



**Language Civility, Immediacy and Peace Valence among
Nigerian University Academics**

Alexander Essien Timothy

Arts Education Department

University of Calabar

Calabar, Nigeria

profalext@gmail.com

Vincent Ugah Uguma

Arts Education Department

University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria

vincentuguma@gmail.com

Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 seeks, in part, to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development” Since the university is a vital component of any society, promoting peace, the university can have a ripple effect on the larger Nigerian society. In addition, since interactions in the university, as in all human societies, are language driven, the language-based negotiations in the university can produce either harmony or discord. This study, thus, examined students' perception of university lecturers' immediacy and civility as they relate to peace valence of lecturers communication. Data were collected from 880 undergraduates from three federal universities in South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria, using a structured questionnaire. Pearsonian correlational analyses revealed low to moderate positive relationships between lecturers' immediacy, civility, and perceived peace valence of their communication.

Keywords: language, peace, valence, immediacy, civility, communication.

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of 2016 seeks in part to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development”(United Nations, 2016, p.42). The United Nations acknowledges that whereas some countries enjoy relative peace and stability, many others are ravaged by violence and armed conflict. Nigeria is one of such countries that live from the armed conflict and violence in her northern and southern regions.

Violence in any society affects persons and institutions. The university is such an institution into which violence percolates. Since the university is critical to the realisation of national goals and development, it must exist in an atmosphere of peace. Peace in the university is vital for learning and teaching. Both students and faculty may not fulfil their goals in an environment of conflict and discord. A peaceful university environment where no student feels alienated, ostracised or excluded is likely to be an incubator for sustainable development. Conflict, anarchy and dystrophy are contrary to sustainable development.

A key element in the psychosocial interactions in the university is language. Therefore, the deployment of verbal and nonverbal communication by university lecturers is important in either engendering or disrupting peace. Faculty, therefore, have the professional responsibility to administer knowledge as well as peace in the university. Since such conveyance is usually negotiated through language, the examination of the extent to which such transactions sustain peace is not only pertinent in this era of global tension and conflict, but also urgent. The paper examines the peace valence of faculty communication from the perspective of immediacy civility.

Valence, according to the Merriam Webster's New Explorer Encyclopedic Dictionary (2006), is derived from the Latin "valentia" meaning power, capacity. The dictionary further defines valence as "the degree of attractiveness an individual, activity possesses as a behavioural goal." Therefore, peace valence is used in this article as the capacity or power of language to attract, engender or sustain peace. It refers to the extent to which verbal or nonverbal communication attracts peace or produces a sense of peace. It is the peace potential and power of all language negotiated interactions between faculty and students. Peace valence, thus, is the power and capacity for peace.

The study is in three parts. The first part summarises literature on immediacy, and civility in teacher-student communication. The second part is a report of the quantitative analyses of students' responses to the survey instrument. The discussion, summary of findings, conclusion and recommendations is the focus of the final part.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of peace is not only important in familial, communal and

international conflict situations, neither is it only relevant in organisation conflict management. It is also critical in the interpersonal intercourse between students and faculty. Since students are not mere objects of administrative or pedagogical manipulation, but persons who have psychosocial needs. Since students tend to expect the recognition, if not the satisfaction of psychosocial needs by their teachers, perceived lack of attention to those needs may create conflict.

Conflict, as defined by Olaley and Arogundade (2013, p.9), is "a by-product of the interaction of people or groups with different expectations, interests and backgrounds, in the society." It could manifest as tension, apprehension, dissatisfaction, destabilisation, insecurity, and myriad of other forms of psychosocial imbalance. Conflict is first internal before it finds external expression. Internal conflict can be a reaction to interpersonal communication that upsets, disconcerts, destabilizes and disrupts the receiver's inner peace.

Although internal conflict may be less destructive collaterally than external conflict, it is as critical as external conflict since it can easily catalyse external conflict. Similarly, peace is first internal and can be the consequence of verbal or nonverbal communication. Thus, inner peace can orchestrate external peace, which is expressed in friendliness, harmonious coexistence, and mutual respect.

Therefore communication can be the means by which conflict is either generated or resolved. For instance, Rosenberg (2003b) believes that non-violent communication

...facilitates the flow of communication needed to exchange information and resolve differences peacefully. It focuses on shared human values and needs, and encourages the use of language that increases goodwill and avoidance of language that contributes to resentment or lowered self-esteem. (p.24).

Communication is, therefore, crucial in creating a peaceful university environment.

Immediacy

A recurrent variable in communication research is immediacy. Albert Mehrabian (1969) defined immediacy as communication behaviours that "enhance closeness to and nonverbal interaction with another" (p. 203).

Thus, Wilson and Locker (2008, p.4) conclude, "Immediacy communicates psychological availability" and warmth. According to Lefebvre and Allen (2014), students tend to respect, like and revere a member of faculty whom they perceive as immediate.

Comadena, Hung and Simonds (2007) report that research consistently indicates that the specific non-verbal language used by the educator will have a direct impact on the psychological attachment of the student to the teacher and the teacher's ability to connect with the student. Such connectedness may make a crucial difference between peaceful, harmonious learning environment and a disruptive conflict-ridden one.

Guerrero and Georgeakopoulos (2010) studied student perceptions of teachers' nonverbal and verbal communication. Participants were students from six countries—Australia, Japan, Mexico, Sweden, Taiwan, and the United States. The students recalled the extent to which their best or worst professors used various forms of communication that have been associated with effective teaching. Results showed that best professors were perceived to employ expressiveness that is more nonverbal, relaxed movement, in-class conversation, and out-of-class communication than worst professors. The study illustrates the importance students place on teacher immediacy behaviours.

Similarly, Wrench, McCroskey, and Richmond (2008) note, "If an individual does not have positive affect for the content or teacher in a classroom, it will be very hard for that person to learn." The authors, therefore, contend that affective learning is superior to both cognitive and psychomotor learning since they constitute "the foundation of the other two types of learning" (p. 346).

Bainbridge-Frymier and Houser (2000) as cited by Robinson (2007) observe that immediacy, communication style, affinity seeking, compliance gaining, humour, and caring were positively associated with learning. Dobransky and Frymier (2004), from a review of literature on teacher immediacy, concluded that students learn and get motivated when teachers are perceived to be close to them. According to Brainger and McCroskey (2000, p.178) immediacy is the product of communicative behaviours that "enhance closeness to and nonverbal interaction with another." Such behaviours could be verbal or non-verbal.

Verbal immediacy behaviours include addressing students by name,

providing feedback, seeking students' opinions, using humour, and storytelling (Robinson, 2007). According to Okon (2011), nonverbal immediacy behaviours, on the other hand, include eye contact, gestures, facial expression, culturally appropriate touch (e.g. handshake) and tone of voice.

Such affective variables, therefore, do not only establish closeness, but also seem to be important to students' performance. Robinson (2007), in a review of literature on the role of communication in student achievement, noted that studies associate factors such as immediacy, perceived caring, and communication apprehension in the teacher-student relationship with student achievement. In addition, LeFebvre and Allen (2014) found a high positive correlation between teacher immediacy and cognitive learning. Similarly, Teven (2001) believes that "a vital requisite to effective teaching is establishing a climate of warmth, understanding, and caring within the classroom" (p. 159).

Apart from the social relevance of immediacy behaviour, there is also the conflict resolution benefit of immediacy. Rosenberg (2003b) believes that non-violent communication

...facilitates the flow of communication needed to exchange information and resolve differences peacefully. It focuses on shared human values and needs, and encourages the use of language that increases goodwill and avoidance of language that contributes to resentment or lowered self-esteem. (p.24).

Therefore, immediacy does not only have social valence but also cognitive valence.

CIVILITY

Another variable that is important for a peaceful and inclusive society is civility. Civility connotes respect and politeness to others in speech and manners (Evers, 2009). To Clark and Springer (2007, p.93), civility means being "polite, respectful, and decent," Forni (2002) illustrates the concept of civility by offering "The 25 Rules of Considerate Conduct" which include paying attention, speaking kindly, accepting and giving praise, respecting the opinion of others, and so on. Therefore, Davetian (2009) defines civility as "the extent to which citizens of a given culture speak and act in ways that demonstrate a caring for the welfare of others, as well as the welfare of the

culture they share in common" (p. 9).

Two things are apparent in the definitions. Firstly, civility is culture-related. Davatian (2009), notes that the constituents of civility vary from culture to culture. For instance, while assertiveness may be a mark of civility (Forni, 2002) in some cultures, in other cultures, it might be considered rudeness or arrogance. Thus, Davatian (2009) submits that the "study of civility is also the study of cultural ideology," since "different peoples continue to possess cultural mentalities and habituations that are distinct enough to cause misunderstandings and tensions"(p. 23).

However, within a culture are certain indices of civility that are mutually recognisable and accepted. In the Nigerian environment, especially in the tertiary institutions, civil behaviour is easily recognised because, perhaps, the university is itself both a *unicultural* and a multicultural enclave. It is multicultural because it admits persons from diverse cultural backgrounds. But it somehow manages to create out of this cultural smorgasbord a unified cultural identity which gives each university a unique identity, a distinct flavour and a peculiar ambience. Within the context of each university are acceptable standards that transcend individual cultural orientations, standards that tend to have universal applicability. The concept of civility is such a concept that though it varies in minute constituents, holistically lends itself to common appreciation in an environment of shared culture and values such as a university. Secondly, civility is a product of verbal and nonverbal communication. It is, therefore, constructed by language; it is coded and expressed in both linguistic and paralinguistic properties of language. It is a communication outcome.

The opposite of civility is incivility. Incivility is defined as "speech or action that is disrespectful or rude and ranges from insulting remarks and verbal abuse to explosive, violent behavior" (Clark & Springer, 2007, p.93). They define academic incivility as "any speech or action that disrupts the harmony of the teaching-learning environment."(p.93). Keçici, Beyhan, and Ektem (2013) describe such behaviour as teacher aggression. They conceptualise teacher aggression in terms of "defamatory behaviors of teacher on students such as using derogatory language, embarrassing or insulting student(s)... and verbal harassment of students by using inappropriate language"(p.15). Mottet, Steven Beebe, Raffeld; and Paulsel (2004) warn that "verbal aggressiveness can have destructive consequences."

In a qualitative investigation into the causes of incivility from the students'

perspective, Clark and Springer (2007) identified six themes of uncivil faculty behaviour reported by students. The uncivil behaviours include looking down on students, using offensive language, arrogance, challenging students' credibility or knowledge in front of their peers and not providing a respectful avenue for addressing their grievances. Whether it is called incivility or aggression, such behaviours are evidence of communication with low peace valence; that is, communication that is antithetical to peace.

Jacobs (2013), while commenting on the consequences of incivility, reported that people have terminated friendship, left their jobs, transferred their children to other schools in reaction to incivility. Jacobs summed up that incivility kills morale, communication, trust, respect, teamwork, productivity, and so on.

The Sustainable Development Goal 16 seeks to "promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development..." Specifically SDG 16.1 states: "Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere." One of the ways of promoting peace is to use communication strategies that engender friendship, closeness, respect and care.

Methodology

A thirty-two – item face validated questionnaire titled "Teacher communication valence survey" was administered to 880 undergraduates (496 female, 384 male) in three universities in the South-South geopolitical region of Nigeria. The accidental snowball sampling was deployed to select only volunteers. The participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

Two hypotheses were formulated and tested using the Statdisk 12.02. at 0.05 level of significance.

Hypotheses

Faculty immediacy does not significantly relate to the peace valence of their communication

1. Faculty civility has no significant relationship with peace valence of their communication.

Results

The results of the quantitative analyses are presented in the following sections.

Hypothesis 1. Faculty immediacy does not significantly relate to the peace valence of their communication

Table 1

Pearson Product Moment Analysis of the relationship between immediacy and peace valence

Variables	N	r - coeff	r- crit	df	P - value	Decision
Immediacy Peace valence	880	.507	.067	878	.0000	Reject null

Decision: Since the r. coefficient (.506) is greater than the P-value (0.000), the null hypothesis is rejected. In other words, there is a moderate (r. = .506) positive relationship between lecturers' immediacy and the perceived peace valence of their communication. This means that the more students perceived lecturers as immediate, the more they consider lecturers communication as being high in peace valence. Table 1 provides the detail. Hypothesis 2. Faculty civility does not significantly relate to peace valence of their communication.

Table 2.

Summary of Pearson Product Moment Correlation of civility and peace valence of lecturers' communication

Hypotheses	Variables	N	r - coeff	r- crit	df	P - value	Decision
2	Civility Peace valence	880	.628	.067	878	0000	Reject null

Decision: Since the r. (.628) coefficient is greater than the P-value (0.000), the null hypothesis is rejected. In other words, there is a moderate (r. = .628) positive relationship between lecturers' civility and the peace valence of their communication. This means that the more students perceive lecturers as civil, the more they consider that lecturers' communication as high in peace valence. Table 2 provides further detail.

Discussion of findings

The study examined how language negotiated faculty interactions with students is related to peace. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was used in analysing the data collected through a survey instrument.

Faculty immediacy and peace valence

The analyses of data showed that lecturers' immediacy positively correlated with the perceived peace valence of lecturers' communication. The findings agree with extant literature on communication and peace. For instance, Comadena, Hung and Simonds (2007) believe that closeness between teachers and students causes an affective bonding. Similarly, Rosenberg (2003b) believes that non-violent communication can help resolve differences amicably. Also, Bıçkı, 2008, citing Bıçkı and Gökkaya (2004) noted that students have affection for teachers who smile. Thus, Schoenmakers (2014) acknowledges that, "...a big smile can do wonders" (p.63).

Immediacy is a product of verbal and nonverbal communication. It utilizes the principles of proxemics to create a feeling of closeness and intimacy among persons. The university environment is a language-laden one. Like any community, every transaction and negotiation in the university is conducted in language. The skill and finesse with which language is managed in the daily narratives in the university can create an atmosphere of either peace or discord. Therefore, students who find lecturers to be distant, unapproachable, aloof and snobbish are not likely to find the lecturers' verbal and non-verbal communication as peace-laden. However, if students find lecturers to be friendly, close, approachable, less formal, and humane, they are likely to be at peace with such lecturers and even derive a sense of peace from interacting with them.

Lecturers who exhibit immediacy are likely to use language that does not exclude. They are not likely to speak in condescending or harsh tones to the students. Students who interact with such lecturers are likely to leave them feeling content, fulfilled, elevated and cheerful. In the era of militancy in the Niger Delta and Northeastern Nigeria, the cultivation of peace through language deployment is nonnegotiable.

Faculty civility and peace valence

The study also found a significant positive correlation between faculty civility and the perceived peace valence of lecturers' communication. The findings cohere with Mottet, Beebe, Raffeld and Paulsel (2004) who have cautioned that uncivil communication tendency like verbal aggression could engender discord, disharmony, conflict and disunity. In the same vein, Clark and Springer, (2007, p.93) consider incivility as disrupting "... the harmony of the teaching-learning environment."(p.93).

The university environment harbours adults, presumably. Therefore, lecturers' interaction with students should be conducted with civility. Violence is not unknown in Nigerian universities. Sometimes university lecturers have been unwitting victims of students' anger. Thus, Jacobs (2013) has observed that incivility has caused the cessation of friendship, resignation from jobs; disrupted communication, and bred distrust, as well as disrespect. Lecturers who are civil and courteous to students are likely to create a sense of peace in the students.

Conclusion

The peace valence of faculty communication is strongly associated with their immediacy and civility. Peace provides a fertile garden for the germination and blossoming of socioeconomic development. On the contrary, wars, conflicts, disunity, and discord are the very antitheses of national development. As Nigeria battles with security challenges in the North East and the Niger Delta regions, economic development withers. Investors are discouraged by a climate of anarchy and turbulence. Therefore, the prevalence of peace in the university does not only create a conducive learning environment, it has a ripple effect on the larger society. This is because the university is a part of the society and it is not insulated from its problems and challenges.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the authors wish to recommend as follows:

1. Lecturers should deliberately improve their relationship with students. The culture of intimidation is neither productive of academic excellence nor peace. Students need not cringe at a lecturers' presence. their knock on the doors of lecturers' offices need not be timid, their walk into the lecturers' office need not be knock-kneed, their faces need not be downcast, their approach need not be solemn, their salutation, need not be a prayer.

Students who encounter lecturers should leave such encounters feeling elated, satisfied, fulfilled and peaceful.

2. Unfortunately, while some persons are naturally good at interpersonal relationships, others are not. The banks have expectations that their workers appear friendly, welcoming and speak courteously, irrespective of their natural inclinations. Similarly, the universities should expect of lecturers that, as a matter of professional ethics, they relate and communicate with students in terms that engender peace and harmony.

3. Since intimacy and civility are culturally defined and could be subject to individual dispositions and natural tendencies, the universities should expose lecturers to courses, seminars and workshops on intimacy and civility in order to build a culture of peace in the university. The university administration should not assume that faculty knows how to deploy language to cultivate intimacy, civility and thereby enhance the peace valence of their communication. The need to deliberately train lecturers in peace language and communication has become urgent for a peaceful community and national development.

4. Language teachers, especially English Language teachers, should incorporate in their curriculum, phatic and civil communication skills. Language mastery should not only be assessed from the cognitive frame only, but also from the psychosocial and affective lens. The deployment of the communicative approach to language learning could be a step in that direction.

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