. However, because of the complexity of the language situation in Nigeria, the English language has continually enjoyed the privileges accorded to it as the official language. It performs different functions in the country. It is the English language that has continued to integrate and unite the Nigerian people, despite the incessant religious and ethnic conflicts that have plagued the country. In conflict resolution, the language that is mutually intelligible and neutral to all the ethnic groups is the English language. It is therefore a powerful tool for conflict resolution in Nigeria.

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