

IMPACT OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES ON CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN YOBE STATE: IMPLICATIONS FOR APPLIED PEACE LINGUISTICS IN FRAGILE SETTINGS

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Abstract

The study attempts to establish the role of an indigenous language (Hausa) in conflict management in Yobe State and the implication to applied peace linguistics. In order to achieve this, the study conducted a participatory observation during the community dialogue sessions conducted in Yobe State by the British Council Managing Conflict in Nigeria Programme in 2022 in respect of assuring community acceptance of the reintegration of repentant insurgent into their communities. In addition, in 2023, the study conducted focus group discussions with some of the persons that participated in the 2022 dialogue in three local government areas to ascertain how the use of Hausa language enhanced the outcome of the community dialogue. It was found that Hausa language contributed in persuading the communities to accept the proposal, engendered active participation and quick absorption of the message, bred the choice of words, negotiation of meaning and concession as well as facilitated the respect for the worth and dignity of the participants during then dialogue session. This study concludes, that once indigenous language users in fragile states serve as communicative humanizers and uses it in such a way that indicates empathy for fellow interlocutors, dignify dialogue and prioritize positivizers; it will engender active participation, choice of words, negotiation of meaning and concession, and respect for the worth and dignity of the participants during the dialogue sessions leading to the resolution of the conflict in question.

Introductory Background

Conflict has been with human beings right from creation as such it is one of the most recurring human activities (Ojukwu, 2016). Individuals within the society may have cause to engage in conflicts. In some cases, the society through the

custodians of its norms and values could be against a person or group of persons and vice versa. This necessitates the society to devise mechanisms targeted at managing conflicts to check them from degenerating to violence. Formal and informal actors play crucial roles in conflict management in the various settings. These agents of conflict management are people and institutions that see it as a responsibility to mediate in disputes, resolve conflicts, or play peace building roles at various levels. In principle, conflict management mechanisms exist at individual and community levels. Individuals and formal and informal institutions mediate in disputes. For example, According to *Managing Conflict in Nigeria (2020)* – a European Union funded programme managed by the British Council –, the programme aims to support Nigerians with conflict resolution, at both the state and community level. Their work focuses on reducing violence, promoting stability and strengthening resilience so that Nigerians can feel safe and secure in their communities. Platforms working on conflict management can be leveraged upon to provide avenue for dialogue on conflicts and security matters. Such dialogues should be organized in such a way that participants that are conflict sensitive provide counter narrative focusing on what they are *for* (rather than *against*) by offering positive stories about shared values, open-mindedness, freedom and democracy; highlighting how the activities of people that breach peace negatively impact on the people they claim to represent; demonstrating the hypocrisy of violent groups and how their actions are often inconsistent with their own stated beliefs; emphasizing factual inaccuracies used in extremist propaganda and setting the record straight; and tactfully mocking or satirizing outlaw propaganda to undermine its credibility (Tuck & Silverman, 2016).

Using non-violent methods, a significant number of ethnicities in the Niger Delta have formed advocacy groups saddled with the responsibility of formally promoting their collective interests and agitating for substantive ethnic and communal demands (Francis, Lapin & Rossiasco, 2011). What they use as channels of action include mass media, rallies, petitions, seminars, conferences, position papers, and lobbying. They have played important mediating roles in negotiating community interests, such as development goods, compensation payments, and jobs, with government and corporate entities.

In the United State of America, Muslim Americans have established dialogue platforms to strengthen the tradition of working side-by-side with different faiths (World Organization for Resource Development and Education, 2016). For instance, in 2011, The World Organization for Resource Development

and Education (WORDE) commissioned the International Cultural Center (ICC) with the core mandate of engaging Montgomery County, MD residents in a wide variety of initiatives that promote pluralism and social cohesion based on mutual respect and harmonious coexistence. One of the cornerstones of ICC's work is interfaith social action, which seeks to promote acceptance and mutual understanding by mobilizing communities from various faiths, ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds to collaborate on community service and cross-cultural programmes. Negotiation serves as a policy option in conflict management (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2015). Negotiation in this context can be likened to dialogue.

In using dialogue to promote conflict management, there is the need for an understanding between the formal conflict management actors and local associations to the extent that civil matters between members of local associations that did not pass through the associations' internal conflict management mechanisms can be referred back to the local associations. However, given that conflict management is dynamic, the actors need continuous capacity building so as to make them more effective and also get their conflict management skills improved. Considering the fact that there are numerous examples of how media and communication strategies are being used to promote violence, there is also need for capacity building on how to use the media as a platform for dialogue. It is evident that there is a growing concern among media stakeholders, governmental and non-governmental organizations around the world that, increasingly, successive communication strategies that threaten international stability, social cohesion, and human rights are being deployed by a variety of state and non-state actors (Ferguson, 2016). As such, it is suggested that media assistance should be one of cardinal aspects of international development, as well as conflict prevention and peace building to ensure that at a time of crisis, the local and domestic media are in the position to respond appropriately to assure public awareness. Raising public awareness entails informing community attitudes, behaviours and beliefs with the intention of influencing them positively (Sayers, 2006).

Of interest in this study is how indigenous languages can be used in managing conflict in Yobe State, Nigeria and engender transformative peace building. Transformative peace building and social cohesion agenda attempts to assure social justice and also eliminate factors that engender conflict and contestation (Sayed & Novelli, 2016). Yobe State is recovering from a fleeting insurgency that was perpetrated by non-state armed groups. Conflict management strategies do not only help in resolving conflicts but also help in

the early detections of the drivers and the triggers of conflict thus preventing its occurrence or mitigating its risks and hazards. The language of official business in Nigeria is English (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2022). But then, not all residents of Yobe State feel comfortable using English language in so many domains. This therefore calls for the deployment of the principles of peace linguistics in conflict management in Yobe State. Peace Linguistics entails the utilization of linguistic principles, methods, findings, and applications to promote peace and human rights at a global level by considering the value of linguistic diversity and multilingualism (Curtis, 2017). For this reason, this study was initiated with the aim of investigating the impact of indigenous languages in conflict management with particular emphasis on the community dialogue sessions supported by Managing Conflict in Nigeria (a British Council Programme funded by the European Union) in respect of initiatives to promote community acceptance of reintegration of persons associated with non-state armed groups in Yobe State from January to June, 2022.

The Problem

The insurgency led by non-state armed groups in northeast Nigeria resulted in the arrest of persons associated with the non-state armed groups. The engagement of these persons in the deradicalization programmes of the Federal Government of Nigeria made some of them to renounce violence and their association with the groups thus the need for their reintegration to their communities in the northeast – in our case Yobe State. However, there were concerns around objections of communities across the region on the return of the ex-combatants and their associated family members that are being mobilised to resettlement and reintegration to the communities. This is because the reintegration of offenders to their community stirs critical challenges for their families and the broader community (United Nations, 2011). This necessitated the need for interrelated activities that will enhance prospects of community acceptance of these persons into their communities. One of these activities is dialogue that will manage the conflict around the reintegration of these persons. The communities in Yobe State mostly use indigenous languages in their day-to-day activities. In consequence, there were concerns on whether to use English language or an indigenous language during the course of the facilitation of the dialogue sessions that will manage the conflict surrounding communities' acceptance of the reintegration of persons associated with armed groups into their communities.

Objectives

The primary objective of the study is to establish the impact of indigenous languages in managing conflicts surrounding community acceptance of the reintegration of persons associated with non-state armed groups into their communities after undergoing series of deradicalization programmes coordinated by the Federal Government of Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

- i. Establish how the use of an indigenous language contributed in persuading the communities to accept the proposal during the dialogue sessions;
- ii. Ascertain the effect of the use of an indigenous language in engendering active participation and quick absorption of the message during the dialogue sessions;
- iii. Identify how the use of an indigenous language bred the choice of words, negotiation of meaning and concession during the dialogue sessions;
- iv. Examine how the use of an indigenous language facilitated the respect for the worth and dignity of the participants during then dialogue session.

Methodology

The study used qualitative research to collect and analyze data for the study. Qualitative research can be used when the aim of the researcher is to examine people's actions (local performances) and the structures (informal guidelines and formal rules) that encourage, shape, and constrain such actions (Tracy, 2013). The population of the study is the two hundred and seventy (270) persons that participated in the community dialogue sessions supported by Managing Conflict in Nigeria (a British Council Programme funded by the European Union) in respect of initiatives to promote community acceptance of reintegration of persons associated with non-state armed groups in Yobe State held in Bade, Geidam and Tarmuwa Local Government Areas from January to June, 2022. The sample of the study is forty-five (45) (fifteen [15] in each Local Government Area) persons randomly selected from the 270 persons. Focus group discussion (FGD) sessions were held in each of the Local Government Areas in July 2023. Focus group discussion sessions usually involve several participants in which a facilitator uses stimulus to elicit discussion targeted on specific topics to generate data (Mackey & Gass, 2022). The sessions attempt to establish the efficacy of using an indigenous language during the dialogue sessions held in

2022 to manage conflict around community acceptance of persons associated with non-state armed groups into their communities in Yobe State. The study also used participant observation in 2022 to observe how the dialogue sessions were facilitated. Participant observation helps researchers notice things about actors, communication and the material world in a particular spacio-temporal context (Heller, Pietikäinen & Pujolar, 2019). The data were analyzed qualitatively based on the four thematic areas derived from the specific objectives of the study.

Findings

Participant Observation

The community dialogue sessions in each of the LGAs were held for three groups in each case viz.: men, women and youths. Participants were drawn from the leadership of faith-based organizations, representatives of the emirate councils, village and ward heads, internally displaced persons (IDPs), persons living with disabilities (PWDs), returnees, traders, vigilante groups, youth groups, students, civil servants etc. Each group was engaged in at least two dialogue sessions in two different days using Hausa, an indigenous language, as the medium of communication.

The following structure was adopted for Day 1 in each case:

- a. Opening prayer
- b. Self-introduction
- c. Brief remarks by the facilitator
- d. Identification of conflict dynamics in the community – all
- e. Presentations by religious leaders on the place of forgiveness and reconciliation in social and conflict dynamics
- f. Dialogue Objectives/Background to the dialogue to be presented by the facilitator
- g. Dialogue on the reintegration of repentant persons associated with non-state armed groups to the community – all
- h. Brief presentation of key resolutions – facilitator
- i. Date and time of next dialogue session
- j. Closing prayer.

The following structure was adopted for Day 2 in each case:

- Opening prayer – Volunteer
- Self-introduction – All

- Review and Adoption of Minutes of the previous meeting – facilitator provided the overview and all adopt
- Issues Arising / Review of Outstanding Action Points - facilitator
- Dialogue on new issues specifically on the reintegration of repentant persons associated with non-state armed groups to the community - all
- Presentation of key resolutions - facilitator
- Close – All

Issues such as burglary, rape, animal rustling, drug peddling and drug abuse, farmer-herder clashes, homicide, abduction and kidnapping for ransom, the activities of non-state armed groups in respect of the fleeting insurgency, the fear of infiltration of group of IDPs by person associated with the non-state armed groups, rural banditry and farmer-herder conflicts were presented by the participants as the pressing conflict-related issues in the communities. Participants pointed out that village heads, ward heads, religious leaders etc. do serve as institutions for the management of conflicts in the communities.

Overall, participants expressed the readiness of the communities in the three LGAs to accept the reintegration of repentant persons formerly associated with non-state armed groups (NSAGs) into their respective communities. However, the following conditions were collated from the different locations where the community dialogue sessions were held. That:

- a. Community members must be involved in the process of identifying the ex-combatants to be reintegrated.
- b. Formal security actors must vouch that the ex-combatants have been deradicalized. Thus, the deradicalized ex-combatants must present certificates issued them by relevant formal security actors.
- c. Ex-combatants take an oath with the Holy Qur'an that they would not renege their repentance.
- d. Those to be considered for reintegration into the communities should be repentant insurgents conscripted into non-state armed groups.
- e. Members of host community should be provided with livelihood opportunities to sustain their buy in on the reintegration initiative.
- f. No repentant person associated with non-state armed groups that is not employed should be reintegrated. For the community members to continue living with the repentant person formerly associated with NSAGs, such person must be gainfully employed.
- g. Only repentant insurgent who surrendered should be pardoned and reintegrated.

- h. Any insurgent apprehended in action must face the wrath of the law
- i. The repentant insurgents must sign an undertaking.
- j. Government must compensate people who lost their properties or means of livelihood as a result of the insurgency.
- k. Security and intelligence personnel must place the repentant persons formerly associated with non-state armed groups under watch.

Findings from Focus Group Discussion Sessions

In what ways did the use indigenous language contribute to the use of compassionate words and proverbs that led to persuasion?

The purpose of the community dialogue held in 2022 includes motivating the participants to work toward a common objective that will enhance understanding and strengthen how to find solutions to the issue of reintegrating repentant insurgents into their communities. Given the acceptance of the community members in the population of this study in respect of the reintegration proposal, the study asked participants how compassionate words and proverbs were used through the medium of indigenous language to persuade them to accept the proposal. All the participants agreed that the use of compassionate words and proverb during the community dialogue sessions enhanced the buy in of the community members in respect of the reintegration project. In each of the sessions, the respondents admitted that an overwhelming majority of the participants at the community dialogue sessions were not initially inclined to the reintegration of the repentant insurgents into their community. However, when the participants inclined to the project began to use of indigenous language, it enabled them to demonstrate empathy, using proverbs and compassionate words, by appreciating the resistance of those not inclined and putting themselves in their place. The respondents added that this prompted authenticity through the means of expressing what each of the participants in the community dialogue truly believes. Use of compassionate words does not only assure empathy but also strengthens politeness (Search for Common Ground, 2016). It should be noted that naturally, conversations and other kinds of face-to-face interchange provide opportunity for the prototypical exhibition of politeness. The respondents asserted that the use of compassionate words and proverbs in indigenous language during the community dialogue sessions enhanced trust and encouraged mutual understanding and harmony. Because indigenous language was used, it enabled the participants at the community dialogue

sessions to express their thoughts and positions eloquently and listen attentively.

How has using indigenous language helped in boosting enthusiasm for active participation and quick absorption of the message?

Respondents at the focus group discussion sessions affirmed that the use of indigenous language during the community dialogue sessions that took place in 2022 made the participant to be highly enthused to participate in the community dialogue. Using indigenous language helped them to decipher the message of each contributor at the community dialogue with ease. The aim of using indigenous language during community dialogue sessions is to give voice to the participants who are often excluded from the act of top-down policy formulation by assuring equitable and effective participation for relevant stakeholders (Search for Common Ground, 2016). The use of indigenous language during the sessions assured joint ownership of the process because the participants were committed to the process and believed that what they agreed during the dialogue session would be honoured. The participants have near similar competence in the indigenous language. Differential command of languages can engender mutual disrespect characterized by perceptions of arrogance on one side and stupidity on the other (Chambers, 2007). This in a sense can lead to a situation whereby an elite language becomes a language of exclusion. This is because persons who are not proficient in the elite language automatically feel a deep sense of inferiority complex (Iwara, 2008) that could impede their active participation in the community dialogue.

What role did using indigenous language play in the choice of words, negotiation of meaning and concession?

The respondents confirmed that the use of indigenous language during the 2022 community dialogue sessions did not only boost active participation but also helped in the choice of words, negotiation of meaning and concession. It should be noted that the subject matter of the community dialogue was very sensitive. This is because both the removal of offenders from the community and their reintegration to their community can stir critical challenges for their families and the broader community (United Nations, 2011). Scholars posit that four things could help communities deal with the cycle of removal and re-entry of outlaws (United Nations, 2011). They are human capital, social capital, social networks; and collective efficacy. But then, specific strategies through the use

of language need to be deployed to mobilize and sustain community interest and involvement in the reintegration of the insurgents. Whatever is uttered during the dialogue sessions should be clear. Where the interlocutors are in doubt about the intended meaning, they should express their confusion to negotiate the meaning that would lead to concession. It should be noted that utterance understanding requires the overt construction of an inference taking into cognizance the import of the explicit meaning as one of its premises and the implicit meaning as a conclusion (Berkel, 2021). This is because the meaning ground of a sentence is non-representational (Zalabardo, 2023). As such, the elements inherent in the use of the expressions are discourse-context-sensitive (Carter, 2023). Therefore, the use of indigenous language made the discourse dynamics persuasive leading to the agreements reached at the end of the community dialogue sessions.

In what ways did the use of indigenous language communicate lead to the respect of the worth and dignity of the participants?

The respondents agreed that the use of indigenous language led to the respect of the worth and dignity during the 2022 community dialogue. Human beings have face that they would not like to be threatened during dialogues. The participants at the dialogue sessions were direct and indirect victims of the activities of non-state armed groups. For these reasons, their worth and dignity must be respected in order to convince them to accept the reintegration of the repentant insurgents into their communities. This necessitated the need for politeness. The use of indigenous language encouraged the participants to express their points of view without fear of undue criticism or reprisals because the indigenous language is culture sensitive. One of the vectors of politeness in this context is the use of indigenous language. Copious studies have been conducted on the interface between culture and politeness from cross-cultural perspectives (Spencer-Oatey, 2023). These studies reveal the ways politeness is manifested in different languages. The use of indigenous language in the context of the community dialogue sessions enhanced politeness in such a way that cultural norms were observed to assure the respect of the worth and dignity of one another during the sessions.

Implications for Applied Peace Linguistics and Language Maintenance

This study has revealed how the use of indigenous language contributed in persuading the communities to accept the proposal during the dialogue

sessions, engendered active participation, choice of words, negotiation of meaning and concession, and promoted respect for the worth and dignity of the participants during then dialogue sessions. These have enhanced how the participants accepted the proposal for the reintegration of repentant insurgents who have hitherto used scarism to traumatize their communities. This means that applied peace linguists should when facilitating conflict resolution sessions ensure that they use language that will indicate their empathy for their fellow interlocutors, dignify their dialogues, prioritize positivizers in their language use and be communicative humanizers (de Matos, 2008) and also make the participants in the dialogue sessions to do same to their co-participants in the reconciliatory and conflict management dialogue.

Despite the fact that some of the participants at the 2022 community dialogue sessions understand English language – the official language of Nigeria and Yobe State –, indigenous language was preferred as medium of communication. This has not only enhanced the confidence of the participants to participate actively in the sessions and be culture sensitive in the choice of words but also enhanced language maintenance. Language maintenance is characterized by the passion of members of a speech community to use and transmit their language no matter the complex nature of the language ecology which could be underlined by many languages contending for relevance (Beacco, Krumm & Little, 2017; Holmes, 2013; Nurani, 2015). Suffice it to say that language maintenance is positive only when the patriotism to the language in question is done devoid of language chauvinism and attempts at making the language one is loyal to a predator that could threaten other languages. Thus, language maintenance is negative when the patriotism is not for the purpose of preserving the language in question. Applied peace linguists should as advocates of language maintenance assure that indigenous languages are used during the course of conflict resolution not only to enhance inclusion but also preserve the language in question.

Conclusion

The primary objective of this study is to reveal the role played by indigenous language in persuading participants at the community dialogue sessions supported by the British Council Managing Conflict in Nigeria programme in 2022 to engender the reintegration of repentant insurgents to their communities. The sessions achieved remarkable success given the fact that the community agreed that the repentant insurgents can be reintegrated to the communities based on some conditions. This study concludes, that once

indigenous language users in fragile states serve as communicative humanizers and uses it in such a way that indicates empathy for fellow interlocutors, dignify dialogue and prioritize positivizers it will engender active participation, choice of words, negotiation of meaning and concession, and respect for the worth and dignity of the participants during then dialogue sessions leading to the resolution of the conflict in question.

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