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**Verbal Hygiene in the Use of the English Language: A Tool for  
Unity, Conflict Resolution and Sustainable Development  
in Nigeria**

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**Abstract**

*The place of cultivating good verbal hygiene is fundamental towards achieving unity, conflict resolution and sustainable development in a linguistically, ethnically, culturally and politically diversified Nigerian society. The concept of verbal hygiene seeks to emphasize the use of respectful and unbiased words to express our opinions in given social context. Even though, freedom of speech is guaranteed for all citizens, it has been abused by Nigerian leaders who capitalize on this opportunity to achieve their selfish and hateful agenda. The recent condemnation of Awolowo has sparked off verbal wars between Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups because of humanitarian*

*issues raised by Achebe. Again, through unguarded and evil utterances of Northern leaders like Major General Buhari, Lawal Kaita and other Muslim clerics thousands of lives have been lost. In this paper, we have discussed extensively, how effective use of words can be utilized to achieve sustainable development in Nigeria.*

### **Introduction**

It is pertinent for us to understand what language is because it will help us to appreciate the concept of verbal hygiene, unity and conflict resolution extensively. Language according to Crystal, (2008) is the concrete act of speaking, writing or signing in a given situation. Mbata (2008), sees language as any means or method employed by human beings (whether spoken, written or signs) to effect communication. Fischer (2005) cleverly depicts the power of language thus:

...language is both the foundation and building material of the social house. Society's final architecture and subsequent remodeling are also measured from and through language. Language gives all human action voice, achieving this in complex and subtle ways. Multiple levels of social interaction, from international relations to intimate relationships are borne, enabled and empowered through language. Language not only signals where we come from, what we espouse and to whom we belong, but also operates tactically and strategically invest our individual, gender, or ethnic franchise; to authorize our pilgrimage through societies' orders and to signal to others what we want and how we intend to achieve it. Throughout history, people have judged others – that is, consciously or unconsciously assessed their place in human society based solely on their ethnic language, their regional dialect, indeed their personal choice of individual words. The linguistic verdict has been final and has fashioned all of human history. (p.175)

### **What is Verbal Hygiene, Unity and Conflict Resolution**

Verbal hygiene is a concept that denotes the use of politically, socially, religiously and linguistically correct words to express our opinions, ideas and views in a given situation. The concept of verbal hygiene is a new area of sociolinguistic, pragmatics and discourse analysis study coined by a British Linguist Deborah Cameron to create awareness on the use of language which is culturally, socially and linguistically correct. Certainly, language involves producing and sending information which is often decoded by an individual through the mechanism of his social context. Verbal hygiene does not mean that speakers should be economical with the truth but we can express our opinion respectfully without causing unnecessary frictions in the society. Cameron (2012) argues that language use is paradigmatically a social and public act, therefore, talking; writing and signing must

be carried on with reference to norms which may themselves become the subject of overt comment and debate.

Basically, every well educated speaker who wishes to express his opinions through the medium of the English language must strive conscientiously to understand the thought pattern or the social context of the group of people he wishes to communicate with. Social context as a political, psychological, religious, cultural, and educational background of an individual shapes and defines how people react to a given piece of information that concerns them. It is a fundamental influence which affects our perception of the world around us. These influences include gender, race, ethnicity, educational status, sexuality, and so on. These factors shape the way a person reacts to things linguistically. Due to individual differences, no two people can react and interpret information in the same way except when they share the same opinions, sentiments, beliefs and worldview.

Again, the word unity as defined by the New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language (2004) is a state of general good feeling and mutual understanding. Ojinmah (2008), sees conflict as warfare between opposing forces; disagreement or clash between ideas, principles or people; psychological state of unconscious opposition between simultaneous but incompatible desires, needs, drives or impulses. Mancha (2008) observes that conflict is a natural part of life brought on by our different beliefs, experiences, values and perception. In the words of Yakubu (2007):

...conflict appears to be present in all human relationships and in all societies. There have always been conflicts between husband and wife, children and parents, neighbours, ethnic group, fellow workers, organizations, citizens and their government and nations.

On the other hand, conflict resolution could be seen as the process of negotiating for peace between individuals or countries. Yakubu (2007) defines conflict resolution as any attempt at applying the skills and strategies for addressing the issues or problems that bring about conflict. This attempt at problem solving and creating peace is often done through the medium of language. This is true because language is at the core of man's existence; it is at the centre of any mobilization of a group of people. It is indeed a crucial socio-political and cultural resort for groups seeking to achieve social integration and cooperation. Therefore, it means that to live in peace and harmony, we must be very hygienic in our use of language, especially as it concerns resolving our deep rooted mutual suspicion and conflict among the ethnic groups in Nigeria. Whenever poor verbal expression begins to manifest in the form of biased language, in the process of mediating for unity and peace, then achieving conflict resolution may not be possible. Maggio, (2004), posits that biased language can powerfully harm people as amply demonstrated by bigots and tyrants deliberate

attempts to linguistically dehumanize and demean group they intend to exploit, oppress or exterminate.

To sum up the importance of good verbal hygiene, Lawal (2004) posits that Conduct and character are largely determined by the nature of the words we currently use to discuss ourselves and the world around us. Our use of language is all-encompassing because “our humanity thus depends on our capacity” to use it effectively. Adedimeji, (2004), posits that mere words, that language produces, can make and prevent wars, create understanding or inflame prejudice, form constitutions or destroy them, sell shoddy or superior ideas, justify man’s worst actions or express his highest ideals.

### **Theoretical Framework of Verbal Hygiene, Unity and Conflict Resolution**

Many studies derived from the famous Sapir-Wharf’s hypothesis of ‘linguistic determinism’ and ‘linguistic relativity’ has shown that there exists relationship between language, thought and action. Such relationship clearly indicates that language is the vehicle for thought which ultimately leads to action based on how, manner and when the information was decoded. There are several instances in Nigeria when ordinary use of words has caused great chaos, confusion, social unrest and disturbance. The theoretical framework of the paper, therefore, is hinged on the significant relationship between languages and thought in the expression of our beliefs, ideas, opinions and action.

Also, the theory of individual differences can also be used to establish the relationship between language, thought, and action. According to Okunna, (1999:168), she observes that:

...the individual differences theory provides another useful way to look at the reaction of audience member to mass communication message. Even when people belong to the same social category and have group norms and values in common; each person still has characteristics which are unique to her. It follows that, depending on who you are and what type of personality characteristic you have, a persuasive media message could fail either partially or totally to have the effect which the mass communicator, an advertiser perhaps, intended it to have on you. The same message could have the intended effect on another member of the audience with a different psychological make-up. (p. 168)

To achieve unity among the ethnic groups in Nigeria, it is very important that we must be very careful of how we express our self in every given situation so as to engender peaceful co-existence in Nigeria.

### **Verbal Hygiene, Unity, Conflict Resolution and the Nigerian Situation**

In Nigeria as a developing country, political, social, religious and cultural leaders are always at verbal war on the pages of newspaper in the process of communicating with their audience and followers. Most of these leaders are ethnically based and biased in the expression of their opinions. These they do through the use of mass media like newspaper, television, radio and most recently the internet. Among these mass communication medium, newspapers as a form of print media is the most popular avenue through which the devastating effects of wrong use of language have impacted negatively in the process of uniting Nigerians.

A critical look at the language of our leaders in the pages of newspapers will attest to the fact that most Nigerian leaders are not verbally hygienic in their use of words. Their words show deep-rooted hatred and mutual suspicion. These leaders in the bid to express their opinions use foul, hateful and inciting language. This is even worse if the issue is political in nature. The result is that every message published in newspaper is viewed, criticized, evaluated, accepted and rejected from the point of view of one's ethnic, political and religious affiliation. In the words of Peter cited in Watson and Hill (1993),

...men frequently find themselves at cross-purposes with one another because they persist in using words in different senses. Their long arguments emit more heat than light because their conceptions of the point of issue... From heedless sloth, or sheer lack of intelligence, men do not trouble to clarify their conceptions. (p. 169)

#### **Causes of Poor Verbal Hygiene**

The major cause of poor verbal hygiene in Nigeria is the heterogeneous nature of Nigerian society. Nigerians tend to be divided among ethnic, political, religious, social and even economic lines. This also influences their use of language positively or negatively as the case may be, just to protect the interest of the group one belongs to.

A recent evident to support this negative ethnic influence on the use of language is the recent comment by Achebe on the role of Awolowo on the gruesome starvation of Biafran children during the Nigerian-Biafran war. In his bestselling autobiography, *There was a country: A personal history of Biafra*, Achebe (2012:233) posits thus:

...the wartime cabinet of General Gowon, the military ruler, it should be remembered, was full of intellectuals like Chief Obafemi Awolowo among others who came up with a boat load of infamous and regrettable policies. A statement credited to Awolowo and echoed by his cohorts is the most callous

and unfortunate: all is fair in war, and starvation is one of the weapons of war. I don't see why we should feed our enemies fat in order for them to fight harder. It is my impression that Awolowo was driven by an overriding ambition for power, for himself and his Yoruba people. There is, on the surface at least, nothing wrong with those aspirations. However, Awolowo saw the dominant Igbo at the time as the obstacle to that goal, and when the opportunity arose- the Nigerian Biafran War- his ambition drove him into frenzy to go to every length to achieve his dreams. In the Biafran case, it meant hatching up a diabolical policy to reduce the number of his enemies significantly through starvation- eliminating over two million people, mainly members of the future generation. (p.233)

His statement has received condemnation especially from Yoruba leaders who claim that Awolowo cannot be blamed for the war, rather he pleaded against it. Ekok (2012) reports that Yinka Odumakin, the spokesperson of Save Nigeria Group was one of the people who angrily criticized Achebe's depiction of Awolowo in the book, says:

...it is unfortunate that a great man of letter of Achebe's status has descended to the arena of Biafran propagandists who are always ready to sacrifice the truth to achieve emotional blackmail. He has betrayed his intellectual calling by joining in the circulation of low quality rumor against Awo. I had looked forward to reading the book, but now I doubt if I would pick up a copy even if dropped at my gate. (p. 2)

From the above excerpt, it is our view that Yinka Odumakin's defense of Awolowo is based on his egoistic inclination as a Yoruba personality. He has not even read the book when he made the comment as evidenced in the statement credited to his in the press. Therefore, one wonders whether his views are well informed and objective. His reaction is simply borne out of his selfish, tribal and natural instinct in defense of the pride of her people.

In the Daily Post Online Newspaper of April 3, 2013, in an article written by Ameh Godwin, General Buhari was described as "a protagonist of violence" by the special assistant to the President on Public Affairs because of Buhari's inciting comments and hate speeches. The retired General had previously said that the North will make Nigeria ungovernable if President Goodluck wins the 2011 general election. The post election crisis which resulted to the gruesome massacre of thousands of people mostly Christians, Southerners and helpless Youth Corps Members and destruction of property worth billions of Naira can be attributed to such unguarded, ethnically biased, wicked, evil and devilish speeches of these enemies of Nigeria's march towards sustainable development and transformation.

Lack of qualitative life transforming and patriotic education together with religious intolerance is at the center of poor Verbal Hygiene in Nigeria. This is true because, in the North, some overzealous and poorly educated and ignorant clerics have over the years imbibed in the people their people mostly 'the Almajaries' a dangerous and negative linguistic superiority with the maxim "WE ARE BORN TO RULE" "ALL NON MUSLIMS ARE INFIDEL" "YOU SHALL BE REWARDED WITH SEVEN VIRGINS IN PARADISE WHEN YOU KILL AN INFIDEL" just to mention a few. This hateful mental posture of some Northern leaders and 'illiterate educators' have been angrily replied by a former militant and warlord - the leader of the Niger-Delta Volunteer Force in the person of Alhaji Asari Dkubo with the statements: "WE SHALL FIGHT THE NORTH BULLET FOR BULLET, IT IS EITHER JONATHAN OR WAR" (*Vanguard* May 22, 2013). With these verbal missiles, the stage is set for violence and bloodshed because the parties involved in this verbal wars are getting their arsenals ready and as such their threats cannot be taken for granted by security agencies because of past records of these self styled 'saviours of the people'. One wonders what the North will turn Nigeria into in 2015 if Jonathan wins or what the South will do if their brother fails to achieve his second term ambition in office?

Also lack of respect for people's way of life and their belief system is always at the centre of verbal war, which if not curbed on time can exacerbate serious crisis in our society. A critical case study of the mayhem that erupted due to *Thisday Newspaper* of 18, 19, 21, 22, (2002) publications. In those publications, the writer, Enola Bello alleged that "the Holy Prophet Mohammed would have married one of the girls participating in the beauty pageantry because of his voracious love for women." This comment was seen by Nigerian Muslims as provocative, dehumanizing and insulting. In that crisis, over 200 innocent people lost their lives because of mere use of negative words to ridicule what our beloved Muslim brothers hold dear to their hearts.

#### **Recommendations for Adequate Cultivation of Good Verbal Hygiene**

The emphasis on good verbal hygiene cannot be overemphasized because Nigeria as a country is made up of people from diverse ethnic, politically, religious, educational and socially coloration. To this end, the following recommendations can work a long way towards achieving unity, conflict resolution and sustainable development in Nigeria.

- 1) Every speaker of the English language in Nigeria must strive to use language consciously to achieve mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence through our use of words to relate with one another. Effective communication begins with caring about the feelings of other receiver of your message. You must care about the people with whom you will be communicating about and what will happen as a result of your

communication. As such you must be objective and factual in what you are writing or talking about.

- 2) Teachers of the English language should as a matter of urgency begin to inculcate in the students a linguistic attitude of talking to people politely and respectfully, especially when we do not share their opinions and when we tend to disagree with them.
- 3) Parents should on their part be mindful of the words they use to react to issues and manner they talk to their children. This is true because a parent that talks to his or her children in hostile manner is basically telling the children in question that there is nothing bad in reacting to issues in a hostile way. These kinds of children go into the society and begin to cause havoc with this kind of communication mentality they have acquired from their parents. This is very bad because the family is the bedrock that transforms or deforms every society.
- 4) While recognizing the importance of free speech, many see hate-speech regulation as a necessary step in ridding society of discrimination, Altman, (1993). This can be achieved by enacting legislation against hate speeches. Racist terms, do not merely express hatred, but also proclaim the inferiority of the target-group and can cause feelings of anxiety, fear, and isolation within the addressee, Gerber, (2004).
- 5) The news media should use their news to inform and educate the public with truthful information, but without violating sensibilities, social and cultural norms, by being balanced and objective in their reporting. The crisis of Miss World Beauty Pageant of 2002 that destroyed the lives of hundreds of people would have been averted if the *Thisday Newspaper* had taken the religious and cultural norms of our Muslim brothers into consideration before publishing the article that destroyed the lives of able bodied men and women that would have contributed in one way or the other towards meaningful and sustainable development in Nigeria.

### Conclusion

The importance of using respectful, unbiased and effective language is fundamental towards achieving long lasting peace, unity, conflict resolution and sustainable development. It is a task which every patriotic Nigerian must consciously strive to promote and accomplish. Our everyday use of words must show love for one another. Nigerians must maximize the potential of our heterogeneous nature as a strength rather than weakness because we have gone a long way as a nation.

In this paper, we have been able to prove that verbal hygiene is an important decisive factor of civilization and the instrument of achieving unity, peace and conflict resolution. Good use of language devoid of inciting and dehumanizing words is the mechanism through which every human society is destroyed or transformed. This paper argued that the ultimate solution to the ethnic, religious, political conflicts disturbing the progress of Nigeria lies in sincere attitudinal change as it regards our use of words to express our sentiments, views and opinions.

To this end, our leaders and indeed every Nigerian must show more love, respect and politeness in their utterances. With this type of attitudinal change, conflicts will be resolved and managed easily and justice will be done. Crises as well, will be prevented in the most acceptable way. When this is done, ethno-religious crises will be averted and socio-political violence will be a thing of the past and Nigeria will witness all-round development and transformation. Interestingly, there is no other time to achieve these great aspirations of brotherhood, love and unity than now.

**Note:** *This Paper was presented at the 2nd National Conference of Colleges of Education Academic Staff Union, South East Zone held at Nwafor Orizu College of Education Nsugbe Anambra on 8th-9th August 2013*

*Theme: Education for Sustainable Development in Nigeria*

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