

# The Place of Language Use in Conflict: A Symbiosis of Relatedness in the Evolution of Violent Conflict in Northern Nigeria

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**Abstract:** The symbiotic interrelatedness of the use of language and conflict generation in the northern part of Nigeria has become a source of worry as the media, journalists and even scholars often blame religion, politics or ethnicity as the major source of conflict in Northern Nigeria but fail to mention the role of manipulative use of language which incited and brainwashed extremist into involvement in various deadly conflicts. Using the qualitative research methodology and library materials, the paper reviewed the role of language in the society with rapt attention to the negative effect of inappropriate use of language and its effects on the masses and concludes that the issue of hegemony between religious or ethnic groups has not sustained conflict as much as manipulative influence of the use of language. The paper therefore recommends that the proper use of language should be employed in every discourse process as inappropriate use of language will continue to generate conflict and also act as a manipulative tool for exploitation in the hands of extremist and interest parties.

**Keywords:** *symbiosis, interrelatedness, manipulative tool, inappropriate, conflict*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

This chapter seeks to review the impact of language use in the various evolutions and metamorphosis of violent conflicts in Northern Nigeria, since Nigerian independence on October 1, 1960. The aim of the study; however is to establish the germane fact that a symmetrical symbiotic interrelatedness exists between the use of language and conflict as conflict cannot possibly occur in the absence of language especially in the case of the Northern parts of Nigeria. Language is often located at the center of all human activities and inter-relationship. Language is in turn seen as the core unifying concept in any society. This readily lends itself as a manipulating tool in the hands of perpetrators as they employ the use of language in achieving personal and selfish aim. The study will aid in augmentation and sensitisation on the proper use of language in the various discourses of; the policy makers, curriculum planners, teachers, traditional rulers, constitution drafting committees, the various arms of the government, (the judiciary, legislative and executive) and the general polity in the avoidance of inappropriate use of language which is capable of inciting conflict. The study recommends that the various arms should engage in crafting policies relevant to each type of conflict which may help to curb future violence in the Northern region of Nigeria.

According to Scholars such as Falola 1998; Boer 2004; Francis 2007 and Last 2008, violent conflict especially, in the case of the Northern part of Nigeria had been motivated and sustained by factors such as illiteracy, unemployment, ethnicity, economics, politics and religion. Interestingly however, these are communicated by one Language form or the other. (spoken, written, sign, or body language). The kernel function of language is communication where the encoder determines whether the language is communicated verbally or non-verbally, violently or non-violently depending on the situation and as the case maybe. This notion is corroborated by the views of Okata (2016) who posits that;

Language is a vehicle that transports thought, feelings, emotions or ideas from one entity to another for the purpose of communication. This can be in form of oral, written, sign or body language and must be acceptable by members of a speech community" (176).

To Odebunmi (2016);

Language is a distinctively human endowment that has empowered the human race with expressivity. Language enables members of the race to vent their thoughts and get engaged in interactive associations. It therefore provides the fundamental orientation for the existence of society, the generation of society's structures and the sustenance of cross-societal ties. (3).

The above definitions collaborates Smith Jr's (1969) concept of language which suggests that language is; a learned, shared, and arbitrary system of vocal symbols through which human beings in the same speech community or sub-culture interacts and hence communicates in terms of their common cultural experience and expectations.(9)

According to Odebunmi (2016), the afore definition implies that Smith tends to assert that;

- (a) The existence of language is hinged on the existence of a group of users who have mutual access to it
- (b) Language consists of codes which groups of users with shared access use in intra-group communication.
- (c) Language is spoken in society, where its resources are activated to express shared cultural experiences and expectations of its users;
- (d) This however suggests that inappropriate use or application of language can generate or degenerate into conflict.

Other linguistic scholars have defined Language from divergent perspectives depending on their point of elevation. According to Mei (2001), Language as a means of communication has linguistic features that are peculiar to different contexts of use. The study of these unique linguistic features is important for defining and creating the different genres of linguistic texts. Hence, it is reasonable to talk of variations of language such as the language of commerce, law, media, the language of institutionalized aggression or the military, the language of agriculture, language of politics etcetera and the language of religion. Linguists have deemed it fit to study different genres as well as understand how language functions in those fields in order to either standardize specific linguistic symbolizations or perform certain appropriate functions that are pertinent to the existence, definition and survival of the institutions and their members (Mey, 2001). To William Rice (2008), language is "the process or set of processes used to ensure there is an agreement between the sender and the receiver for meanings assigned to the symbols and the scheme for combining the languages used for each communication.

However, this work argues that the function of language affects the entire rule system, which supports subjugates and where possible politically control one ethnic group above the other. This is a major factor that sowed the seeds of conflict though unintentionally. According to Mavalla(2012); the subordinated ethnic groups in post-colonial Northern Nigeria, have gained influence and become competitive equals to their one time rulers. According to him, this has consequently engendered fear and mutual suspicion between ethnic groups. As a result of this, the slightest provocation has always produced violent reaction based on the intrinsic function of language.

### **Modes of communicating Language**

Language can be communicated by;

1. **Tone:** Language is designed to be spoken. And the spoken form of a language is known as an utterance or the production of audible sound which involves the various speech organs. The speech organs include the resonance chambers, the nasal and buchal cavities.
2. **Written:** When we talk of written form, we refer to the graphical representation of the speech sounds on a medium. This could be found on paper, board, stone, mud, text message, telegraphs, computer system etc
3. **Gestures.:** This refers to the changes of the position of the various parts of the body, especially of the most mobile parts, which include; the arms and hands, eyes shoulders etc
4. **Grimace:** This refers to the change of expression of the face which exhibits features of one's countenance.
5. The **extra paralinguistic features** of communication. This includes instruments such as talking drum, gong, pipe, whistle etc. these have functioned as an effective mode of communication especially among a distinct group and society who share a common norm and experience or a speech community. It is worthy to note that the five mentioned modes are employed by extremist in perpetuating conflict in the northern part of Nigeria.

### **Role of Language in Human Society**

Language has been discussed earlier on in this review as a bonding instrument that helps in bringing together diverse cultures, extending the range of communication, expansion of community and acts as a facilitator of a free flowing relationship among members of a particular society on one hand and on the other hand, especially when language is misused, acts as a manipulator and an effective source of conflict as the misuse of language, the attitudes and sentiments to which it is attached also can affect or distort the reach of contact and narrow the area of understanding among human beings. In specific terms, the role of language will be reviewed from the following relevant perspectives;

Language is a special gift from God to mankind. They are means to deliver thoughts, dreams, meditations, relations, prayers and communication. To others, apart from being a means of communication, it is the source of thinking as well as expression. Since man interacts with the society, language plays a vital role in society transformation; the language can serve in the following ways:

1. Language as a means of communication.  
Language is a social tool that is used for interacting with others in a human society to deliver a message
2. Language is important to understand the nature and the behaviour of man.  
Man would have remained deprived of the Divine message of God if there was no language. It helped in making him capable of receiving and understanding his purpose of life
3. Language helps in preserving the past  
The written and spoken records of history helped the subsequent generations to understand the living patterns of mankind.
4. Language helps to understand the culture and life styles of other societies. Their traditions, customs, and festivals are purely reflected by diversified languages around us.
5. Language is knowledge and learning new language increases intellectual status of mind an individual
6. The brain efficiency could be improved with the aid of new languages. One of the famous man in history said “by learning anyone’s language you actually conquered half of his land”
7. Language procreates knowledge  
The world probably, would have been empty of poets, philosophers, leaders, writers, scientists if there would be no language at all. Thus it can rightly be said that languages actually fulfilled basic human needs to live happy and responsible live in any society. It has played a significant role in the services of mankind and its civilization.

### **Causes of Conflict in the Northern Part of Nigeria**

A cursory look at the functions of religion in the Northern Nigeria that are often recognized by the media and scholars alike are Islam and Christianity. The third, African traditional religion seems to be relegated to the backdrop, deemphasised or a non-existing.. According to Falola (1998), the beginning of religious conflict in the post-colonial era is dated as far back as April 1978 by many analysts, when the Constituent Assembly for the presidential constitution held deliberation. To him, this deliberation was as it were a wake-up call to religious consciousness. Gofwen (2004) also opines that the discourse on religion came in to the open during the 1977 constitution drafting. To him; the politicisation of religion got to its peak of saturation and openly manifested itself during the second republic this wild fire was lit during the 1977 constitution drafting which created an opening for the elite to mischievously express some of the bottled religious grievances which have for long been swept under the carpet. (65). There is no gain saying that the Northern Nigeria are predominantly Muslim, and preferred the Islamic code of Law, *al-Sharia*, rather than the British law which is Christian religion. This status was adapted in the Nigerian constitution where the Muslims’ desire was already at the base during the colonial era. This is cited in a secret letter from the civil secretary’s office titled ‘CONSTITUTION’ and dated 13<sup>th</sup> June 1953 (NAK: Zarprof, 69). The above assertion suggests that religion on its own is not the source of conflict, but rather the use of language (written form) According to Falola (1998), A religious divide separates Christians and Muslims, and Long-standing intra-religious conflicts further divide the. The imperfect distribution of adherents to Islam and Christianity is complicated the ethnic differences: the North (with the exception of central Nigeria, known as the Middle Belt) Is predominantly Muslim, and the southeast is predominantly Christians. It is only South-western Nigeria where both religions are equally represented. In a polity that is already fragile and on the brink of Collapse, religious trouble at this moment presents a great threat. The institutionalization of religious and the aggressive competition for dominance by Islam and Christianity continue to have negative impact on the nation. (1)

It was until 1978 political election that the religious element became significant. This marked the era when religious bigotry became a tool in the hands of power-hungry individuals who manipulated religion into a stepping stone to political power. At this time, politicians encouraged religious adherents to vote for candidates based on religious lines, Christians voting for Christians and Muslims voting for Muslims. It is also worthy to note that Christianity was introduced to the Northern Nigeria in a somewhat spirit of competitive relationship with the already established Islamic religion in the area. It is however important to note that the question of religion, though unresolved, never arose during the colonial era. It rather started to become evident during the first republic. This notion is corroborated by Eliagwu in Gofwen (2004) where he posited that; Religion played very little part in the politics of Nigeria during the first republic. At the local level, of course, religion was important in the calculus of politics. But generally, amidst the many sins of the first republic, perhaps religious bigotry of groups ranked lowest. The intervening political parties, interest groups and associations, beyond parochial religious groups, often submerged or pushed to lower level, the religious issue. (64)

The uneven distribution, coupled with the fear of being subjugated by the other religion, became a constant fear that is expressed within the slightest provocation to produce a violent defence which often results in a deadly conflict. This fear of being subjugated also affected the nation’s politics. There was less conflict during 1970s unlike today where conflict has become the order of the day in the Nigeria. Pipes (1992), states that at the beginning of 1980 a Muslim fundamentalist cleric (in his effort to expose the moral decadence of the

Sufi brotherhood) initiated a religious crisis in Kano, Maiduguri, Yola and Gombe. The crisis led to the killing of over 4000 people –including Muhammad Marwa (the Muslim fundamentalist cleric popularly known as Maitatsine). The media, journalists and even scholars often blame religion, politics or ethnicity for the conflict in Northern Nigeria but fail to mention the role of manipulative use of language which incited and brainwashed extremist into involvement in various deadly conflicts.

### **The Post-Colonial Conflicts in the Northern Nigeria**

In the Northern Nigeria, The post-colonial conflicts (1960–1986) can be classified according to their nature and occurrences over time. To Falola (1998) the violence of the 1960s can be grouped as ethnic. In the 1970s, religion began to take the place of ethnicity in provoking conflict in Nigeria. Wadumbiya, a lecturer in Christian Religion Studies at Hong, Adamawa State in North Eastern Nigeria, showed the evolution of conflict in Northern Nigerian as the progression from political conflict which added ethnic dimension into the conflict in 1971-1977 and finally degenerated into religious gab in the 1978 -1986 (Boer 2004a). However, between 1980 and 2000, the combination of these three (Politics, ethnicity and Religion) have helped in developing the conflict into more frequent and complex clashes, especially since 1987.

Meanwhile the categorization of conflicts into epoch and era may be misleading because compartmentalizing conflict does not suggest that the presence of other types of conflicts were entirely absent but rather that the compartmentalizing of the epochs shows the dominant type of conflict as noticed by the media, the elites, and even the scholars at the given period. The interplay of religion and ethnic identity in Northern Nigeria makes the conflict in this region difficult to designate, because religious adherents are divided along ethnic lines (Smock, 2006). Therefore, ethnic conflict has a very high propensity to be interpreted as religious and vice versa. For instance, the Hausa or the Fulani cannot describe their ethnic identity without connecting it to Islam. Hence “where ethnicity combines with religion, identity becomes stronger and conflicts tend to linger” (Falola 1998:13). To further complicate a conflict analysis in Northern Nigeria, the formation of political parties in 1959 was organised according to ethnic lines which strengthened the propensity for conflict in the region to be subject to various interpretations from the religious, political or ethnic viewpoints, especially because two or three of those elements often tacitly manifest themselves in a single episode (Forsyth, 1983). Falolain his own view affirmed that “religion, politics and language are inextricably bound up with one another to some degree” (Falola 1998:10). Therefore, the nomenclature of politically, ethnically, and religiously motivated conflicts become mere descriptions of arenas where conflicting actors mobilized supporters to achieve their desired aims by using a collective identity which is depicted by verbal, written, sign or body language. Supporting the notion of compartmentalization, Jacoby (2006), described this approach as constructivism. To him, the categorization of the conflict helps to form boundaries between social groups, which functions as a fluid division subject to constant manipulation and change.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

Positing from the stand point of Last (2008), the paper concludes that the incessant communal conflicts in the Northern Nigeria seem to offer a good return financially to the politicians who use language to manipulate the situation effectively. Christians ask (use of language) Christian nations (USA) for aid whereas Muslims turn (Language use) to North Africa or the Middle East for funds. In order to attract the endless support of these donors, parties in the play involve the use of manipulative language to incite and generate conflict which is hitherto found not found only in the northern part of the country but is fast spreading to the entire region of the country. The paper concludes that the issue of hegemony between religious or ethnic groups has not sustained conflict as much as manipulative influence of the use of language. This is because Conflict has not only benefited the politicians who perpetrate violence, but it has also yielded some financial dividends from overseas for so-called peacemakers and academics who write about the conflict. The paper therefore recommends that the proper use of language should be employed in every discourse process as inappropriate use of language will continue to generate conflict and also act as a manipulative tool for exploitation in the hands of extremist and interest parties.

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