

Language Use and Communication as Determinants for Effective Governance: A Case of Academic Staff Union of Universities and Benue State University Management, Makurdi

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Abstract

Language is a veritable tool or instrument of communication between human beings, organizations or societies. It is also a potential weapon for the unification of groups and nations worldwide. However, depending on how language is used, it could serve as a double edged sword to create tension, anarchy, rancorous atmosphere, mar relationships or diffuse tension and effect harmonious relationship and coexistence between individuals or groups of people within a geographical location including academic setting. This paper which is rooted in socio-linguistics, examines how language used by Benue State University Management and Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) BSU chapter between 2009 and 2010, caused friction or strengthened ties between these bodies. The work adopts Giles' and Hayakawa's Snarl and Purr Maxims, employs qualitative methodology and proposes cordiality of language use for effective, smooth and strike-free academic programmes in Nigerian universities especially Benue State University, Makurdi.

Keywords: *communication, university management, language use*

Introduction

Language is a form of human communication using words, either spoken or written or gestures with hands or other parts of the body. It is structured with grammar. It is the utmost treasured or cherished resource which is naturally designed and endowed basically to human beings as a medium of communication with one another or between groups in an environment or setting. It defines our lives, formulates our thoughts, it is a precursor of/and heralds the human existence, it equally enables all we are and have.

However, depending on how it is used, language could serve as venom which begets tension, conflicts or anarchy of whatever sort. Conversely language possesses the capacity to serve as a double-edged sword and could equally diffuse tension, improve relationships and effect harmonious co-existence between individuals and or groups of people in a given location, even an academic setting.

This paper utilises sociolinguistic insights, specifically, Giles' and Hayakawa's (1981) Snarl and Purr theoretical propositions to explicate how language use in communication between Benue State University Administration and the Benue State University branch of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) BSU Chapter, from 2009 to 2010, hurt or enhanced relations between the aforementioned bodies

University/ASUU Strikes in Nigeria: A Historical Review

The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in Nigeria was founded in 1978 (Tokpe, 2014:1) after the proscription of the then National Association of University Teachers (NAUT), in order to address the declining quality of the Nigerian University education (Aidelunuoghene 2014:7). Aidelunuoghene (2014) further quotes Makosa (2007) as saying that: "The history and struggles of ASUU was at the beginning of the decline in the oil boom, when the country faced the consequences of the failure of its rulers to use the oil wealth to generate production and a social welfare system". It was these and other prevailing issues at that time that instigated ASUU to pick up the weapon they knew best: industrial strike, defined as "an organised work stoppage by a body of workers to enforce compliance with demands made on an employer or a group of employers" (Chijioko, 2013:1).

The kind of events which generated the university upheavals in Nigeria originated in the 1960s. They were a response to attempts by politicians in the First Republic to interfere with the pre-independence university autonomy. Matters worsened under successive military reigns; with three effects on university autonomy: the violation of the prescribed process for the appointment of university vice chancellors, the seizure or suspension of the powers conferred on the university councils as the sole employers, and the removal of the powers of university senates as final deciders of academic matters.

After the university teachers' strike of 1973 to press for improved conditions of service in the aftermath of the deplorable conditions occasioned by the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), the Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon, ordered the striking university employees to resume work or face the wrath of

government such as dismissal and outright ejection from their official residences. This regrettable act is aptly captured by Chukwuemeka (2011:67) thus:

That singular incident epitomised the most fundamental aspect of the university crisis. Its socio-psychological and symbolic implication was national humiliation ruinous both for the system and the staff, resulting in the lowering of prestige, self-esteem, dignity of labour and job security. The event signaled the beginning of the bid by the military ruling class to “capture” the university terrain.

Since inception in 1978, a considerable number of ASUU national and local chapter strikes have been recorded, especially during the military regimes notably from 1988 to the present, which circumstance Tokpe laments that “almost all Heads of State and Presidents of Nigeria between 1988 and 2013 (including the seven day national warning strike of 16th November, 2016) have been compelled by ASUU through strike to meet their demands.

Statistics from the National Universities Commission (NUC) cited in Chukwuemeka (2011:39) show that since 1992, ASUU has downed tools over 23 times to press home its demands, with some of the industrial actions lingering for more than 6 months.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilises Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) which emphasises the adjustments that people employ in a communication endeavour (Agbedo 2015:72). Developed by Howard Giles, CAT which evolved from speech adjustment theory, and consists of *Interactant* and *Convergence* aspects, accounts for people’s attempts to emphasise or minimise social differences between them and others whom they interact with. The factors that lead to the accommodation activity are adjustments which can be through verbal or non-verbal communication. Referring to the participants in a communication activity as *Interactants*, the theory describes the human tendency to adjust their behaviour while communicating; which could seemingly be to downplay their emotions and uphold the ability to control the social differences between the interactants. This presupposes that people need to accommodate their communication activities in order to gain approval and create a positive face for the interactants or inter-communicators. *Convergence* on the other hand symbolises a procedure in which people tend to adapt the other person’s communication attitudes or characteristics in order to reduce the social differences at stake in a communication chain.

In disregard to the *Divergence* approach which is a second part of the C.A.T., but does not have direct bearing on the focus of our presentation, this paper merges the C.A.T. with Hayakawa’s (1981) proposition of the ‘snarl’ and ‘purr’ use of utterances which could mar or lubricate communication between individuals or groups in a given environment.

For Hayakawa (1981:28), language is of immense relevance to humanity and a crucial medium of information and effective conveyor of the feelings which individuals harbour on issues and personalities”, agreeing that “the expressive use of language affects us”. Aside from the “tone of voice, and rhythm”, another “extremely important and effective element of language”, according to Orjime “is the aura of feelings-pleasant or unpleasant-that surrounds practically all words”. Orjime’s take here is a reminder about communicators being mindful and careful of the way language is utilised in their communications. Bargoan and Miller in Orjime (2002:58-59) validate this position that unless common sense and writers like Goffman are completely off base, people use considerable time trying to persuade others to perceive them as attractive as socially desirable individuals; that is they deliberately enjoy verbal and non-verbal strategies to maximise the likelihood of creating favourable impression.

This paper adopts the descriptive approach for its analysis by identifying and selecting terms, words, utterances or vocabulary items which are capable of dissipating tension, confrontation and or crises between groups of people. The preference of this type of analysis is rooted in Hayakawa’s Maxim of ‘Snarl’ and ‘Purr’ language or vocabulary. A ‘Snarl’ word is abusive, spoken in a bad-tempered way” or “an act of speaking in an angry, nasty, insulting and abusive as well as bad-tempered manner” such that progress or cooperation is retarded. ‘Purr’ language or a ‘Purr’ statement on the other hand is “an act of writing or speaking in a low gentle and respectful voice”, indicating excitement, happiness or a satisfactory state with an intent to attract someone to perform a positive act. Regarding extent, our type of description is restricted to individual and intra-national or group conflicts which are communal in nature.

ASUU-BSU Chapter Participation in/or Initiation of Strikes

Benue State University was established on 27th day of December, 1991 by the Benue State University Law (CAP.15: 181) and has experienced five tenure vice chancellor administrations/administrators namely:

Professor Charles Vajime 1992-2000, Professor David Ker 2000-2005, Professor Paul Akase Sorkaa 2005-2010, Professor Charity Angya 2010-2015, and Professor Msugh Kembe, the incumbent vice chancellor, 2015 to date. ASUU-BSU, an affiliate of the National body, has, from the time of its establishment, either participated in or initiated thirteen strikes precipitated either by national or local issues evident from the table below.

Table 1: Strike Actions at BSU, 1996-2009

| S/No | Nature of Strike and Date | Issues | Date of Suspension of Strike Action |
|------|---|---|---|
| 1. | National warning strike – March 18 th , 25 th , and 1 st April, 1996 | Poor pay and failure of FGN to review its agreement with ASUU | 2 nd April, 1996. |
| 2. | National total and indefinite strike 9 th April, 1996 | Failure of Government to review the September 3, 1992 Agreement with ASUU. | 1 st July 1996 |
| 3. | Local Strike 13 th April, 1999 | Payment of HATISS in its original form/arrears. | 19 th June, 1996 |
| 4. | National indefinite strike 22 nd April, 1999. | Refusal of FGN to negotiate with ASUU on conditions of service and funding. | 9 th November, 1999. |
| 5. | Local Strike 10 th November, 1999. | To press for the payment of September – December 1999 HATISS arrears and allowance. | 17 th November, 1999. |
| 6. | National indefinite strike 2 nd April, 2001 | Failure of FGN to sign an agreement reached with ASUU concerning funding, basic salaries and autonomy. | July 4, 2001 |
| 7. | National total and indefinite strike Sunday, December 29, 2002. | Under funding of teaching, research, arbitrary cut in salaries and demotion of academic staff, failure to assist State Universities, unjust sack of academic staff at the University of Ilorin. | May 2003 |
| 8. | Local 2 day warning strike – 3 rd August, 2006. | To press for payment of 12.5% arrears, and monetisation | 4 th August, 2006. |
| 9. | National indefinite and total strike-Sunday, 25 th March, 2007. | Collapse of the renegotiation of the ASUU/FGN 2001 agreement, under-funding of Universities, University autonomy and academic freedom. | 4 th July, 2007. |
| 10. | National 1-week warning strike – Sunday, 17 th February, 2008. | Part of efforts towards the completion of the stalled negotiation. | 25 th February, 2008. |
| 11. | Local strike – 12 th March, 2008 | Non-payment of 15% salary increase/arrears. | Wednesday, 26 th March, 2008 |
| 12. | National 2 weeks warning strike 18 th May, 2009 | Failure of the FGN to sign the document of agreement it reached with ASUU. | Sunday, 31 st May, 2009. |
| 13. | National, total, comprehensive and indefinite strike – Monday 22 nd June, 2009. | Failure of the FGN to sign the document of agreement it reached with ASUU | |

Data Presentation and Analysis

The data for this paper is assembled from written communications between ASUU-BSU Chapter Executive, the Benue State University Management, the national print and electronic media especially the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (News Commentary) and selected academic publications including academic journals and dissertations, which focus on the phenomenon of Universities Management-ASUU strike with specific attention on the Benue State University, Makurdi. This study is an investigation of the linguistic nomenclatures which the parties, sometimes, employ that propel them to relate like cats and dogs. In our case study, we present the usage of these ‘snarl’ and Purr concepts in tabular form below:

| Period of Strike | | Use of Purr/Snarl Words by BSU Management to ASUU- BSU. | | Use of Purr/Snarl Words by ASUU-BSU to BSU Management. |
|------------------|----|--|----|--|
| 10/9/2009 | 1. | <i>The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) BSU Chapter joined the ongoing nationwide strike on Monday 22nd June 2009. BSU Governing Council invited ASUU-BSU chapter Exco to an interactive session... on 1st July, 2009. It was established that ASUU-BSU Chapter does not have any industrial dispute with its employer or the management of the university.</i> | 1. | <i>ASUU-BSU as a branch of ASUU National is not in a position to suspend the ongoing nationwide strike. Only ASUU NEC has the power to do so. The branch has immense respect for employer-employee</i> |

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| | <p><i>Council advised that ASUU-BSU Chapter could have expressed sympathy and solidarity with its national body and continued work as exemplified by ABU Zaria, Taraba State University, Adamawa State University, Anambra State University etc.</i></p> <p><i>The Council formally appealed to ASUU-BSU Chapter to suspend its sympathy strike and resume academic activities.</i></p> <p><i>Council invites Your Excellency to exploit ASUU's disposition that it respects employer-employee relationship on matters of unionism to press for the lifting of the strike.</i></p> | <p><i>relationship in matters of unionism.</i></p> |
| 2. | <p><i>Records available indicate that between 1996 and 2009, ASUU-BSU Chapter engaged in a total of thirteen (13) strike actions. Of this number, only four (4) were based on local issues while the rest nine (9) were precipitated by disputes between ASUU and the Federal Government.</i></p> | <p><i>Please be informed of an emergency NEC meeting of ASUU at Abuja for Monday 5th – 6th Tuesday October, 2009.</i></p> |
| 3. | <p><i>The situation calls for concern and need to appeal to ASUU-BSU Chapter to reconsider its involvement in nation-wide ASUU crises.</i></p> | <p><i>We therefore, regret to inform you that given the absence of the Chairman, ASUU-BSU may not participate in the interactive session as scheduled.</i></p> |
| 4. | <p><i>BSU staff emoluments are currently about 10 to 15 per cent higher than emoluments in the Federal Universities.</i></p> | <p><i>We deeply regret any inconveniences that might cause... please be assured of our very high regards.</i></p> |
| 5. | <p><i>BNSG without external promoting is already embarking on infrastructure development in BSU.</i></p> | |
| 6. | <p><i>BSU is right now preparing a Strategic Master Plan. This master plan is what will guide the development of the Benue State University not pronouncements from the Federal Government.</i></p> | <p><i>... EXCO meeting scheduled for Monday was postponed to Tuesday by 4:00pm and Congress scheduled for Tuesday was postponed to Wednesday. Notice of rescheduled Congress attached herewith, marked 'C'.</i></p> |
| 7. | <p><i>The Federal Government has regulatory authority over the university system but does not share ownership of BSU with the Benue people. BSU has the right to share in resources of the federation, but the ownership of BSU is distinctly BENUE.</i></p> | <p><i>We have taken the precaution of listing the details to convince Council of how seriously we viewed its invitation in an interactive session... but for the unforeseen circumstance of an Emergency NEC.</i></p> |
| 8. | <p><i>Your Excellency you may wish to put ASUU-BSU on notice that BNSG will not be bond by agreements reached between the Federal Government and ASUU and direct that BSU management stops using University instruments to facilitate activities of ASUU-BSU if it insists on its actions being tele-guided by ASUU-FEDERAL.</i></p> | <p><i>We regret that the letter conveying the inability of the Branch to attend the meeting</i></p> |

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| 9. | <p><i>...dialogue be conducted in a friendly/mature atmosphere with adequate press coverage.</i></p> | 9. | <p><i>was presented late into the time of the meeting.</i></p> |
| 10. | <p><i>The Governing Council on Saturday constituted a team to interact with the ASUU, BSU Chapter on the on-going strike embarked upon by the union. You are hereby notified to attend the interactive session.</i></p> | 10. | <p><i>We would, however, state categorically that our letter was delivered to the Secretary to the Vice Chancellor one full hour before the meeting was started...</i></p> |
| 11. | <p><i>I write on the instruction of the Governing Council...</i></p> <p><i>... Your letter of response for your inability to attend the meeting came in about one and a half hours into the meeting... shows total disregard to the Council...</i></p> <p><i>Council views your failure to attend the meeting as an act of unwarranted disrespect for the Governing Council. Council affirms that as a policy making body of the University and employer, it will not tolerate a situation where a Union refuses to honour an invitation by Council...</i></p> | 11. | <p><i>Congress was taken aback by the strong worded nature of Council letter to us particularly the use of following rephrases:</i></p> <p><i>i. total disregard to the Council (3rd paragraph)</i></p> <p><i>ii. an act of unwarranted disrespect (4th paragraph)</i></p> <p><i>iii. this act of insubordination (5th paragraph)</i></p> |
| 12. | | 11. | <p><i>(iv) Union membership is contingent upon being a staff of the university (5th paragraph) ... the letter is considered by ASUU-BSU Congress as a clear threat of sack to its members.</i></p> |
| 13. | | 12. | |
| 14. | | | <p><i>Viewed against the backdrop of an earlier communication to the Visitor of Benue State University by Council ref: BSU/R/CGOV/75... The content in our opinion was directed at inciting the Visitor against the University; Congress expressed apprehension over continued industrial cordiality and harmony.</i></p> |
| 15. | | | <p><i>The foregoing notwithstanding, we would like to assure Council of our continued high regards.</i></p> |

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|------|-----|---|--|--|
| 2010 | 16. | <i>The Governing council of Benue State University... received copies of the agreements between the Federal Government and the various Unions of Nigerian Universities.</i> | | |
| | 17. | <i>Council has set up a committee to work out the financial implications with a view to adopting the provisions of the agreement. Council Committee... noted the huge financial involvement and the challenges therein.</i> | | |
| | 18. | <i>Committee envisages the problem of the University raising adequate funds in adapting all the provisions of these agreements.</i> | | |

Table indicating instances of aggressive or provocative or ‘snarl’ and ‘purr’ words engaged in by ASUU-BSU/Management/Council of the University.

In table two above, the words or utterances that are presented in bold italics are deemed to be tension-laden and capable of creating disunity, unharmonious and protracted crisis, while those in un-bold italics can encourage communication and diffuse tension and crisis among individuals and organisation; in this particular case as it relates to BSU management and ASUU-BSU.

A cursory observation of the data would indicate that both ASUU-BSU Chapter and BSU Management indulge in the use of disdainful language or words when occasion warrants for interaction by both bodies especially on managerial matters and interest of unionism. In similar token, there is evidence of the application of respectful, solemn, cordial and harmonious use of utterances between the bodies to establish progress, unity and growth of the Benue State University, regarding issues that demand for such use of language. It has to be pointed out that management’s use of language seems to be tendentiously harsh, authoritative and almost despotic as it appears to be in words indicated in items (7-14), in such expressions like: *“This master plan will guide the development of Benue State University not pronouncements from the Federal Government”*; *“The Federal Government... does not share the ownership of Benue State University with the Benue People”*; *“Council views your failure to attend the meeting as an act of unwarranted disrespect... council affirms that as a policy making body of the university and employer, it will not tolerate a situation where a union refuses to honour an invitation by council”* and *“Your Excellency you may wish to put ASUU-BSU on notice that BNSG will not be bound by agreements reached between the Federal Government and ASUU and direct that BSU management stops using university instruments to facilitate activities of ASUU-BSU if it insist on its actions being tele-guided by ASUU-Federal”* on the part of management, and those such as *ASUU-BSU as a branch of ASUU-National is not in a position to suspend the ongoing nationwide strike only ASUU NEC has the power to do so*; *“We therefore regret to inform you that given the absence of the chairman, ASUU-BSU may not participate in the interactive section as scheduled”* and *“congress was taken aback by the strong worded nature of council letter... considered by ASUU-BSU as a clear threat of sack to its members”* reflected in items (1,3and 9) of ASUU-BSU communication to management, are viewed (by us) as been capable of causing and prolonging industrial disharmony as it were in 2009 ASUU-BSU strike, particularly.

On the other hand, when the use of purr words like *“The governing council of Benue State University... received copies of the agreements between the Federal Government and the various unions of Nigerian universities”*; *“Council have set up a committee to work out the financial implications with a view to adopting the provisions of the agreement”* as shown in items (16) and (17) on the table above, and a horde of others, on the side of management, likewise for ASUU as shown in statements like *“we deeply regret any inconveniences that might cause... please be assured of our very high regards”*, *“the branch has immense respect for employer-employee relationship in matters of unionism”* *“ we regret that the letter conveying the inability of the branch to attend the meeting was presented late into the time of the meeting”* captured in items (1, 3, 4, and 7) on the table, depict the tendency on the part of ASUU-BSU towards ending an industrial disharmony sooner than later. Overall, there should be, therefore, an attitude of respect and give and take on either part of these bodies in their communications if the persistent industrial disharmony been experienced in academic activities of Nigerian universities should cease.

Conclusion

It is evident from the proceedings so far that language occupies a central stage in society or in smoothing relationships between individuals or groups, especially regarding the ASUU-BSU Chapter and Benue State University Management/Council. Equally, we have made effort to acquaint ourselves with the latent effect of language in establishing harmonious co-existence among similar other bodies in Nigeria's institutions of learning, particularly, the universities. We have aptly illustrated in this study that many individuals, or groups are unaware of the effective application of language or communication and as a consequence, risk cordial or healthy relationships which, most times, lead to crisis or conflict. Therefore, for peaceful, harmonious relationships to prevail in Nigerian universities, and for the avoidance of crises-laden education in the country, Benue State University inclusive, the paper advocates for the engagement of "polite, responsible, careful and appropriate employment of language" (Jija 2012:119), "one that is devoid of arrogance, disrespect for human dignity, abusive and inflammatory statements".

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