

LANGUAGE USE FOR ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL STABILITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The need for peaceful co-existence and social stability has never been more urgent in Nigeria than it is today. This is why ways of achieving them should be, and in fact they actually are, in the front burner of government agenda at all levels of governance in Nigeria. In line with this concern, this paper takes a look at the ways language can be used to foster, promote and sustain ethno-religious tolerance as a means of ensuring social stability in Nigeria. The task in the paper involves highlighting the features and functions of language as a peculiar human possession, conceptualizing ethnic and religious tolerance to put them in the perspective of this paper, and outlining how language use can help bring about peaceful ethno-religious co-existence. The paper concludes that language use can make or mar social relations and that toleration is indispensable for a healthy co-existence in a multi-ethnic society. Recommendations are given on how to ensure proper exploitation of language features and functions for peaceful co-existence and social stability. The core of the recommendations is that deliberate steps should be taken to promote mutual understanding of one another's culture, language and religion.

Introduction

Nigeria is in a state of chaos and anarchy occasioned by primordial religious sentiments and ethno-religious intolerance. These have thrown the nation into global notoriety far outstripping the pariah status the country acquired in the wake of the "June 12" saga. Every Nigerian is reeling under the weight of the present chaos. There is a massive sense of insecurity and social instability resulting in the displacement of people from their usual places of residence within the country. President Jonathan (Terradaily, July 6, 2010) captures this situation in an address during the Army Day celebration when he said:

We must remember that some of the greatest dangers to our democracy and freedom are shrouded in the perils of ethnicity and religious intolerance....These evils threaten our very existence as one sovereign indivisible nation.

This is an apt description of the state of Nigeria as a few other reports will highlight.

Crises in Plateau State of Nigeria between 2010 and April, 2012 have claimed hundreds of lives. The crises are seen along ethnic and religious divides. Plateau is in the eye of the storm probably because it lies in the “middle-belt” between the predominantly Muslim north and the mainly Christian south. But the crises are not restricted to Plateau State. It is estimated that over 10,000 people have died in other religious and ethnic clashes since the return in 1999 of democracy to Nigeria whose over 150 million population is divided almost equally between Christians and Muslims (Terradaily, 6 July, 2010). If this is the picture up to July 2010, the current menace and horrendous acts of the Boko Haram sect have thrown the nation into unparalleled state of anxiety, instability and senseless loss of lives.

Obviously, the task of keeping Nigeria one must revolve around ways of putting a stop to ethnic and religious violence in Nigeria. Several approaches can be adopted but the view in this paper is that language and language use can be urgently deployed to arrest and correct the attitudes of Nigerians towards the ethnic and religious diversities inherent in Nigerian society.

In this regard, this paper examines the peculiarities of language, the concept of ethno-religious tolerance, the place of language use in enhancing peaceful co-existence and the implications of language and language use for social stability in Nigeria.

Peculiarities of Language

Language is a peculiar human possession. This is why Palmer (1983) describes man as the only homo loquens among the Homo sapiens. Language is the expression of thoughts or emotions by means of words, spoken or written. Possession of language and using it well gives one the power to handle the world of people, ideas and things (Opara & Torkaa, 2010). The New Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol.7 (2007, p.147) captures the social nature of language by defining language as “a system of conventional spoken or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture communicate”. This portrays language as being used by humans to express themselves and to manipulate objects in the environment (Wikipedia, 2011)

Language use evokes a complex of reactions in the speaker or writer and in the listener or reader. The reaction to language can be physical (the sound waves), chemical (body chemistry), physiological (movement of nerves, impulses and body muscles), psychological (reaction to stimuli), general culture (the situation of the speaker in respect to the cultural system of his society), linguistic (the language being spoken), and semantic (the meaning)(Opara & Torkaa, 2010). These events and the reactions they evoke in the language users significantly influence the achievement of communication goals which in social interaction can be beneficial or harmful, constructive or destructive.

Language, as noted earlier, is crucial to the creation of society and no human society can exist without language. In this regard, Achebe (1975) avers that the value of language is facilitating the affairs and transactions of society. Simply put, language enables the speakers to pass on their messages quickly and exactly. But language can be abused just like any other human creation. Achebe further notes that “language can be turned from its original purpose into something useless or even deadly”p34. This position agrees with George Orwell’s (1954) assertion that language can be used not only for expressing thought but also for concealing thought or even preventing thought.

In the instance where language is used for concealing or preventing thought, the language has deviated from its natural purpose which is the expression of thought. Once again, Achebe warns: “Beware of interfering with its purpose; for when language is seriously interfered with,

when it is disjointed from truth, be it from mere incompetence or worse, from malice, horrors can descend again on mankind”p34. Of course, the first reign of horror among mankind was when there was no language and man used the crudest means possible to express his feelings and apprehensions in the absence of language-based communication.

Formally characterized, the features of language, as given in Wisniewski (2007), include the following:

Displacement: This is the ability of language to speak about what is happening at the time and place of talking as well as speaking about the past, future and unreal situations.

Arbitrariness: There is no natural connection between a word and what it refers to in the language. In other words, the meaning of a word cannot be deciphered by looking at it.

Productivity: Also called creativity or open-endedness, productivity means the potential of infinity of expressions and utterances in a language using a finite set of words.

Cultural Transmission: Though the ability to speak is natural and genetically programmed, the actual language an individual develops is culture specific; it is determined by the environment in which the language is developed.

Duality: Language operates with two levels of linguistic organization:

- (a) Minimal units which are the alphabet and phonemes for writing and speech and which do not have meanings on their own.
- (b) Combination of units to arrive at meanings in the language.

The levels operate together to produce an infinite number of words and utterances from a finite set of letters and sounds.

Prevarication: This is the tendency to make utterances knowing full well that they are false with the intention to mislead the receiver of the information.

Reflexiveness: This is using language to talk about language. It is also called metalanguage. It enables the use of language to talk about abstract and non-existent things.

Learnability: Though the mother tongue is naturally acquired, any other language can be learned by a normal human being.

Reciprocity: Speakers can equally become receivers in language use situations.

Specialization: Linguistic signals serve only for communication. They do not have any other function.

Transitoriness: The signal of spoken language fades quickly; however, written language is enduring.

Non-directional: Any person close enough to the interaction can pick up or hear the message.

Most of these features are peculiar to human language, but some like reciprocity, specialization, transitoriness and non-directionality are shared with other animals.

Several functions have been ascribed to language as a social phenomenon. Opara & Maikano (2004) outline the functions of language as instrumental (using language to get things done), regulatory (using language to control the behavior of others), interactional (using language to create interaction with others), personal (using language to express personal feelings and meanings), heuristic (using language to discover things), imaginative (using language to create a world of the imagination), and representative (using language to pass information). It is self-evident here that language is integral to human existence.

Jakobson's (1960) enumeration and explication of the functions of language in Herbert (2011) ties the functions to the six elements or factors of a communication context _ a context, an addresser, an addressee, a contact between an addresser and an addressee, a common code, and a

message. Each of the functions operates on a factor or element of communication. The functions identified by Jakobson are referential (context), emotive (addresser), conative (addressee), phatic (to establish, prolong or discontinue communication), metalingual (to establish mutual agreement on the code) and poetic (focusing on the message for its own sake).

The features and functions of language outlined here contribute to the impact of language on ethno-religious co-existence.

The Concepts of Ethnic, Ethnicity, Religion and Tolerance: An Overview

“Ethnic” as an adjective means “of, relating to, or characteristic of a sizable group of people who manifest a common and distinctive racial, national, religious, linguistic or cultural heritage” (Wikipedia, the free online dictionary). Also, ethnic can be seen as relating to the classification of mankind into groups on the basis of racial characteristics. As a noun, ethnic is a member of a particular ethnic group especially one who maintains the language or customs of the group. From ethnic is derived the word “ethnicity”.

Ethnicity itself is a social identity formation that rests upon culturally specific practices and a unique set of symbols and cosmology (Olu-Adeyemi 2006). Ethnicity embodies a belief in common origins; a broadly agreed common history provides an inheritance of symbols, heroes, events, values and hierarchies, and confirms social identities of both insiders and outsiders. While ethnic is an accident of birth, ethnicity is a consciousness of the ethnic background and a firm stand on its tenets and beliefs along with the resolve to pursue its causes. Several questions arise from this: Is ethnicity helpful in a multi-ethnic society? Can ethnicity promote national integration? Does ethnicity not compartmentalize society? Is ethnicity as a consciousness not the breeding pond for intolerance?

“Religion is a collection of cultural systems, belief systems, and worldviews that establishes symbols that relate humanity to spirituality and sometimes to moral values (Wikipedia, 2011). Religions are usually characterized by the possession of narratives, symbols, traditions and sacred histories that are intended to give meaning to life or to explain the origin of life or the universe. It is also the case that religions derive morality, ethics, religious laws or a preferred lifestyle from their ideas about the cosmos and human nature.

Religion can be faith or belief system; but it differs from these because it has a public aspect. Most religions have organized behavior including clerical hierarchies, a definition of what constitutes adherence or membership, congregational laity, regular meetings or service for purpose of veneration of a deity or for prayer, holy places or scripture. Religious practice may also include sermons, commemoration of the activities of a god or gods, sacrifices, festivals, feasts, trance, initiations, funerary services, meditation, music, art, dance, public service or other aspects of human culture (Wikipedia, 2011). Although scholars of religion disagree on the classification of religion, it is obvious that despite the international or trans-cultural nature of some religions and the ethnic-specific nature of others, all religions, whatever their philosophical origin, are ethnic because they come from a particular culture.

Religion has the capacity to evoke great personal commitment and passion from adherents leading to love, caring, respect and support for others with similar faith. However, religion can lead people to hate followers of other religions and social minorities. The hatred engendered by religion can lead to actions of harassment, conflict, oppression, murder, terrorism and genocide.

“Toleration” and “Tolerance” are derived from the words tolerate (verb) and tolerant (adjective). Wikipedia (May, 2011) provides a detailed explanation of the concepts. Toleration is the practice of deliberately allowing or permitting a thing of which one disapproves. But one can meaningfully talk of tolerating, i.e. permitting or allowing, only when one is in a position to

disallow. Related meanings of toleration include bearing or enduring, to nourish, sustain or preserve. Toleration is also forbearance and the permission given by the adherents of a dominant religion for other religions to exist, even though the latter are looked on with disapproval as inferior, mistaken or harmful. Tolerance, as distinct from toleration, is an attitude of mind that implies non-judgmental acceptance of differing life styles or beliefs whereas toleration signifies putting up with something that one disapproves of (Wikipedia, 2011).

Most references to toleration and tolerance involve a situation of minority and dissenting viewpoints in relation to a dominant religion. Of recent, however, toleration is being applied to political and ethnic groups and to social minorities. Even the concept of human rights also includes the principle of legally enforced toleration.

Tolerance is the major ingredient that holds multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-ethnic societies together. From antiquity, we see instances of tolerance in the proclamation of the Persian King, Cyrus the Great, who released the Jews from captivity to return to their homes to worship their God. Also, the Roman Empire encouraged conquered people to continue to worship their own gods (Wikipedia online, 2011). Several other instances of toleration abound culminating in 1948 when the United Nations General Assembly adopted Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public, or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

(United Nations, 1948, Universal Declaration of Human Rights)

Tolerance is not without consequences. In exchange for toleration or tolerance, the minority social group or religion must come to grips with the criticisms and insults from the dominant group. If discrimination and deprivation are added to the criticisms and insult, what Ted Gurr in Salawu (2010) describes in his theory of conflict plays out. Using a combination of relative deprivation and group mobilization approaches, Gurr outlines three levels of actions that lead to violence in minority-majority relations. The first is discrimination against an ethnic or religious minority which causes the minority to form grievances. The second is that the grievances lead to mobilization of the ethnic or religious minority group for political action. Thirdly, the mobilized minority is empowered to engage in political action including protest and rebellion (Salawu, 2010).

Language Use and Ethno- Religious Co-Existence

The converse of tolerance is intolerance. The two tendencies are present in the human person. This is captured in this story:

A man told his grandson: “A terrible fight is going on inside me_ a fight between two wolves. One is evil, and represents hate, anger, arrogance, intolerance, and superiority. The other is good, and represents joy, peace, love, tolerance, understanding, humility, kindness, empathy, generosity, and compassion. This same fight is going on inside you, inside every other person too.” The grandson asked, “Which wolf will win?” The old man replied simply, “The one you feed (Targay, 2012).

The essence of this story here is that the evil and good in every person can be “fed” or nourished. The food can come through language which is naturally entwined with the human mind.

One of the features of language noted earlier is prevarication—the ability to make sentences conscious that they are false and with the intention to deceive or mislead the receiver of the information (Wisniewski, 2007). Another feature is displacement which enables the language user to talk about present, past and future situations or events. These are the capacities of language that can turn it into a weapon for good or for bad. Language can be used for the purposes of persuasion, in which case it is called rhetoric; or “used deliberately with no concern for truth or fact in order to create a particular and biased impression” in which situation it is termed propaganda ((Opara & Torkaa, 2010, p146).

Furthermore, the impact of negative language use and the worry it causes well meaning citizens the world over can be seen in the words of Toni Morrison at her Nobel Lecture on 7th December, 1993:

Oppressive language does more than represent violence. It is violence.
It does more than represent the limits of knowledge, it limits knowledge.
It must be rejected, altered and exposed. It is the language that drinks blood,
laps vulnerabilities, tucks its fascist boots under crinolines of respectability
and patriotism as it moves relentlessly toward the bottom line and the
bottomed-out mind. Sexist language, racist language, theistic language—all
are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not permit new
knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas.

But language use does not necessarily need to be oppressive, racist or propagandist. Positive language use can exploit the functions of language to draw people’s attention to positive virtues like the need for peaceful co-existence, convince them of the worthwhileness of such actions, and get them to act in favour of the identified virtues. This embodies the phatic, conative, referential and emotive functions of language. Positively used, language should engender peaceful relationships by encouraging tolerance and unity.

Language is part of the culture of a group. As Cohen (2011, p28-29) rightly notes “Languages do not exist in isolation as an abstract system of signs but within unique, organic habitats, complex ecologies and interactions”. He further insists that language and culture are inseparable as language reflects culture and culture is reproduced in language. Through language all forms of human activities are carried out. Language is capable of destroying or minimizing relationships within the culture it operates in. The way every language is sufficient for all the communication needs of the people that use it is the way the culture of the people is the totality of their way of life. Therefore, the mingling of cultures and languages should be an expansion of wholesome ways of life and an enrichment of the linguistic resources by the processes of assimilation and adaptation of linguistic forms and norms from one language to the other. This process is bound to engender healthy bilingualism and multilingualism in the citizens of the multiethnic community. It will also foster integrative-motivated language learning because of the desire to identify with the speakers and culture of the other language group.

Peaceful co-existence will hold sway in the situation described above. It will make the idea of toleration or tolerance irrelevant in the community because in toleration there are still unvoiced suspicion, criticism, denigration and discrimination against the tolerated group. Rather, what will subsist is a sort of fellow-feeling where everybody is everyone’s brother or sister irrespective of language, religion or ethnicity. Walzer (1997, p17) captured such a situation in the Hellenist City of Alexandria founded in 331 BC. The city contained a large number of Jewish communities which lived in peace with equivalently sized Greek and Egyptian populations. In Walzer’s words, the city

provided “a useful example of what we might think of as the imperial version of multiculturalism”. In the City there was no question of toleration; there was absolute mutual and peaceful co-existence.

Implications of Language and Language Use for Social Stability and Conflict Prevention

It has been noted that language is deeply entrenched in human culture. This is to say that language and society are intertwined. Language is a tool for interpersonal interaction necessary for incorporating the individual into existing social structures and also harnessing the potential of the individual towards the aims and aspirations of the society. In other words, language ropes the individual into a society and also enables him to contribute to the sustenance and integration of that society (Opara, 2012, p156). Apart from its use to communicate and share information, language has the socio-cultural functions of signifying group identity, social stratification, social grooming, and entertainment. The implication of language use is that it can make or mar society; it can facilitate or hamper social integration. That is why people who can use language well are respected in society. Igwe and Green (1967) in Achebe (1975, p31) note: “A speaker who could use language effectively and had a good command of idioms and proverbs was respected by his fellows and was often a leader in the community.” The respect and leadership accorded such a person will be enduring if the person uses the gift of language for good causes.

Conflict situations are inevitable in human society as long as there are struggles over values, power and scarce resources, and the groups that are concerned try to outwit or outgain the other. Such conflicts must be prevented, resolved or managed if the society is to survive and make meaningful progress. This will only be possible if there is peaceful co-existence facilitated by language, effective communication and healthy language use.

Communal life is based on a set of shared meanings which enables the members of the community to make coherent sense of the world. The shared meanings constitute what the community has in common and underlie all communication, interaction and organized activity (Cohen, 2011). The language of the community is the repository of the community’s communality. Despite a common language, a community may still be divided by “religion, culture and nonverbal behavior” (Cohen, 2011, p28). But it is strongly canvassed that language can give a clue to how a community understands and handles conflict since the common language constitutes their shared meanings. This makes language very instrumental to co-existence as it provides grounds for common understanding which makes communication easy. The ease of communication is necessary where issues or differences have to be discussed and reconciled.

As mentioned earlier, communication and understanding are needed to reconcile differences that are bound to arise in multi-ethnic settings. Cultural differences and language barriers can obstruct understanding. Where communication is not understood or is misunderstood ill-feelings generated can easily lead to conflicts, aggravate intolerance and destabilize social cohesion, especially in multi-ethnic and multi-religious settings (Akin, 2003). Hence, there is always need for reconciliation. In the words of Cohen (2011, p27), “As a complex, interconnected chain of nonverbal and verbal messages and moves, conciliation can advance only when there is synchronized and consecutive understanding at every stage of the process. For information to be comprehensibly exchanged and issues at stake to be discussed, the parties must be able to draw on a shared store of meanings; before they can meaningfully discuss substance they must arrive at a meta-understanding of form and process”. A common language and an open channel of communication are the factors for reconciliation highlighted by here Cohen.

Language use can make or mar social relations. It therefore becomes imperative for language used in social interactions to be politically correct. Politically correct language refers to

language use that reflects acceptable attitudes. The use of politically correct language is absolutely necessary to retain balance, peace and stability required for cohesion and integration within the society (Opara, 2012).

There is a strong relationship between language use and conflict. Inappropriate language can cause as well as escalate conflicts which mar social cohesion. Bacal & Associates (2013) observe that learning to use language more effectively is a critical skill in reducing unnecessary conflicts and managing conflicts. The group further notes that inflammatory statements and personal attacks are two of the most common causes of conflict escalation. When people attack people verbally, those attacked are likely to get especially defensive or angry more than they would have had their opponents kept their statements impersonal and focused on the problem (jump.cgi.htm, 2013).

The place of language and language use in disrupting and also ensuring harmonious ethno-religious co-existence can be illustrated with the situations in some Nigerian communities and in Sierra Leone. Sub-nationalities and regions in Nigeria are held together by indigenous lingua franca: Hausa in the North, Yoruba in the West and Igbo in the East. However, cleavages, especially in the North, emerged with the concept of “middle belt” which de-emphasizes the homogeneity of the North and escalates ethnic consciousness. Deliberate steps are now being taken to promote ethnic loyalty which often revolves around the language of the ethnic group. Where the Hausa language had helped to foster unity and tolerance as a common language among the northerners, the recourse to ethnic cleavages and the “indigene” syndrome it promotes is largely responsible for the recurrent crises and intolerance in the north of Nigeria today. The other regions, East and West, where the Igbo language and the Yoruba language respectively have continued to enjoy common acceptability are relatively at ease without tensions as to who is from where in the region. So, it can be said that language has helped to foster unity and tolerance in the ethnic groups.

In Sierra Leone, negative metaphoric language use following the 29th April 1992 coup led to the crisis that engulfed the nation. Bangura (2006.p445) notes that a plethora of bloody metaphors invoking images of Darwinian jungles and guerrilla warfare threw the state into a theater of war, “a brutal battle for survival devoid of rules, trust, or courtesies in which mercy and mutual considerations are share folly”. Basically, then, the crisis following the military coup was not caused by clash of ideas but by ill-language. This is like the Jos crisis of September 2011. The spark off of the crisis was climaxed by harsh exchange of words and propaganda between Muslim and Christian youths circulated in leaflets and posters all around Jos (Kevin, 2006).

Toleration in ethnic and religious affairs has been identified as key to unity and national development. In the view of Fashola (2012), ethnic and religious tolerance in Nigeria is the only way to realize the desired national development as nothing can be achieved in an atmosphere of chaos. Intolerance, which breeds chaos, is mostly caused by immoderate and foul language. It is language that is used to “feed the good or bad wolf” in every human being. As Targay (2012) observes, language use characterized by false and biased information can fuel ethno-religious intolerance. Furthermore, Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance (2012) assert:

Intolerance breeds injustice, injustice invariably leads to rebellion and retaliation, and these will lead to escalation on the part of both (sides) making reconciliation almost impossible. It appears that during times of stress, despair and frustration, people become increasingly irrational, and they do things which they never think they are capable of. And so we see hideous brutality perpetrated by the most gentle people.

It is germane to the discussion here to reiterate the concern expressed by President Jonathan: “We must remember that some of the greatest dangers to our democracy and freedom are shrouded in the perils of ethnicity and religious intolerance. These evils threaten our very existence as one sovereign and indivisible nation.” (Terradaily, 6 July, 2010) This is still the situation as it is in Nigeria today.

Conclusion

The exploration of the features and functions of language in human affairs has shown that language use or misuse can promote peaceful co-existence or sow seeds of discord among the members of multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies. Toleration as a virtue is indispensable if pluralistic societies are to continue to exist as one and achieve meaningful development. The major ingredients required for toleration are the use of moderate and politically correct language, and the understanding of the cultures of the ethnic groups that live as a single society.

Recommendations

The following positions are adopted in this paper to serve as recommendations towards exploiting the resources in language and culture for ethnic and religious tolerance to ensure social stability and conflict prevention in Nigeria.

The languages and cultures of co-existing ethnic groups should be learned in the primary and secondary schools in the concerned society. This will promote cultural integration, and can be studied in one of the branches of anthropology.

Indigenous language learning should be anchored on integrative motivation. By this, language learning should be motivated by the desire to identify with and probably take part in the culture of the people that own the language.

Deliberate steps should be taken to de-emphasize cleavages and ethnicity within society. The concept of “indigene” and the demand for “indigene certificates” should be completely abolished from public life (school admission, employment into the civil service or armed forces, etc).

Annual cultural carnivals should be held in every multiethnic society where the cultural and linguistic diversities can be exhibited for appreciation.

Inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogues should be a regular feature of multiethnic communities. Such dialogues should address topical issues that threaten mutual co-existence. The dialogues can also focus on the conscious removal of derogatory and inciting language among the people, in the church and in the mosque.

There should be censorship of foul and inflammatory language use in public places, regardless of freedom of speech. A mobile or special court should be established to try offenders on the spot or within the shortest possible time. This measure will ensure the use of moderate language by all opinion, ethnic and religious leaders in society.

Programmes in the mass media, especially the electronic media, aimed at moderation in language use should be aired regularly in national and local stations. The programmes can be sponsored by ethnic and religious groups or by the stations themselves.

There should be the promotion of school exchange programmes in reasonable volume at secondary school level. This can be complemented with acculturation visits for students studying indigenous languages other than their own mother tongue or first language at secondary school level.

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