

Language and Communication as Tools for Conflict Resolution in the Contemporary African Society

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Abstract

Conflict whenever it occurs anywhere in the World is widely perceived as destructive. The destructive capacity of every conflict makes it a vice that should be avoided. Therefore conflict has become a permanent life threat and in some cases has reversed development globally. The dangers associating with outbreak of conflict require that there should be proactive measures taken to avoid the occurrence of conflict in the initial stage. In doing this, we begin to appreciate the role of communication in promoting human relationship. This paper takes an examination on the role of language in providing an environment for effective understanding of the mechanism for resolving conflicts that exist among parties. Hence this paper concludes that the success of any communication in conflict resolution has to do with the degree of language choice which allows parties in conflict to understand the factors that degenerate into violent conflict.

Key words: Africa, Communication, Conflict, Language, Resolution

Introduction

Language and communication is a multi disciplinary field that analyses the causes of social conflict and explores processes by which conflict or war can be handled so as to maximize social value, justice in order to minimize violence conflict. It is the systematic mechanism through which conflict mediators could bargain and negotiate in order to bring violence conflict into halt. Therefore language and communication assume systematic tools for resolving violence conflict in the world.

The importance of language and communication goes to show that whenever conflict breaks out, parties into conflict should be taught in a clear language understood by the parties about the dangers of such conflict. It is on this note that language becomes a means to which information is communicated between and among people in conflict environment. According to Amiara (2016:268), many conflict analysts have defined and interpreted human actions in relation to enhancing peace. This analysis opines that human beings have the capabilities of initiating and diverting social changes to enhance or promote social relations. By this, the social changes have the likelihood of transforming conflict-prone processes into pro-peace. This would be done through an adequate communication between/among people in a conflict environment. Therefore communication becomes an important factor that has promoted human's social relations because the absence of communication breeds conflict environment and conflict situation among people (Amiara, 2016:268). This is why communication is a channel through which information is passed from one person to another or from one person to group of persons. This information is transmitted through effective use of a language understood by people hence language and communication can be used interchangeably in this work. The reason is that, communication cannot take place in devoid of language and for information to be passed between the encoder and the decoder there must be an absolute use and understanding of a particular language. Therefore, the both terms assume a significant importance in the resolution of conflict in our modern society.

Conceptual clarificaton

i. Communication

As widely conceived, communication promotes human relationship in social environment. By this, Amiara (2016:268) holds that communication is an important factor that promotes social relations among

people especially those with diverse interests. Therefore, the importance of communication in a social gathering shows that it stimulates and promotes love, understanding and development hence Best(2007:107) opines that communication is the process of sharing and exchanging information between individuals, groups and potential parties in a conflict situation. It is a process of interacting and relating with others, meaning that parties into conflict still talk.

Communication is a means of peace building, confidence and trust which promotes healthy relationship between/among people. Hence it is often believed that when people interact and relate with one another, it helps to remove doubt, suspicion and hatred. This shows that steady communication among people promotes a healthy relationship hence it does not allow for prejudice or mix-feelings against anybody rather it becomes an essential ingredient of peace building. Therefore communications relate to the presence and sharing of accurate information about a conflict situation, being able to talk about the feelings and concerns of party, speaking about what parties would like to change and discussing the nature and type of conflict, touching on the positions, interests, needs and fears of parties (Best, 2007:103). It is on this note that one may add that the importance of communication in the resolution of conflict has to do with the choice of language and the degree to which the message or information communicated will be understood by the parties; hence language enhances communication in conflict resolution

- ii. Conflict:** Conflict is mostly conceived as the absence of peace and the breakdown of order. However, Scholars of social conflict have made several attempts to dissect the concept, especially on the analysis of what constitute violent conflict and how it is inimical to peace. Indeed, conflict is actual or perceived opposition of needs, values and interest (Olorede and Olorede, 2015:2).

Indeed, conflict is a phenomenon that is an important part of human existence and a natural part of our daily lives (Isard, 1992:316). It is an intrinsic and inevitable part of human existence (Francis, 2006:20). By this, conflict appears to be pervasive in human society. What this means is that conflict generally arises as a result of the pursuit of incompatible interests and goals by different groups or individuals. By this, Hobbes argued in Leviathan that:

*when two men desire the same thing,
which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy,
they become enemies and...endeavor to
destroy or subdue one another(Hobbes,1951).*

To this extent, it is the inability of parties to enjoy values accrued to scarce commodities that invariable conveys them to conflict. For Butler (2009:13), conflict arises from a mutual recognition of competing or incompatible material interests and basic values. However, most conflicts in the social realm are dynamic rather than static in nature, and evolve in accordance with interactions between and among the aggrieved parties (Butler, 2009:13). This shows that the absence of communications or interactions among people provides conflict environment, a situation the aggrieved parties are ready to go into war with one another.

iii. Conflict resolution

The resolution of conflict has widely come to refer to the actual tackling of prevailing disagreement that translates to violence conflict. In other words, conflict resolution is seen by Miller (2003:8), as “a variety of approaches aimed at terminating conflict through the constructive solving of problems, distinct from management or transformation of conflict”. Miall, Hugh, Ramsbotham, Oliver, Woodhouse Tom (1999:21), indicate that by conflict resolution, it is expected that the deep rooted sources of conflict are addressed and resolved, and behavior is no longer violent, nor are attitudes hostile any longer while the structure of the conflict has been changed. However, Mitchell and Banks, (1998), use conflict resolution to refer to:

a. An outcome in which the issues in an existing conflict are satisfactorily dealt with through a solution that is naturally acceptable to the parties, self sustaining in the long run and productive of a new positive relationship between parties that were previously hostile, adversaries and;

b. Any process or procedure by which such an outcome is achieved.

Therefore, Conflict is resolved when the basic needs of parties have been met with necessary satisfiers, and their affairs have been allayed (Best, 2007:94-5). Others like those over values, may be non-resolvable and can at best be transformed, regulated or managed.

By this however, conflict resolution appears to be a constructive solving of all the factors that translated into violent behaviour with the intention that all those underlying factors that led to the outbreak of conflict are once addressed. The resolution of conflict entails an adoption of variety of approaches such as grass root community based activities, communication, good governance, collaboration, negotiation and many other pro-active methods like conciliation, arbitration, accommodation, confrontation/fighting and problem-solving. Therefore, conflict resolution connotes a sense of finality, where the parties to a conflict are mutually satisfied with the outcome of settlement and the conflict is resolved in a true sense

Aims of the study

This study aims at:

- Investigating the role of language and communication in the resolution of conflict in the contemporary African society.
- Examining whether lack of communication has any effect in the prevailing state of crisis that have gripped Africa over the years.
- To identify how language usage and communication would lead to peace building and peacemaking.
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Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on human needs theory to explore the relevance of language and communication in the resolution of conflict. The theory was propounded by David McClellan in the 1960s after Maslow had opined that human needs are categorized into three types of motivation which ranges regardless of age; sex; race; and culture. The theory is a direct response to human desire to satisfy his basic needs such as security, power, happiness, food and sex. Human needs theory is similar to that of frustration, aggression and relative deprivation theory. Its main assumption is that humans have basic needs which they seek to fulfill and that the denial and frustration of this needs by other groups or individuals could affect them, immediately or later, therefore leading to conflict (Rosati, Carroll and Coate, 2007:51). In order word, to provide access to one and deny or hinder access to another would amount to denial and could make people to result to violence in an effort to protect these needs.

Therefore, humans need basic information that could improve their social relations, economic and political relations in the society. The absence of this information amounts to denial of sense of belonging which would result to violence. It is on this premise that Ademola (2007:51), holds that basic human needs in this sense comprise physical, psychological, social and spiritual needs. Needs theorists such as Maslow in his motivation and personality, identified psychological needs, safety needs, belongingness and love, esteem and self actualization. It is important to add that the need for information cannot be inextricably diverged from the above basic needs of man. This is because language and communication play an important role in the security of people, therefore man needs information to secure himself and his environs and this information can be communicated using a particular language. Against this background however, Agbede (2003:18), holds that language provides the unique medium through which the belief system, world-views, moral value and virtually all the basic ingredients of any given society are passed on from generation to generation. Thus communication relates to the presence and sharing of accurate information about a conflict situation, being able to talk about feelings and concerns of parties, speaking about what parties would like to change and discussing the nature and type of the conflict, touching on the

position, interest, needs and fears of parties (Amiara, 2016:279). Thus poor communication or the absence of communication about these and other subjects, or a misinterpretation of the needs and feelings of one another by conflict parties, can easily lead to the escalation of conflict (Best, 2007:103). Communication in this context is the process of sharing and exchanging information between individuals, groups and potential parties in a conflict situation.

Methods of conflict resolution

Conflict occurs through a number of processes. The process to which conflict occurs today depicts the application of different methods for the resolution of such conflict. Therefore methods of conflict resolution vary according to the nature of conflict, the context of conflict, history of conflict and the culture within which conflict takes place (Onu, 2009: 89). In other words, regardless of the level of conflict to deal with the incompatible interests between/among people, there are differing approaches to which conflict can be resolved.

However, conflict can result in destructive outcomes or creative ones depending on the approach that is taken. Therefore, if we can manage conflict creatively, we can often find new solutions that are naturally satisfactory to both parties. By this, Fisher (2008:5), holds that sometimes this will involve a distribution of resources or power that is more equitable than before or in creating a larger pool of resources or forms of influence than before. Thus the resolution of conflict from its earliest stage entails the application of the proactive measures such as good governance, grass root community based activities and communication to deal with the outbreak and suppression of conflict. In other words, Fisher, (2000:6), further maintains that creative outcomes are more probable when the parties are interdependent, that is each having some degrees of independence and autonomy from which to influence the other, rather than one party primarily dependent on the other.

According to Blake, Shepherd and Mouton (1964), given the interdependence among people, three general strategies have been identified that the party may take towards dealing with conflict; win-lose, lose-lose, and win-win.

The win-lose method

The win-lose approach is all too common because it avoids the opportunity for people to learn about the behaviors of destructive conflict including competition, dominance, aggression and defense that permeates many of our social relationships beginning from the family level to the school play ground. This approach is likened to a “fixed pie” or “non zero sum game” situation which is an assumption often made incorrectly, that what one party gains, the other loses. The strategy here is this: to force the other side to capitulate even though sometimes, very difficult entails persuasion, this is done through socially acceptable mechanism such as majority vote, the authority of the leader or the determination of a judge. Sometimes, it involves secrete strategies, threat and innuendo. What is practically significant here is that the valued outcome is to have a victor who is superior, and a vanquished who withdraws in shame, but who prepares very carefully for the next round.

The lose-lose method

This method is exemplified by smoothing over conflict or by reaching the simplest of compromises. In this context, disagreement is seen as inevitable and therefore, parties always tend to split the difference or smooth over difficulties in as painless way as possible. The implication is that in reaching compromise, each party gets what it wants, and resigns itself to partial satisfaction. Thus, neither side is aware that by confronting the conflict fully and cooperatively they might have created a more satisfying solution.

The win-win method

In conflict resolution the win-win approach is a conscious and systematic attempt to maximize the goals of parties through collaborative problem solving. In other words, the conflict is seen as a problem to be solved rather than a war to be won. By this, Fisher (2008:6) maintains that the important distinction is we

(both parties) verse the problem rather than we (one party) verse them (the other party). According to him, this method focuses on the needs and constraints of both parties rather than emphasizing strategies designed to conquer. It is imperative to know that the win-win approach of conflict resolution emphasizes the creative outcomes of conflict to both parties. This shows that parties into conflict work towards ensuring equal benefits or outcomes of the conflict. A good example of this approach can be seen during the end of Nigerian civil war in which Yakubu Gowon declared the outcome of the war to be 'no victor no vanquished'.

However, most conflict analysts have represented the win-win approach to zero sum game thus emphasizing that propensity is equal to both parties. In other words, the parties work towards common and super ordinate goals, in order to ensure mutual benefits to the parties.

The role of language and communication in conflict resolution

Language is the pivot on which all human activities, ranging from the most prosaic to the most profound resolve. It provides the unique medium through which the belief system, world-view, moral values and virtually all the basic ingredients of any given society are passed on from generation to generation. Agbede (2003:18), holds that the essential thread that runs through all these authorities is communication, i.e. interlocutors trying to exchange their ideas. Language as a natural ability is common to every normal human being. All normal beings are naturally disposed to using language for the sole purpose of communication. Language in action can be seen in terms of verbal, non-verbal, and written media. Therefore, language and communication are sine qua non in this world of words and continued eruptions of conflicts or disputes (Adejimola, 2009:36).

Language is however seen as a key in human's social relations, and therefore language and communication are crucial in the management and resolution of conflicts or disputes between or among peoples in a conflict. The importance of this assertion goes to show that human feelings are expressed through language. This implies that language makes it possible to express feelings, emotions, views, ideas, opinions, perceptions, objects, places, things, information and situations. Therefore, information about conflict and conflict situation can be expressed in language. This shows that communication relates to the presence of sharing and of changing accurate information about a conflict or conflict situation. In other words, the resolution of conflict can only be made possible when information is passed to another person that a conflict has been identified and the communicator wishes to settle it. The identification of the conflict requires an effective communication as a key to facilitate dialogue between/ among parties.

Therefore, the role of communication is very powerful and assumes one of the proactive methods that aimed at preventing the occurrence of conflict. In fact, it promotes interactions and relations among people meaning that parties into conflict situation still talk. In other words, the importance of communication can help to remove doubt, suspicion and contribute to the process of confidence building. The import of steady communication between people is that it discourages prejudice and ill-feeling among people and contributes to the process of confidence building. By this, Best opines that:

Communication is a non-adversarial, cheap method of preventing and removing conflict situations, quite within the grip of the parties. Once communication is lost, parties risk getting into deep crisis that cannot be easily resolved. Thus, communication is inevitable for conflicts prevention in the first instance, and then for conflict resolution (Best, 2007: 96).

In dealing with conflict resolution strategy, Aja Kpuru-Aja (2009:15) holds that conflict prevention is a pro active measure that depends on communication channels and intelligence co-ordination to control and manage a strained relationship before threats materialize as a conflict situation. This shows that communication is essential in preventing conflict from its manifestation. Therefore, communication gives an opportunity to respond to early warning system that is designed to detect and respond to early threats or conflict signs for the preservation of norms and rules of peaceful coexistence. Indeed, communication facilitates peace process and prepares ground for parties into conflict to resolve their differences. For

example in 1993, the Enugu State sole administrator, Capt. Tony Ekor with his Cross River State counterpart brokered peace between the people of Ikwo and Nsobo of Obubara local government following their protracted wars. The resolution of the conflict was done using English as the means of communication hence the two parties speak two different dialects-Ikwo and Ikori. In Middle East, the 1978 Camp David accord between Palestine and Israel was achieved using English Language as a medium of communication. The whole essence is to ensure that the two parties would be able to communicate their differences, thus marking the beginning of telecommunication diplomacy in the world. In the contemporary African society communication has assumed a significant means of peace education hence Nwoli (2009:78) opines that peace education is the process of pro-active enlightenment on the knowledge and skills of observing and responding to early warning indicators.

Peace education requires a channel of communication which is promoted by the role of language hence it acts against misperception and misinterpretation of intention by either party. Usefully, employing free flow of communication and information makes dialogue the supreme values (strategy) of conflict prevention.

Conflict as a characteristic of African states

Beginning from the periods of pre-colonial to colonial eras, Africa has been gripped with festering crises. The empires of Ashanti, Fanti, Songhai, Gio, Mali and many others did provide a justification of Africa as having culture of conflict. Till after independence a continued state of violence persisted with each state engaging in either ethnic induced conflict or struggle for resource control.

Therefore, a study of African kind of conflict reveals that there are intra state and extra state conflicts. By this, intra state conflict has come to be seen as a conflict that takes the form of a struggle between two or more groups of power contenders within a state, each seeking to accede to political power in order to advance in interests and goals. Orwa (1985, 129) holds that at worst intra state political conflicts can cause costly civil wars, especially when the state apparatus fails to mediate successfully between the conflicting parties. While extra state conflict occurs because of competition between two or more states. Because no state is self sufficient, they become interdependent. This interdependence produces a degree of interaction (by which we mean increased interaction or close contacts) among independent and sovereign African states. In other words, because states pursue divergent interests, increased contact is likely to cause conflicts as it is to promote co-operation.

In African society, intra state conflicts had even occurred within a well organized state system with a legally constituted state apparatus for the mediation and arbitration of conflicts. Most conflicts that had occurred in African states today could be analyzed from the failure of governments of such states to deal with the sources of such conflicts. In Sudan up to the time of independence of south Sudan, there were conflicts of ethnic marginalization, ethno-religious conflicts and resource control in Nigeria, government induced conflict in Cote d'Ivoire, political crisis in Tunisia and Burundi as the least of all the conflicts that had taken place in African states. Apart from intra-state conflicts as mentioned above, there were extra state conflicts like the ideological differences between Kenya and Tanzania as Kenyans accused the Tanzanians of envying their capitalist economy as against the socialist economy of the Tanzanians. In West Africa there was power struggle between Ghana and Nigeria during the founding of Organization of African Unity. Orwa, (1985:129), holds that this difference continued until Nkrumah was over thrown in 1966 as Nkrumah's commitment to socialism and his call for immediate unification of African states alienated both the conservative and moderate states. As a result, Nigeria led a strong and successful campaign against Nkrumah's efforts to mould a continental system based on his ideology of African unity (Aluko, 1976:145).

In 1975 and 1979, Angola had lord it over with Zaire on a suspicion that the Angolan government would provide an operational base to Mobutu's opponents to attack him. Though it was clear that president Mobutu was interested in the oil resources of the exclave of Cabinda and the existence of a socialist government in Angola at the time when internal opposition to Mobutu's rule was strong alarmed the government of Zaire who was encouraged by the United States government to pursue an anti Angolan

policy. These and more emphasized the culture of conflict in Africa beginning from the period of independence.

Conclusion

A common trend among scholars and academics of social conflict is to perceive conflict from the negative angle. This is because of the destructive outcomes of conflict whenever it occurs. However conflict is not only destructive but also constructive especially in the development of human social relations. Constructive conflicts lead to the development of society, state and community. Therefore constructive conflict enhances human relations including communication hence an understanding about the nature and types of conflicts deals with the degree to which information about the conflict is communicated to the people.

Therefore, communication plays an important role in the understanding of the nature, types and outcomes of every conflict. Most importantly, communication in conflict environment cannot be valid without an application of a language, thus language plays an important role by conveying meaning and understanding to the information communicated. Therefore, language and communication play an important role in the resolution of conflict

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