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**THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN INTER-ETHNIC CRISIS: A CASE STUDY OF THE  
TIV AND JUKUN ETHNIC GROUPS**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the role of language in inter-ethnic crisis with a focus on the Tiv and Jukun ethnic crisis. The qualitative method which involves collection and analysis of primary data was employed to carry out the study. The study revealed that uses of inflammable terms like: “Atswake”, “Atswa”, “Adenkankan”, “Hondobeegai”, “Tor mbaayie”, “Mbasoonayalave” by members of the language (groups) in conflict contribute to crisis in the society. The work also uncovered that a lot still needs to be done to forestall ethnic crisis between the two speech communities and to eliminate the consequential effects this problem has been posing as it relates to ethnic consciousness. Based on information from the study, the recommendation is that seminars and workshops on the need for peaceful co-existence between the Tiv and Jukun ethnic groups need to be organized from time to time.

**Keywords:** Language, inter-ethnic crisis, ethnic consciousness, conflict

### **Introduction**

Language as a system of communication in every speech community is used in diverse ways.

The positive or negative things happening within a speech community or between two speech communities depend to some extent on how people use language. Language when politely and positively used can enhance peaceful coexistence between speech communities or individuals. In contemporary times world over, people are exposed to different types of vulgar use of language every day. The various forms of using language either helps to shape the knowledge or mar the understanding of both the language and the behaviours of its users thereby, elucidating the predominant attitudes and opinions expressed, which also sharpens the individuals negative or positive thought pattern.

It is a plain fact that every ethnic group has

its own language and beliefs. Thus, the existences of different languages could be traced to the different ethnic groups that inhabit the human society. Language, which is a tool for identification, mutual intelligibility and rallying point for unification has now become manipulative tool of oppression, segregation, nepotism and the likes. This unique human attribute that is supposed to be cherish, has in turn become our greatest weapon of warfare. This truly is repugnant to natural justice, equity and good conscience. The fact that one person does not speak the same language with the other person does not make the second person sub-human to that person, who speaks a different language from one's own language.

In agreement with the above assertion, Jija (2012:116) observes that “the misapplication of language is a sure way of bringing about disharmony and by extension, underdevelopment.” The study further points out that, “the misuse of language brings about

confrontation.” The Tiv and Jukun people are not far from the issue raised above. Language differences contribute negatively to influencing and manipulating the behaviours of these two ethnic groups that have lived together over the years, thus, occasioning disunity and misunderstanding among them over the years. This situation has become a concern to the researcher because of the constant recurrence of the crisis between these two ethnic groups, which sometimes takes a destructive dimension leading to the destruction of properties and lives. It is in the light of this that this study sets out to examine how language can be used as a manipulative tool to either bring about unity or disunity among individuals or groups in a society.

### Conceptual clarification

#### Language

Language is an attribute of human existence, a core value in terms of human interaction. It is difficult to conceive a human society without a language. Language plays a unique role in harmonising individuals when used politely, binding people in unity and at the same time, it can also be used as a manipulative tool to ignite crisis. Jiji (2012:114) observes that: language is symmetrical in nature and is simply a restatement. While it could be employed to induce sour and frictional relationship between groups on the one hand, it could equally be used to establish harmony and diffuse tension between individuals and groups

Jiji (2012) explains that language is symmetrical in nature, that is, it possesses a harmonious and balancing capacity. It also has the capacity to ignite, fuel crisis or bring about sour relationship between groups. This speaks of language as having the characteristics of a two edged sword.

In a similar view, Hayakawa (1990) cited in Jiji (2012) observes that “language is of immense relevance to humanity and a

crucial medium of information and effective conveyor of the feelings which individuals harbour on issues and personalities”. Hayakawa (1990) further adds that, “the expressive use of language affects us” aside from the “tone of voice and rhythm.” Suffice to say that, language conveys feeling which bring about either negative or positive reactions depending on the usage or the context in which the language is being spoken.

Furthermore, to buttress the fact that language conveys feeling, Sabo and Tanko (2014) stress the importance of tone as it influences human behaviour and the critical role it plays in the nature of meaning passed across. Tone influences the pitch of the voice which invariably could send a different impression or message to the listener. Speech characterised by a high pitch is noted to be 'anger' and this should not be used when seeking ways of de-escalating or resolving conflict or crisis, among other things, that disarming and conciliatory statements and utterances would strengthen and enhance peaceful intentions between disagreeing parties. The study further adds that, looking at the possible conflict situation with regard to the social factors, if language is used in all cases effectively, conflicts or crisis could be prevented.

Aluaigba (2008) is of the opinion that in language usage, certain discriminating concepts or terms should be avoided, especially in situation where one is communicating to non-speakers or referring to non-speakers in communication. If certain terms are used by native speakers to segregate the non-speakers or to identify other speakers other than themselves, even if these terms are not provocative, the speaker may need to ask his or herself what the terms could mean to the hearer, and whether or not the tone is appealing to the hearer. In the light of this truth, Hayakawa (1990) attests to the fact that language is of immense relevance to humanity, a crucial medium of information and an effective conveyor of the feelings which individuals harbour on issues and personalities. Language conveys feeling

which bring about either positive or negative reaction depending on the usage or the context in which the language is being used. In view of this, language should be cautiously, conscientiously and politely used so as to have positive influence on individual and group co-operation in social affairs.

### **Ethnic crisis**

The issue of 'place of origin' handed to us by the colonial masters has eaten deep down into our consciousness. It has given birth to the desire to guide and protect the resources in our 'place of origin' with all we have and what it takes. Nnoli (1978) observes that in Nigeria, the colonial urban setting constitutes the cradle of ethnicity. It provided the converging point for members of the different pre-colonial politics and diverse linguistic and cultural formation; it was through this colonial urban setting that ethnic group acquired a common consciousness. The study went further to show that contact alone is not the source of ethnicity. The competition for scarce resources among different groups enhanced the consciousness for ethnicity. This has been the case of the Tiv and the Jukun ethnic group in Taraba state.

Deducing from Nnoli's assertion, Alubo (2006:98) observes that the Tiv often assert that "it is the 'open bush' which the Jukun 'vaguely' 'claim to be their land', that is responsible for the crisis". Jija (2012:115) observes that "the Tiv-Jukun crisis has recorded quiet a volume of pejorative vocabulary or lexical items among the conflicting groups (thieves, inferior race, land seizers, blood spillers, pretentious band of fishermen, ingrates) that are more prone to conflict between the communities. Jija (2012) further avers that based on the social dignity of any group of people in Nigeria, once words that are not appealing are used, as indicated here, definitely the stage is set for not just the war of words, but the real and physical combat. Nnoli (1978) tries to show how ethnicity does not exist in a pure form; it is always closely associated

with political jurisdiction, religious and other social views, which constitutes its important ingredient as well. According to the study, ethnicity is a social phenomenon associated with interaction among members of different ethnic groups. These ethnic groups are social formation distinguished by the communal character, which may be language, culture or both.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study adopts the Cooperative Competitive Theory as propounded by Morton Deutsch (1949) as the framework for analysis.

The competitive and cooperative theory is considered to be a two-dimensional theory. The first dimension (competitive dimension) accounts for what triggers ethnic conflict or crisis. The second dimension (cooperative) accounts for ways of resolving ethnic crises and enhancing mutual understanding and co-habitation. Specifically, the assumptions of the competitive dimension are:

- i. When there is conflict among ethnic groups, there is desire to reduce the other's power and dominate them.
- ii. The solution to conflict situation can only be imposed by one side or party on the other.
- iii. Dominance and imposition of conflict resolution is done through coercive means and the use of language as a powerful tool.

The assumptions of the cooperative dimension are:

- i. When there is no cooperation, conflict or crisis is inevitable.
- ii. Cooperative relationship displays a number of positive characteristics which include; more effective communication and coordination, open and friendly attitudes, a sense of mutuality and willingness to increase the other's power

by seeking to enhance other's capacity with a view that you benefit from other's enhancement. As the other's capabilities are strengthened you are strengthened; seeing others as being of a value to you as well as to others.

For instance, Adamu Abdulahi of Nassarawa State, Jija (2012:118) states:

We all need each other and we must accommodate one another to be able to maintain the needed multi-ethnic state like ours. Hatred of peace and solidarity without which it is impossible to achieve development and progress in a neighbour, will be the beginning of our downfall as a state.

Competitive processes tend to yield the inverse, negative effects; suspicion, desire to reduce the other's power and to dominate them. It stimulates the view that solution to a conflict situation can only be imposed by one side of the party on the other. This is done through coercive means. This can only compound issues in conflict as no one would like to be persuaded or threatened to do what he or she is unwilling to do in a conflict situation. For instance, a statement credited to General T.Y Danjuma. Jija (2012:116) observed in Ihua (2010:19)

The Tiv people used to be migrating farmers. When I was a child, Tiv people would come and set up their farms in Jukun land...But over the recent years...The Tiv became permanent settlers. Just when people are about to harvest their yams, and guinea corn and beans...people are driven away by armed robbers.

Jija (2012:116), observes that because people are not aware of the effective use of language or communication, they

jeopardize cordial or healthy relationships which, most times, result in conflict. A similar statement by a former President of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo reflects an ignorance of the consequence of language in conflict "It serve them right...the massacre should serve as a lesson to anybody or community contemplating similar action".

Based on the assumptions of the theories of Morton Deutsch, the Tiv and Jukun crisis experienced the desire to reduce the power of each other and Language played a crucial role in igniting and fuelling the conflict. The conflict must have been resolved as a result of the return of cooperation amongst the two ethnic groups. When the cooperation is threatened the conflict or crises recur. The theory is therefore relevant to this study as its application in data analysis using the descriptive approach provides information on how the use of language by members of the warring groups contributes to crisis which affect the peace and security of lives and properties of the people of these ethnic groups. The study identifies and examines selected linguistics terms that are capable of igniting conflict between a group of people or individuals.

### Methodology

The study adopts interview method as instrument of data collection. Some prominent personalities in the area who have first-hand information as regards the crisis were interviewed. These personalities are: Solomon Ishaku Muya Kente of Kente village, Dwan Tyough of Assa village, Sunday Marga Orpinga of Ikyaior village, Zaki Tarbee Mbaume of Atereyange village, Yakuku S. Atabon of Wukari, Mkohorga Usumbo of Assa village, Manu Alamanta Audu of Wukari, Manu Hosea Aminti Kunassa of Assa village, Caleb J.B Tunku, Ishaku K. Danji, Emmanuel Moto Kente, Amadu Arobo of Nwuban village. Twelve respondents were asked four questions in regards to the subject under investigation. The aim is to find answers to the research questions.

## Presentation and Discussion of Data

Answers derived from the four questions that were posed to the twelve respondents serve as data for this study. The pieces of information obtained from the study are stated below:

### Question 1

Why do you use some terms in your language to refer to the Tiv/Jukun other than the Tiv/Jukun? Information from preliminary study reflects that the two different groups use pejorative terms to refer to one another. Such terms often refer to certain behaviour of the groups. The use of such terms help them to discuss secrets especially when they are amidst people by using coded terms such as: “atswake” (covetous people), “atswa” (people that squat to eat), “adekankan” (females that tie their wrapper one-sided), “munchi” (we have eaten), “apyen” (people that carry rumour around), “hondobeegai” (people that don't finish barbing their hair), “mbasoonayolave” (people that love themselves above any other people), “Tor mbaayie” (people that are chiefs in lying), “nyafa” (selfish people).

### Question 2

Have you ever given it a second thought that the terms used to refer to the Tiv/Jukun will bring about misunderstanding that might lead to crisis?

All the informants agreed to the fact that the term used might lead to crisis if the person understands that what the other person is using to refer to him/her is inciting.

### Question 3

Are there tendencies for the crisis between the Tiv and Jukun to recur in the future if the use of such language continues?

On the possibility of recurrence of crisis between the two groups, 75% of the total numbers of respondents, that is 9 out of 12

respondents are of the opinion that the crisis might recur if the controversies between the two ethnic groups are not dealt with completely. One of the informants Mr. Dwan Tyough confesses:

My concern on this issue is that they (Jukun) refuse to see us as an indigene. My grandfather was born in this village, my father was born in this same village, I was born in this village and have given birth to children in this village. For goodness sake, where do you want us to go from here with these people (His families)? These controversies between the Tiv and Jukun concerning indigeneship have been one of the primary reasons for the crisis that still needs to be given attention owing to the fact that the Tiv man can still trace his ancestors to a particular place within Wukari.

### Interviewed ...8<sup>th</sup> January, 2017.

Another interviewee, Manu Alamanta Audu states

I believe that they have lived in Wukari for decades, owned houses, farms and other properties. The fact is that they are also part of the Wukari traditional council having district heads in Chinkai-Mbawa, Va'ase, Abako, etc. But as regarding the issue of indigeneship, I disagree with that completely.

### Interviewed... 8<sup>th</sup> January, 2017.

### Question 4

Are there some things that these two ethnic groups need to do for them to enjoy lasting peace?

All the informants agreed that there are things to be done for the two ethnic groups to enjoy

lasting peace:

Mr. Mkohorga Usumbo responded thus: “We are the ones living in this community, all we need to do is to accept our differences if not, we will continue to tear ourselves apart instead of web ourselves together”.

**Interviewed... 8<sup>th</sup> January, 2017.**

On the same issue, Marga Sunday Orpinga says:

There should be rotation in the politics of Wukari. The Tiv should be given a chance to be the Chairman of Wukari Local Government. Wards should be added to the Tiv areas because of their wide concentration in those areas and finally, let us be faithful with one another in our dealings so as to reduce suspicion and accusation among us.

**Interviewed... 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 2017.**

Another informant, Manu Hosea Aminti Kun-assa of Assaadds “if intermarriage between the Tiv and Jukun is encouraged and it continues, it will go a long way to reduce the pressure and tension among the Tiv and Jukun especially that of indigeneship”.

**Interviewed... 8<sup>th</sup> January, 2017.**

### Conclusion

This paper has made attempts to establish the fact that language input helps to influence the behaviour of its users by revealing the predominant attitudes and opinion expressed which affects the listeners thought pattern. The study has identified some inflammable terms in language usage by the two ethnic groups which ignite crisis. The use of inflammable terms often provokes or ridicules the referent. The paper creates an awareness on

the need to be careful in the choice of words people use to describe their neighbors. This will enhance peaceful co-existence among the Tiv and Jukun ethnic groups thereby achieving a strong and healthy society.

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