

Language and Cultural Barrier: Implication for Conflict Resolution in Nigeria

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Abstract

Conflict remains a global phenomenon. It is not a particular ethnic groups or society's challenge. Conflict takes different forms and sizes; hence the ways of resolving such conflict differs based on language and cultural setup of a particular society. Resolving conflict is a huge task influenced by factors such as language and culture. The paper primarily seeks to highlight how language and culture are instrumental in conflict and conflict resolution. The colossal loss of both human and material resources in Nigeria is mostly the function of both linguistic and intra/inters ethnic conflict. The paper adopts contingency theory of strategic conflict management for discussions. The paper explains the concept of culture, conflict and conflict resolution, established a strong interface between cultural differences and conflict. It posits that if conflict must be resolved in Nigeria, linguistic and cultural diversity must be taken into consideration in order to bring about system balance as people's worldview is rooted in their culture. Also, the need to employ the language of nativity in resolving conflict is highlighted. The paper concludes that an exploration of the language and the culture of the people remain effective tools for resolving conflict. It recommends that conflict resolution methods like mediation, avoidance, collaboration, etc should bring cultural and linguistic factors into thought and deliberation.

Keywords: *language, cultural barriers, conflict and conflict resolution, contingency theory*

Introduction

Conflict is inevitable in any society. It grows from simple to complex, from non-violent to violent depending on the gravity. Conflict is a situation where there is disagreement between parties. It connotes a stressful, unhappy, distressing, depressing, annoying and frustrating state of affairs (Sagimo, 2002). Rue and Byarrs (1992) opine that conflicts occur because individuals have different perceptions, beliefs and goals while Bateman and Zeithalml (1993) argue that conflict is inevitable when managers are making important decisions as they would face opposing pressures from different sources.

Language and culture do not only bring meanings to the world, but also shape one's cognitive process, such as perception, interpretation and judgment. Krocher and Kluckhomhn (1962) affirm that language embodies the spirit of people who speak it; that grammatical forms have influence on the development of ideas. The language spoken by a people and their identity as speakers of that language is inseparable. This fact must have prompted Leonard and Law

(2004) claim that language acts, are acts of identity. Language reflects culture and language and culture combined are major components of social identity.

The link between language, culture and identity is often so strong that a single phonemic feature suffices to identify someone's membership in a given linguistic group. For instance, on the battle field after their victory over the people of Ephraim, the people of Gilead applied language test to sort out friends and foes of the nation. All the soldiers were asked to pronounce "shibboleth". Those who pronounced the first consonant as /s/ were friends; those who pronounced it as /ʃ/ were enemies and therefore killed (Judges 112 v 6). In fact, a single phonemic feature may be sufficient to resolve an issue, include or exclude someone from any social group. Most often the reference "Igbo man" "Yoruba man" "Hausa man" etc., meant more than naming; it sets the frame within which the relationship will start and progress. It implies both that they are different from us and we are different from them. All these mind-frames are often bounded by one's social and cultural upbringing. Over the years, the field of cognitive linguistics had demonstrated that language influences people's thought, feeling, reasoning and ways of communication in everyday life (Triands, 1995). Many abstract concepts are inherently structured to varying degrees by language and metaphors arising from recurring embodied experience in the cultural world.

According to Froman (1992), there are obvious disadvantages of imposing a language and restricting the use of a foreign language in conflict resolution. In his book entitled "Language and Power" Froman (1992) stressed that those who control language control what information, meaning and truth are taken to be, power is located in the linguistics structure which we are member. Hence, in a multicultural and multilingual society that we now live in, we often take language for granted by using English as a tool for negotiation and conflict resolution.

Theoretical Framework: Contingency Theory of Strategic Conflict Management

The contingency theory of strategic conflict management began as an elaboration, qualification, and extension of the value of symmetry. The theory has over the last decade come into its own as it has emerged as an empirically-tested perspective. Contingency theory argues that the complexity in strategic communication was best represented by a continuum of stance, not by a limited set of models of excellence (Fisher and Keashly, 1988). This continuum of stance facilitates easy theoretical analysis while acknowledging the inspiration of the excellence theory. It also celebrates the maturing of the contingency theory by consolidating the development and advances the theory has made since 1997. Viewing the complexity in strategic communication as a continuum of stance has the potential to facilitate the documentation of the discoveries that have either added new insights to the theory or refuted postulations, chart the streams of research that have been extended and expanded from the original framework and record the ongoing dialogue the theory has offered to the field to continually challenge prevailing presumptions and presuppositions (Pang et al., 2007).

Contingency theory in conflict resolution was pioneered by Fisher and Keashly (1988). In brief, the theory, which comes mainly from organizational psychology, is that, at different points during a conflict different types of third party intervention are more or less effective. The implication is that the distinction which Burton (2002) makes between disputes and conflicts is not necessarily useful.

Research from organizational psychology analogously applied to deep-rooted conflicts suggests moments at which substantive issues (interests) are most salient whereas at other times miscommunication and misperceptions block attempts to resolve. The assumption is that subjective elements get worse as conflict escalates (Rahim, 2002)

Fisher and Keashly (1988:382) summarize their argument as:

A contingency approach to third party intervention is based on the assessment that social conflict involves a dynamic process in which objective and subjective elements interact over time as the conflict escalates and de-escalates. Depending on the objective-subjective mix, different intervention strategies will be appropriate at different states of the conflict”.

Although, Fisher (1993), did in a later article, consider Burton's human needs approach as the basis of analytical problem solving, this seems to have been a brief foray and later work discusses a contingency approach without reference to basic human needs. Where Fisher does engage Burton he seems to view needs-based problem-solving as part of a broader peace-building approach: “The analysis of protracted inter-group conflicts as rooted in denial of basic human needs explains why such disputes defy traditional methods of conflict management and resolution” (Fisher, 1993:248).

Fisher places needs-based 'peace-building' within a contingency framework as, activities designed to improve the relationship and meet the basic needs of the parties, in order to de-escalate the conflict and render it amenable to peace-making. Peace building can then take its place as the essential bridge between peacekeeping and peace making. Conflict resolution in an organization practice depends on a circumstance, that is, a contingency. Contingency theory recognizes the influence of given solution on organizational behaviour patterns. There is no one best way to do things. Difficult in determining all relevant contingency factors and showing the relationship can be very complex.

Conceptual review

Language

Tidwell (1998) views language as an external behavior that allows the identification of a speaker as a member of some group. For example, a native speaker of English will identify Nigerians as foreigners by their ways of speech. Looking at this definition, we can say that language can be used as an instrument to cause acceptable and unacceptable act (conflict), in this case, by members of some group so identified. In fact, it is language that makes us human. Human institution would have been impossible but for the instrument of language

and this is supported by Frompkin, Rodmam and Hymes (2003) cited in Nzeakor, N. et al (2017) when they define it thus:

We live in a world of language, we talk to our friends, our associates, our wives and husband, our lovers, our teachers, our parents, our rivals and even our enemies, and we talk to bus drivers and total strangers. We talk face-to face and over telephone and responds with more talk. Television and radio further swell this torrent of words. Hardly a moment of our working lives is free from words.

The implication of the above definition reveals and also places human language as a potent tool for creating conflict as well as resolving conflict when it is improperly or properly used respectively. To corroborate this, Balarabe (2009:10) submits that “Language has continued to play a vital role during peace and imbroglio. It has been the instrument for initiating war and establishing peace”. In this regard therefore, this paper maintains that language should be effectively deployed for the latter and not the former.

Culture

Livine and Adelman (1993) define culture as a shared organization of ideas that include the intellectual, moral and aesthetic standard prevalent in a community and the meaning of communicative actions. Triands (1995) declared that the process of enculturation lays the foundation for shaping our mind frame and defining what is appropriate, what is inappropriate, what is good; what is rude or polite, and what is right or wrong, this is very important in determining the policy for conflict resolution and its process. Thus cultural values can narrow or broaden one’s perceptions of an event, focus and diffuse one’s sense of logic or discard certain information as irrelevant. Thriveni (2005:2) defines culture as “a complex collection of experience which conditioned daily life, it includes history, social structure, religion, traditional customs and every day usage” The above definition agrees with the one in Chambers 21st Century Dictionary (Revised Edition) where it stated that culture refers to the “customs, ideas, and values of a particular civilization, society or social group especially at a particular time”.

Culture is dynamic and as such an interesting thing to look at. That is the primary interest of the paper. We are therefore inclined to investigate the aspect of culture that largely determines and influences individual behaviour in and towards his given environment. Culture can have an overwhelming effect on a people as put forward by LeBaron (2003) cited in Anyabuike (2015)

two things are essential to remember about cultures: they are always changing, and they relate to the symbolic dimension of life. The symbolic dimension is the place where we are constantly making meaning and enacting our identities. Cultural messages from groups we belong to, gives us information about what is meaning or important, and who we are in the world and in relation to others- our identities.

From the above, it is evident that to understand a person or group of persons, a thorough study of their cultural background is paramount. Anyabuike (2015) maintained that taking

the simple steps as pointed out by LeBaron (2003), would surely mean averting so much crisis and conflicts among people and nations. The colossal wastes of both human and material resources would be averted if persons, group of persons, nations get to study and know each other. Looking at Nigeria, a country with high indication of cultural diversity that cuts across different ethnic lines, the long and reoccurring conflicts witnessed in the country would have been averted if different ethnic nationalities were made to embrace, understand and appreciate the cultural values of each other. It is evident in Nigeria, even the world over that one of the primary sources of conflict is cultural differences among persons, group of persons or even society. Given the statement above, it therefore means that there is a relationship between culture and conflict. Let us look at the relationship between culture and conflict.

Conflict and Conflict Resolution

For clarity on the concept of Conflict, Chambers 21st Century Dictionary (Revised Edition) defines conflict as “disagreement, fierce argument, a quarrel”. Furthermore, the same dictionary also defines the concept as “a struggle, fight or battle, usually on a lesser scale than a war”. Adejimiola (2009) sees conflict as the pursuit of incompatible interests and goals by different groups. The definition above by Adejimiola (2009) is in line with Huntington (1996) assertion that conflict is contentions involving real or apparent fears, interest and values, in which goals of the opposing group must be opposed, or at least neutralized to protect one’s own interest, prestige, employment and political power etc. The above assertions by Huntington (1996) and Adejimiola (2009) corroborate Nwoliise (2003) assertion that “ Conflict is a situation which two or more human beings desire goals they perceive as being obtainable by one or the other but not by both. Each party is mobilizing energy to obtain a goal and each party perceived the other as a barrier or threat to the goal” Conflicts arise from anger, fighting, depression, obsession thinking, compulsive behaviours and addictions.

Heitle (2016) defines Conflict Resolution as a process of trying to find a solution to a conflict. She believes that conflict resolution is a collaborative problem-solving, a cooperative talking-together process that leads to choosing a plan of action that both of you can feel good about. There are however numerous paths to conflict resolution as pointed out by Heitle. She maintained that out of the five paths to conflict resolution, only one (collaborative resolution) leaves the participants with a good feeling. The other four (fight, submit, flight and freeze) are sub-optimal resolution pathways which creates ill will, bad feelings, and have a corrosive impact on relationships and well being. In line with the numerous paths to conflict resolution as pointed out by Miller (2003) states that “conflict resolution is a variety of approaches aimed at terminating conflicts through the constructive solving of problems, distinct from the management or transformation of conflict” (p.8). Conflict resolution is multifaceted in that it refers to a process. If a process, then careful, systematic approaches are expected to be employed in order that the deep-rooted sources and causes of conflicts are addressed and resolved and behaviours are no longer violent nor attitudes hostiles any longer.

This paper posits that ignoring or denying linguistic and cultural diversity in global conflict resolution and implementation is not only a problematic issue but could also perpetuate a system imbalance. Hence, this needs to be addressed and considered. Thus in National conflict resolution the idea of using English language as tool for all indigenous settings could be a form of power given to the English speaking countries which could be detrimental to achieving peace in any society plunk in conflict vis-a-viz Nigeria.

Relationship between Culture and Conflicts

In his article “The Role of Cultural Diversity in Conflict Resolution in Africa, cited in Anyabuike (2015), Shomi Kim (2010:1) said ‘the conventional interpretation on the origin of the conflicts originated from the ethnic and religious diversity in Africa. It is frequently associated with the cultural diversity, supporting the argument that cultural diversity is the root of conflict in Africa’.

From the above observation by Kin, it is therefore evident that cultural background of persons remains a principal factor in conflict escalation in Africa vis-a-viz Nigeria. If this is anything to go by, a proper study into a people’s culture is sacrosanct in order to have a clue to the behavioural tendencies of members of a given culture or ethnic affinity. Such study would prove to be vital in resolving conflict in our society. Culture being the total way of life of a people must as a matter of urgency should be taken into consideration when such an attempt is being made to resolve conflict. This is because the differences in culture contributes immensely to how persons think and act. The role of culture in conflict resolution cannot be overemphasized.

As highlighted by LeBaron (2003) as follows:

Culture is an essential part of conflict and conflict resolution. Culture are like underground rivers that run through our lives and relationships, giving us messages that shape our perceptions, attributions, judgments, and ideas of self and other. Though cultures are powerful, they are often unconscious, influencing conflicts and attempts to resolve conflict in imperceptible ways.

LeBaron in the above assertion has put it forward in clear terms that cultural influence can be instrumental in conflict and conflict resolution. If this is true, then the authorities can pull resources and energy in studying cultural differences existing among ethnic nationalities to tackle existing inter-ethnic conflicts and to forestall future occurrence of conflict in Nigeria. Having discussed the link between culture and conflict, we shall continue by x-raying the implications of language on conflict resolution.

The Implications of Language and Culture on Conflict Resolution

Language plays a crucial role in causing and resolving conflict. Culture has an influence on communication in in-group and out- group relationships. Culture forms one’s values, norms

and style in managing conflict. People tend to tolerate, listen, understand and co-operative with those who have similar values and belief system. Most often some intercultural conflicts are resolved when the parties realize that their perceptions of divergent interest 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. Leonard and Law (2004) noted that in a context of international conflict, perceptions of and emotional reactions to an event could be bound by one's socio-cultural assumptions. Many scholars claimed that interpretations of an event are bound by socio-linguistic perceptions. In fact, cultural variation has an impact on motivation, cognition and behavior of citizen in dispute resolution.

Similarly, language plays a crucial role in causing and resolving conflicts. The manipulation of language in communication can often strengthen or weaken group solidarity. It can also be used to categorize individuals into in-group members. For instance, it will be difficult for the native English speakers to negotiate on equal terms with the non-natives.

The prominent linguists Sapir and Whorf (1941), in their book entitled *Language, Culture and Personality* emphasized that language influences thought processes. According to the source, individuals from different cultural and social units perceive the world through the lens provided by their unique vocabulary. Sapir-Whorf further explains that those who are bilingual or multilingual that is, people from multi-cultural nations like China, Nigeria, and India etc place greater emphasis on maintaining relationship, particularly long term relationships than people from monolingual and from individualistic culture (Butter 2002). In other words, Nigerians perceive relationship differently from the people in the Western world. The importance of language in conflict resolution is evident in the united nation's proclamation of 2001 as United Nations year of dialogue among citizens. At these occasions, Schwartz (2000) declared that 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 a commitment towards resolutions and seeking security through dialogue requires cultural and linguistic considerations. The question is what language is adequate in conflict resolution since people, culture and language are inseparable? In fact, languages are not merely means of communication; they stand for or symbolize people.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper by a way of conclusion maintains that conflict is a global phenomenon. The paper cites and also maintains that language and culture remain influencing factors in resolving conflict. However, the paper raised the question as to what language would be appropriate and adequate in resolving conflict since people, culture and language are inseparable? It reviews language, conflict and culture and highlights the relationship between culture and conflict pointing to the implications of language and culture in conflict resolution. This paper posits that ignoring or denying linguistic and cultural diversity in global conflict resolution and implementation is not only a problematic issue but could also perpetuate a system imbalance. The paper concludes that language and culture are effective tools for conflict

resolution. This is because interpretations of events are bound by socio-cultural perceptions of individuals in the region. Thus, we express knowledge and feelings using language.

It was however, recommended that conflict resolution tools like mediation, avoidance, etc., should take cultural and language factors into thought and deliberation. Thus the notion of fairness, neutrality, cultural awareness should be managed well if language is to be used as the national tool in managing dispute in the federation.

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