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### Assessing the Language of the Jos Crises: Syntactico-Semantic Implications of Pronouns

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#### Abstract

*Language signals diverse kinds of meaning in interpersonal and social relationships: it could express distance, exclusion, and alienation instead of friendship, inclusion and rapport. As a ready tool which can be manipulated to accommodate different communication needs, language is invaluable in dictating the dominant tone in social disorders and crisis situations. What is said or heard is crucial in either quelling or escalating tension during crisis. It is in the light of the above background that the authors wish to analyse the*

*impact of the use of personal pronouns in the Jos crises. The paper posits that the use of personal pronouns in the course of the crises generated some gap that is tantamount to further disunity and division among a people that were hitherto united. It is suggested that some peace initiative that would primarily address the language use of members of the communities be instituted to enlighten people, and curtail the rift that may destroy the unity of the state in particular, and that of the nation in general.*

### **Introduction**

Language occupies a pivotal and unique position in human existence. The essence of human survival is heavily anchored on the possession of linguistic endowment. Indisputably, the very existence of man derives its actualization in communication, and language is the primary means through which human beings communicate. Every human activity is controlled and given expression by language. It may not be an exaggeration to assert that human societies rely basically on language for any form of growth and development. Many scholars have proposed that by means of language man is able to develop and maintain the complex human social organization. In the words of **Lyons** (2009), “the possession of language more than any other attribute distinguishes humans from animals.” Palmer (1971) is also of the opinion that man is unique because of his ability to speak meaningfully; therefore it is grammar that makes language an essentially human activity, and as such, man is homo grammatical. Syal & Jindal (2008) also asserts that language is “species-specific” and “species-uniform”. They observed that it is only humans that possess and use language for communication; and such possession is uniform to all humans.

The ability of language to convey meaning rests solely on its structure as well as its semantic properties. Thus we observe as many authors have done, that language is a ‘structured system’, a ‘system of systems’ which allows an infinite range of arrangement: the system of sounds (where the phonological form of a language takes care of the distinctive, significant sounds existing in that language), the system of word and sentence order (where morphological and syntactic levels cater for the combination and arrangement of words and sentences in a language); and that of meaning (where the semantic field addresses the issue of meaning); and the inter-relatedness of the various levels of linguistic description.

Language has many functions and uses. This, in a way confirms an earlier allusion that every human activity revolves around language. To ensure continuity of the human species, all available functions of language are explored daily. Essentially, language is used to transmit the norms, beliefs, values and ways of life of people in every society. It is also widely believed that the social structure of most societies is actualized through the linguistic system. In the words of Hudson (2001),” Some cultural concepts, including some of our most important abstract concepts are learned through language, so language is an important ‘instrument of socialisation’”. This function clearly establishes the link between language and culture; a link, which may aptly be described as that of interdependence: language presupposes culture, since part of the shared knowledge members of a particular society have is that of the language; and people’s knowledge of their native language is culturally transmitted.

Having this understanding of the relationship between language and culture, it may be appropriate at this point to observe that meaning is usually given a priority attention whenever socialization occurs. People interact and communicate at many levels, with many people, in many ways and for many reasons. However, at the various levels of interaction and relationship, people through their linguistic abilities communicate one form or level of meaning or another. This again buttresses the general consensus that language is not only instrumental to socialization, but also flexible in addressing different kinds of meaning.

The line of thought above may well justify many scholars’ explication of the social functions of language. Although language may be said to be used generally for communication, language scholars and other professionals have distinguished different functions of language alongside its communicative function. Lyons (1991) has used three functions of language to describe three levels of meaning: descriptive, social and expressive. These three levels in essence capture the significance of human interaction; that is, the provision of factual information about a given situation or state of affair, the social relations shared by interactants, and the personality and attitude of speakers. Others have highlighted the factors that influence the use and function of language as meaning, social organization and individual variability within a language.

Psycholinguists, linguists, and other scholars have argued at different levels that language and thought are intricately connected (Sapir 1949; Whorf 1956;

Boaz 1966). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic determinism and linguistic relativity that appeared highly controversial for many decades, is but one example to buttress this fact. This proposition maintained the views that language determined thought; and that there were distinctive differences in conceptual representation of experiences and world views by different languages, thus making the extent to which members of a linguistic community think about subjects rather restricted. Even though later studies tried to reduce the strength of this hypothesis, its contribution to the understanding of the interdependence of language and thought; and language and culture remains relevant till date in linguistic, sociolinguistic, psychological and other discourses. Some more contemporary arguments maintain that language is one of the variables that influences thought. (Fodor 1975; Pinker 1994; Stillings et al. 1995). Hudson (2001) in his reaction to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis subjugates the 'idealism' of linguistic determinism when he said,

*These concepts and thought patterns seem to affect our behaviour not only when talking, but also in other activities. On the other hand, language is only one influence on our thinking, so we have rejected 'linguistic determinism'.*

Again, it is obvious that language plays a significant role in defining social identity. There is a strong affinity between language and the social structure, and such bonding dictates or conditions people's language use. In most human communities individuals belong to different social groups and their membership of such groups affects their language usage. In other words, while the composition of a social group can determine the type of language used by such group, the language also helps to define and identify the group. It is therefore pertinent to note that in the environment under study, socio-cultural, religious, ethnic, situational and other factors affected members' use of language during the period under review, especially as regards the use of personal pronouns. Similarly, the language use also aided the identification of the various social groups named in the crises. Accordingly, in the authors' view, as observed in previous studies (Ella 1999, Dugga 2002), language serves as a tool for establishing social cohesion and mutual understanding among members of a social network. The use of a common language by a group or community gives a sense of belonging, some kind of security and, fosters unity among speakers of that language.

In the light of the above position, it is clear that language can express different meanings and attitudes. It can signal acceptance, solidarity,

friendship, love, and inclusion on one hand, or rejection, distance, enmity, hatred, and exclusion on the other. Upon this premise it would be necessary to affirm like many specialists, that language is a social and public issue just as much as communication is also regarded as 'a social activity'. Its use in social interaction therefore can attract different reactions and responses. People can be emotional in their approach and attitude to language. People who use language can be hurt by certain usages; and some may wish to impose a certain language on others. Such response to language may generate conflict and debate in most cases. Such is the issue of instituting a national language in Nigeria, an idea which has remained an enigma till date. In his discussion of the language question in Nigeria, Iwara (1992) highlights the complex and emotional nature of language and the implication of imposing a particular language on people of diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. He noted that "*language choice is not a simple case of statistics and rational issue and, therefore, a potentially disruptive and destructive force*".

Along the same line of argument, Crystal (1987) has observed that "*our perception of our own language and others' language can become in varying degrees, a source of pleasure, pride, anxiety, offence, anger, and even violence*". He further noted that "*There is also a tendency for language to act as a natural barrier between cultural groups, promoting conflict than cooperation*".

In addition to the functions and characteristics of language addressed so far, a major variable that determines language choice, and which is of significance to this study is the situation or context as mentioned earlier. Sociolinguists and ethnographers, among others believe that apart from sociological and socio-cultural factors the situation of use greatly affects language choice and language use. Trudgill (1983) elucidated this position when he said:

*Language varies according to the social situation or context in which a speaker finds himself and not only according to social characteristics or factors such as ethnic group, social class, age and sex. The same speaker in a particular speech community uses different linguistic varieties in different situations and for different purposes.*

### **Why the syntactico-semantic approach?**

It may appear that the discussion so far has been purely sociolinguistic in orientation, considering the social variables that regulate the language usage of social groups and networks highlighted above. However, the writers' attention was drawn to the occurrence of a particular word class or part of speech which was used to convey certain meanings with social implications in the course of the crises. Any discussion of word forms, phrases, clauses and sentences can best be pitched within the domain of syntax. This is because words and phrases are what people use to say the things they say, and these are the building blocks of language. Words convey different kinds of meaning, however, in order to understand the meaning of an utterance, the meaning of the words used and that conveyed by the structure are considered. This does not however, exclude the situation and other extra linguistic factors as observed earlier.

Syntax on one hand, concerns itself with the arrangement of words and other units larger than the word within a structure, and ensures the grammaticality of same. In other words, syntax deals with the appropriate ordering or arrangement of components within a sentence such that the meaning of the construction sounds grammatically right and acceptable to speakers of the language. Prasad (2009) has described syntax as "... *the level at which we study how words combine to form phrases, phrases join to form clauses and clauses make sentences*". The maximum or highest structural unit of grammatical analysis is the sentence. Sentences can be classified structurally or functionally. A sentence is said to be declarative, imperative, interrogative or exclamatory when analysed functionally. Structurally a sentence may be simple, complex, compound or compound-complex. Other lexical considerations could be made in the course of analyzing and expressing ideas and thoughts; all these contribute to the sense, implication and meaning that aid interpersonal relationships.

Semantics on the other hand, deals with the construction and interpretation of meaning. It is that field of linguistics which deals with the study of meaning. Semantics tries to explain the meaning of larger linguistic items (e.g. sentences) by considering the meaning of their constituent parts. Semantics is crucial in the understanding of language in social contexts. Major areas that enhance the understanding of meaning in semantic analysis include concepts, propositions, collocation, lexical relations, connotation, etc. For sense to be made of words, sentences and utterances that people use in social relations

and interactions, there must necessarily be interplay of syntax and semantics. The relationship between semantics and syntax is so close and germane that one cannot be discussed without a reference to the other, hence their indispensability in the assessment of language use.

Different schools, models and theories have evolved over time in pursuit of better ways of understanding these linguistic phenomena. The structural, functional, generative, systemic, transformational, etc., approaches have been adopted by different scholars to explain the workings of language. One of the most controversial of these theories is the transformational generative school pioneered by Noam Chomsky. He is of the opinion that grammar is the structure of the human mind. He believes that syntax is based upon the constituent structure of sentences. His proposition focused on the relation between form and meaning of a sentence rather than its communicative function. Furthermore, he emphasized the ability of a speaker of any language to generate infinite set of sentences that are grammatically acceptable and meaningful. Even though the Chomskyan model is somewhat contemporary and popular, this study uses the systemic approach which tends to look at the structural units of sentences and their functions. The systemic model of syntactic analysis places emphasis on the functions of classes, units, categories, etc., and appears to be more relevant in the discussion and description of naturally occurring speech. This theory was modeled by Michael Halliday. According to him, *'We do not experience language in isolation...but always in relation to a scenario, some background of persons and actions and events from which the things that are said derive their meaning.'* The pronoun which is the focus of this study can conveniently be categorized under the class or system subset, hence confirming the validity of the choice of approach.

### **The Jos crises: a synopsis**

The Jos crises have lasted for over a decade, with their resultant perennial and malignant features which have in so many ways affected people's psyche and behavior, including their language behavior. Jos, the capital of Plateau State is known for its serene and naturally beautiful weather/climatic condition. It is a truly metropolitan entity housing people of diverse ethnic, social, linguistic, religious and racial affiliations. This conglomeration of diversities co-existed mutually and peacefully until the invidious invasion of Islamic fundamentalism.

The first major bloody attack on residents of Jos was on September 7, 2001. That coincidentally marked the beginning, as it were, of terrorism assault on world powers. Then and all through the early part of the decade, crude weapons such as swords, bottles, stones and sticks were used by the jihadists to assault, brutalise and annihilate hundreds of defenceless and unassuming residents of Jos. However, with time, the sophistication in terms of weaponry and mode of operation changed; this unfortunately, has assumed a frightening dimension. Today the use of explosives and other deadly weapons of mass destruction are employed by these terrorists.

Many reasons are advanced for the perpetual attacks launched on the inhabitants of this city, and indeed the state; however, it is evident that the bone of contention and the heart of the matter is the ownership of Jos. Are there natives/ indigenes of the geographical landmass known as Jos or is it a no-man's land to which claims could be laid by all and sundry? This is a question which has remained unanswered, and around which other causes and variables have revolved. Since some of the major strategies of the religious fundamentalists are force, fear, violence and brutality, many surviving residents have been displaced; and have sought ways of sheltering and securing themselves. But to a large extent the concomitant response of people to such barbarism is relocation from one part of the city to another or from Jos to other parts of the country. As a result, the city of Jos has been polarized along several sentiments and divides. Today there are roads, streets and communities that pose security threats and risks to members of certain religious, ethnic and social groups.

Over the last decade it is interesting to note that each crisis has had certain peculiar language use and style associated with it. Some of such usages were documented as data used for this study. Particular attention is paid to the use of pronouns.

### **Pronouns**

Pronouns are pro-forms that are used generally to replace nouns or noun phrases in order to avoid unnecessary repetition and clumsiness in construction. They constitute a closed- system with numerous subclasses. In grammar pronouns are said to acquire meanings based on their antecedents, that is, they make reference to the nouns they replace (anaphora) and by so doing derive their meanings from the contexts. Pronouns can perform the roles and functions of nouns syntactically because of the relationship of the



two parts of speech. Pronouns also share the grammatical properties of number, case, gender and person as nouns, even though they possess certain peculiar features exclusive to them as a class. For example, many pronouns have morphological features that are absent in nouns such as the contrast in subjective and objective case forms, the unrelated number forms, etc.

The subclasses that will be considered in this paper are personal and possessive pronouns. Some authors treat possessive pronouns as genitives, determiners or possessive adjectives. Tomori (2007) has classified them as epithetic and predicative possessive pronouns.

Personal pronouns are so called because of the grammatical characteristic of “person”. They refer to the person speaking, the person spoken to or the person spoken about. Personal pronouns stand in place of nouns mentioned in preceding phrases or clauses. The following are some of such pronouns that occurred in the utterances, jingles and other discourses in the course of the crises, and which are interpreted according to their contexts. The questions this paper seeks to address are: How were these pronouns used and what meanings did they signify during the crises? What possible effects could the continued use of such pronouns, and indeed language pattern have on the mutual coexistence of the communities in Jos?

The sentences and jingles that form the data are here presented:

- Are you for us or (you are) for them?
- They have started.
- We cannot fold our arms and watch them finish our youths.
- We are not discouraged by the challenges that we have to face. Plateau will rise again.
- The military is on their side.

Because religion was a major factor in the Jos crises, there was such polarity and distinction between Christians and Muslims and the locations of their residency within the city. The first sentence is interrogative and such sentences were used to segregate between the two religious groups. It has the simple syntactic order of (V S AO) because of the interrogation where the verb is reversed to the subjective position. ‘**Us**’ and ‘**them**’ are both objective plural personal pronouns; but while ‘**us**’ implied collectivity, oneness and unity, ‘**them**’ indicated exclusion, distance and division. As shown in the data, ‘**us**’ referred to the speaker and others of same religious,(ethnic,

political, social, etc.) class. ‘**Us**’ therefore was inclusive, accommodating and unifying as long as it referred to a specific group, while ‘**them**’ was separating, segregating, alienating and distancing. Again ‘**us**’ and ‘**them**’ in that sentence were used to divide groups according to certain existing parameters. This is clearly indicative of the influence of these pronouns in creating division and disharmony among the diverse ethnic, social, religious and political groups. Linguistically therefore, whoever was not identified as satisfying the conditions for belonging to the speaker’s group based on such criteria was regarded as an enemy. The weight of implication this question carried connoted that any victim who was faced with such poser in the heat of a crisis, and in the wrong camp was in for it.

‘**They**’ which is a third person subjective plural pronoun could be used indefinitely to exclude the speaker from the person(s) spoken about. ‘**They**’ can be generic in which case it marks indeterminacy by referring to each person as well as to a collectivity of persons. ‘**They**’ can be used grammatically as a singular form when the sex or gender is inconsequential (singular they). However, in the utterance “**They have started**”, it was used to exclude the speaker from the person(s) spoken about. The objective and possessive forms (**them, their**) also alluded to similar emphasis. This pronoun was used to exclude and distance conflicting or faction group from the speaker and the persons spoken to. ‘**They**’ has come to assume the name or nomenclature used to refer to people of the other religion, the opposition or enemy group depending on who is using it, where and in whose company it is being used. The sentence ‘**They have started**’ is a simple, declarative sentence with the structural pattern of (SV).

The use of ‘**we**’ and ‘**our**’ in the course of the crises connoted unity, solidarity, inclusion, commonality and ownership depending on the geographical location and religious cleavages of the speaker(s). When ‘**we**’ was used among Christian indigenes of Plateau State and in Christian dominated areas of Jos, it implied and included the speaker(s) and all other members of the social group (i.e. Christians, indigenes), and such use tended to unify as well as identify members of such group as having a common cause for concern. For example, the use of ‘**we**’ and ‘**our**’ in the sentence, “**We cannot fold our arms and watch them finish our youths**” included all belonging to the socio-cultural, religious, ethnic, etc. group of the speaker and the person(s) addressed. ‘**Them**’ obviously referred to the enemy group as used in the same sentence.

In English grammar, there is an interrelation between number and person as regards the use of the first person plural pronoun 'we'. 'We' may be used to include the addressee or to exclude the person(s) spoken to. We talk about the inclusive and exclusive 'we' in this case not in terms of plurality, but the meaning that is intended by the speaker as whether or not to include certain person in the reference. That is, the meaning of 'we' may not necessarily correspond with the idea of plurality, but whether or not the person(s) addressed is (are) included or excluded in the theme of the construction. (Quirk et al, 2000).

The sentence is declarative and complex, having the pattern (SVO), (VOVC) where the two clauses are conjoined by 'and' and the subject of the second clause implied or taken as an anaphoric reference to that of the first. Similarly, in the sentences '**We are not discouraged by the challenges that we have to face.**' '**Plateau will rise again**', we see the use of 'we' as a strong portrayal of the element of solidarity and ethnic consciousness. Here 'we' represented the people of Plateau State who were seen to have suffered tremendous losses and destruction; and who needed to be encouraged to hope for a better future. The first sentence is more of a complex type and also declarative in function. The elements of the clause structure pattern as (SVAO) (SV) is apparently a reflection of the independent and dependent ideas borne by the same construction. The second clause introduced by 'that' could as well have been subordinated to the principal clause without making much difference in meaning without that relative pronoun. The second sentence is declarative and simple in structure, with the pattern: (SVA).

'**Their**' is a possessive pronoun used in most cases as a determiner. Like other possessive forms, it is used to show ownership or that something belongs to someone. Some language specialists describe such words as adjectives because they qualify or modify nouns while others see them as purely serving the purpose of pronouns. Proponents of the former school of thought maintain that since pronouns replace nouns there is no use allowing a repetition of nouns in such constructions. In this paper '**their**' and other equivalent forms are treated as possessive pronouns. It is necessary to observe that '**their**' can function both as the subject and object in a sentence when used in the capacity it is used here as a possessive pronoun; or its alternative objective form 'them'. In the sentence '**The military is on their side**', the declarative status is maintained with the pattern (SVAC). In this sentence, the segregation between two groups is clearly brought to the fore

depending on who is making the utterance, to whom and in which part of the city it is made. There had been several instances of the insinuation and rumour that fake soldiers were involved in carrying out some of the attacks suffered by defenceless citizens during the crises.

From the analysis of the sentences that formed the data in this study, it appears that the use of personal pronouns is gradually conforming to the sectarian, ethnic, political and religious disparities created by the crises. Persons are now judged by the creed they profess, their political philosophy, and by ethnic and tribal descent. While ‘we’, ‘our’ ‘us’ are used to express inclusion, solidarity’, friendship, rapport, love, unity; ‘they’, ‘them’ and ‘their’ connote exclusion, alienation, distance, hatred and acrimony. This therefore confirms that even though conflicts have arisen for lack of understanding among diverse groups, the linguistic variable as shown in the use of pronouns above has given a new dimension to the issue. The linguistic dimension has indeed intensified, and consequently strengthened the suspicion, misgivings and intolerance that are characteristic of crises.

### **Conclusion**

Having established that language is a powerful tool in maintaining human societies, an attempt has been made to x-ray how personal pronouns were used in the Jos crises, and the effect of such usage on the communities resident in Jos. The data analysed were utterances used by a cross-section of the public comprising of academics, civil servants, traders and artisans. Observation and surreptitious recording of conversations were the methods used for data collection. One of the sentences was a jingle aired on the PRTVC Station (the state owned radio/television station).

It is evident from the discussion that throughout the period the crises lasted, with attacks and reprisal attacks, the topic generated a lot of concern and was a dominant issue of discourse formally and informally among members of the public. Getting the raw sentences that formed the data as presented above was therefore as natural as engaging in every day routine. What the subjects said and the grammatical categories (word classes) used had semantic implications that are feared to have greater divisive impact on the people groups resident in Jos. It may be pertinent to observe by way of conclusion that such linguistic choices were not explicit and glaring before the outbreak of the crises, tacitly alluding to the pointer that the crisis situation necessitated the change in linguistic preference, especially as regards the use

of pronouns. This ultimately suggests that a 'we'-'they' dichotomy has been introduced into the vocabulary of members of the various people groups in Jos metropolis.

As a panacea to this worrisome trend, it is suggested that in order to augment Government's efforts at peace keeping, media stations, schools, civil society groups, etc., should organize programmes for different groups to address the issue of language use. Such arrangement should seriously and deliberately involve pupils and students of primary schools, secondary schools and tertiary institutions because this divisive language is spreading like wide fire among the children and youths.

It is also suggested that conflict resolution and peace workshops should involve language teachers. As specialists, they will be able to address the problem of language use, and provide alternative modes of expression that will help to consolidate and stabilize the fragile and relative peace that is gradually returning to the city.

Again it is suggested that deliberate and proactive steps be taken to create awareness on the danger of such continued use of alienating and divisive language. It is feared that if appropriate measures are not taken to correct the prevailing situation as it borders on the use of personal pronouns, and language generally, a greater rift might evolve that may threaten not only the unity of the state but that of the nation.

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