

LANGUAGE AS A TOOL FOR PEACE BUILDING AND SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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**Abstract**

*This paper examined language use as a tool for communication and peace in Nigeria. Language as an expression of human ideas is basically used for communication. It helps to conserve one's culture and if misused bridges the peace of a society. This paper explained different meanings of language, as a system and as a code. Characteristics of language, the different functions language perform in the society and elements of language as communication tool were all discussed. The paper equally discussed language as a national tool to maintain peaceful co-existence, crises free environment. Paper showcased the different ways people can use language to ruin or build a society and concluded with factors that can impinge good uses of language recommending the use language in a more positive way.*

**Key words:** *Communication, Language, Tool, Peace building, sustainable development*

**Introduction**

Nigeria is a multilingual nation that has over 500 indigenous languages existing alongside English Language although three of them are regarded as official languages which are Igbo Hausa and Yoruba (Araromi, 2018). There is equally a sign language used by the deaf which was introduced by Andrew Foster in 1960. According to Emmanuel, Ezinne and Mary (2018), sign language is officially recognised in Nigeria and the same Nigerian sign language is used in Chad and Republic of Congo . Generally speaking, the primary aim of using language is for communication. It could be spoken or written. The most important thing is that words and signs are used which are structured in a way they are understood. However, every language has one thing in common whether it is officially recognised or not, the sole purpose is effective communication. According to Calistus (2015), language preserves culture, promotes peace and brings conflict to a stop in the society. National interest and unity can be maintained through the use of language (Achilike, 2007). Nigerian government sees language as a means of promoting social interaction, national togetherness and cultures which forces every Nigerian child to learn the language of the immediate environment. Furthermore, in the national interest, it is beneficial that every child is required to

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learn one of the three Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (Ayeomoni, 2012). In a nut shell, language is a tool for describing all human activities/human existence and above all a consolidating means of bringing people together especially in a multilingual society like Nigeria.

### **Meaning of Language**

Language is a system of spoken or written symbols which people as members of a social group use to air their views and opinions. Robert (2022) defines language as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by which social group cooperate . It is a patterned system of communication that involved what human beings can utter. This definition means that language is spoken by human beings alone and other animals use sign language. Human language is a semiotic system hence it subsumes the use of signs and symbols to make sense from one individual to another (Ndimele, 2007). Azikiwe (2007) describes language as a system where sounds are arranged by the thoughts of human beings and equally used by them in order to communicate effectively . Language is a means of social control and national mix up. Language use is one of the major factors that makes human beings different from animals therefore, language is the property and characteristics of human beings which shows a clear discrepancy between them and animals. Man uses language to represent experiences. Man most consequential way of identifying and naming things is through the use of language. It could be the relationship between words and thoughts. It could also be developed and accepted as verbalization of ideas (Azikiwe, 2007). When we talk we verbalise. The verbalisation of our thought, ideas and experiences come to play through the use of language either by talking or writing.

Language is a code. It is used to depict a thing. It could come inform of a word, graph and map that portrays objects for easy identifications. According to Nwala (2015), it is a code of conduct people share and full of multiple and refined grammar that makes it different from that of animals hence that of animals are closed system used to portray some strong intentions like anger, danger, joy, hunger, sex etc. Through the use of language, man understands his environment. As a code, it helps the society to preserve, conserve, identify, send, receive, organise and function effectively. Effective cooperation, limitations and achievements in life are done through the use of language. This is why a bridge in communication causes anarchy and disunity.

### **Characteristics of Language**

Language has so many characteristics, some of them include:

**i.It is a means of communication:** This is the primary aim of language. It is the most convenient means of expressing one's views, ideas and thoughts. It could be through speaking, writing, drawing, painting, gestures, signs and symbols. Feelings are expressed via the means of language. We use language to interact with one another. According to Azikiwe (2007), language as a means of communication involves five elements:

**The sender** who gives out the information, message or contacts needed for communication to take place. It could be the teacher, learner, scholar, administrator or anyone else.

**The message** conveyed or given by the sender is another element that must be present before communication takes place. The sender must send something and whatever he/she sends is the message whether feelings, information, knowledge, truth, signs etc.

**The medium** of sending the message is important. Whatever means by which the message is being sent is the medium.It could be through utterances. It could be in black and white, drawing and

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painting. It could also be synchronous or asynchronous. The sender may decide to do it through the use audio/ audio visual aids, visual aid only where you view it on a plat form where you read the information without a back-up voice. Whichever means used by the sender to give out the message is the medium.

**The recipient** on the other hand has to receive the message. It could be through any of the means used by the sender. The most important thing is that there is a target audience. If there is no receiver, there is no communication because communication does not take place in isolation. Receiver can be anyone who finds the piece useful and interesting. In addition, communication as one of the characteristics of human language is a crucial tool in growth and development of a society .

**ii.Language as a Social Phenomenon:** This means that language is a conventional communicative sign used in the community for effective communication. Social group uses language as a social tool to interact and share ideas together in a permissible way. Members of a social group are allowed to use acceptable language to communicate with one each other. It is a social institution. Language is a social act that one uses to get, maintain and measure contact with others. It nourishes and develops culture and establishes relationship among members of a social group.

**iii.Language is Unique:** Language is so unique that every single language has a function to perform. Every language has its own tone. It is made up of its own sounds-vowel and consonants. According to Nwala (2015) language is so unique that it is different and special in so many ways.

**iv.Language is Conventional:**Language is not inherited. It can be learnt. Language can be transmitted from generation to generation. It can be acquired by man because man has an innate ability more than other animals to acquire language. Language changes and dies. Every language gives the user the ability to express himself and communicate effectively. Language has words and organised means conventionally associated with fields of human works.

**v.Language is Productive and Creative:** Speaking itself is productivity. Human beings create language and produce it in order to have discussions. They can talk about present, past and future via the use of language. Language is used in discussing everything. There is no discussion if there is no language.

**vi.Cultural Transmission:** Language is transmitted from one generation to another. A baby's language is determined by the culture where the baby is born into. Language describes what people do and believe in. through the use of language, one can identify a group of people hence language cannot be transmitted through hereditary but through culture and teaching.

### Functions of Language

Language performs some functions in the society. Although these functions are sometimes mistaken for the characteristics. It is to be noted that the sole aim of language is for effective communication which are giving, taking and doing.

**i.Communicative Function:** Language is learnt for the purpose of communicating with one another. The communication could be through signs and gesticulations, speech and actions. In Nwala (2015), people's view and opinions are feasible with the use of language. If there is no

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means of relating with each other in the society, the society will be a funny place to live in, therefore, to relate with people effectively on daily basis, effective communication is needed either verbally or non-verbally.

**ii.Informative Function:** People give language in order to give or receive information and get task completed. This is closely related to communicative function. It aids us to deliver messages, describe things and give out new thoughts to audience.

**iii.Means of Social Control and Understanding:** People involved in language use are able to understand each other's weaknesses, strengths, talents, abilities, intelligences, interests and lots more. You can only know yourself and others by the use of language. This is because once there is understanding by power of language, characters are built positively to create new vision. Language is also used to create situation. It can be used in the form of gesture and symbols; in form of rules, statues, laws etc.

**iv.Expressive Function:** Language is a means of expressing feelings, emotion and passion. It is used to tell everything that is hidden in our hearts and minds hence from the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. There are words that don't do any other function except expressing attitude and feelings like exclamation words and swear words. Language is used to show impression and understand the speaker's personality and emotions. Expressive function of a language is mostly used in poetry (Calistus, 2015). This particular function of the language does not give out any information to the listeners but expresses the speaker's feelings.

**v.Aesthetic Functions:** According to Calistus (2015), language is used as linguistic artifacts. Beauty is admired and expressed via language. This function helps us to make use of poetic art and different signs. It is more of choosing words and phrases to be used than the information they give. Some adjectives that express beauty like charming, beautiful, elegance, nice, handsome etc are usually used to carry out this function. Theaesthetic function of language is not only on the structure but also on the cultural norms (Agbedo, 2009 ).

**vi.Directive Function:** Certain actions, order, command or reactions are carried out via the use of language. This function can be used for making request, for social control and interaction to maintain peace and other in the society. The reaction of the audience is regarded paramount than that of the speaker because that is the only thing that will determine if the target goal is achieved or not. For instance, if an order like "stop that" is given out to an angry mob and they are still moving, the goal of issuing out that order is not achieved.

**vii.Phatic Function:** This function is not for the interest of the speaker or listener but for the purpose of discussing, maintaining a relationship and keep the conversation going. When people interact at work place, on the road, in the street or occasion about children, food, weather etc, it is not necessarily for expressing feelings but a desire to just talk. Although, there may be some interesting information from the discussion, but it may not be too necessary.

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### **Language as a tool for peaceful communication**

Language develops a nation and sustains peace depending on the usage. It has been said earlier in this paper that Nigeria is a multilingual nation. Language serves as a tool for peaceful communication. According to Ituen (2011), English Language is a lingua franca in Nigeria which is used as a medium of communication, language of commerce and business, government and education. The linguistic reality of a society has to come in place before peaceful existence of such society is assured. Clear understanding of language spoken in a society increases mutual understanding in that society hence speaking and listening bring about an internalised ability for peaceful coexistence (Agbedo, 2009). Every day use of language depicts different senses. Emotional thoughts and feelings are expressed by the use of language. In a multilingual society like Nigeria, the consciousness of the use of language should be paramount for the sake of peaceful living. When a society is made up of multiple languages, mutual understanding is bridged. The story from Genesis as pointed by Cook, (2013a) would have us believe that linguistic diversity is the cause of fall of Tower of Babe . This project could have been a success if not for the diversity of languages. When a society is made up of multi languages like the story of Babel, misunderstanding, bitterness, suspicion etc set in and mar mutual achievement of that society. Such society needs a central language for easy communication. If a multi lingual nature of a society is not well handled, nepotism, favouritism, tribalism and other social ills that bring disunity will be the order of the day. This is because we are always conscious to favour our own linguistic group as against another person language. Furthermore, if the national tool which is effective use of language is ignored, peace is bridged and poorly sustained. According to Odudigbo, (2014), through writing or speaking a language, we pass information across to the audience . The way language is used should be taken into consideration because language can restores unity as well as disintegrates. The dominant form of disseminating information is through the use of language. It is a key to national peace therefore, acceptable form of words should be used to accommodate the general public. In order to maintain peace and unity, the language in use should be clear and free from ambiguity, hate speech, not complicated and made comprehensible to the audience. This supports the assertion of Mayr (2008) that language cannot be separated from the original purposes in the society which is communicative purpose.

Language is a tool used for government programs (local, state and federal) like campaigns, census, workshops and seminars, immunization exercise, broadcasting and lots more. It is also a means of creating awareness to the citizens. Government policies and agenda are made clear via the use of language. If there is no language, there is no communication and if there is no communication, there is no society. Language use still stands as an important part of the societal peace because it is the means of communal interactions and living. Through the use of language, people express their feelings and thoughts. The communal life of people is attainable only if the people living together understand each other, doing things together with common ideas and thoughts (Cohen, 2001). Language can cause disunity, war, anarchy and bridge of peace in the society (Seweje, 2005). In his statement, some ethnic unrest and social crises in a country emanated from wrong use of language. Most security challenges in Nigeria like kidnapping, killings, armed robbery, some communal clashes, conflict, land disputes, boundary dispute, farmers and herders' clash can be resolved by effective use of language. Language is a powerful tool that can quench bloody war within a short while and return peace (Ekere, 2013 and Jija, 2012 ). In support of this statement, Cohen (2001) asserted that parties involved in misunderstanding have to share some levels of meaning to be able to understand each other . This therefore means that words have

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variations of meaning and if not properly explained, the reverse becomes the case hence the greater the gap in connotation of words, the greater the cultural understanding and the use of words (Cohen, 2001). Cohen further stated that since the use of language depicts diverse interpretations of realities, the level of understanding of the speaker's words depends on the parity in his language. Language does not exist in isolation therefore the meanings of words are seen in the usage of those words. In other words, for one to live peacefully with others, the use of words should be considered. Jija (2012) stated that language should be used cautiously and courteously so that there will be social cooperation in the society. Once language use is controlled, conflict and misunderstanding are suppressed to a maximum level. When referring to one's life style, delicacies, religion, tribe, dressing, etc, languages that are honourable and respectful should be implored.

Nevertheless, words, statements or utterances that promote tension, anarchy and disunity should be avoided (Jija, 2012). In lieu of this, people have ignited and promoted war on social media through the use of wrong words and utterances. Hate speech is order of the day. Insulting and castigating one's religion and mode of dressing, calling people names, propagating religious and communal crises through the use of language are not left behind. The need for the use of polite utterances in the society like Nigeria where there are multiple languages should be encouraged because misuse of words can be worse than atomic bomb (Yusuf, 2003). Grouching (2005) says that if a piece of information is wrongly given, the receiver misunderstands it which can cause loss of lives and property. Culture of peace is easily found in an environment where people's lives, values, ways of life and tolerance are encouraged (Osam & Ekpo, 2009). In addition, a favourable atmosphere should be created where people's right, liberty and culture are respected for national peace.

### **Factors that mar good language use in the society**

**i. Illiteracy:** Many Nigerians are not literate especially those living in the rural areas. Besides, Nigeria has not officially adopted any local dialects as a national language. So in a place where the inhabitants cannot speak or understand English language, communication is marred between the ethnic group and settlers. In a multilingual society, there is always a misconception of roles which usually ends in conflict. Calistus (2015) supported this statement when he opined that language gap promotes ethnic misunderstanding and increases danger of war. Illiterate society cannot obtain and understand essential information which can lead to tension and crises.

**ii. Ignorance and lack of awareness:** Ignorance they say is a disease. A misinformed society is a deformed society. These two factors play dangerous roles in the society. Wars, racism, terror, tribalism and the likes are caused by sheer ignorance and lack of awareness. It is ignorance that makes people to forget that nobody lives forever no matter your tribe, race, religion, rank, position etc. Ignorance is the result of conscious effort to do the wrong thing (Robert, 2011). If we are conscious of the weight of our utterances and their meanings in a given situation some wars will be wedged. When you believe more in rumour than the truth, you live in ignorance. Those who cause disunity with the use of negative words operate in ignorance hence an adage says "A stone thrown in the middle of the market may either fall on the head of your kin's men or on the head of your mother's kin's men". This means that when unrest erupt through the careless use of language, you are either affected directly or indirectly. Again, when there is lack of awareness of impending

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danger of wrong use of languages/hate speech, the reverse becomes the case. Some disturbing situation may be curbed hence there is room to create awareness of what might be the outcome of the situation.

**iii.Poor communication:**Poor communication is lack of using proper language while speaking. Poor communication mars understanding. Communication is said to be effective when there is understanding between the sender and receiver. Good communication is crucial in every organisation. When an intended goal is not made clear through communication, confusion sets in. There is no effective communication if there is no effective feedback. When the message is wrongly conceived, definitely the reaction will be negative. Language is a medium of communication and words usage play important roles in communication. Be objective and select words while addressing the public especially in a multilingual society to avoid misunderstanding of the intended aims and objectives.

### Conclusion

Language carries meaning, describes culture, values and societal life's style. It is a tool for peace building. Language has a mutual relationship with peace and crises. The rapid growth of social media irrespective of the positive sides has become the avenue to promote propaganda and hate speech. Language brings people together and also separates them (Mohammad, 2016 ). When a language is recognised nationwide then that language is as powerful as that nation because the unity and division of that nation depend on the usage of that language. Language is a tool that allows one to cultivate an idea and thought into another's own without caesarean operation (TEDGlobal, 2011 in Mohammad, 2016). Language is your words and your words are your language which deduce a lot of meaning therefore being mindful of the power of our language will stand as a tool for national peace.

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