

Linguistic and Cultural Tenets in Africa: The Quest for Peace

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ABSTRACT: *Using a theoretical concept by combining linguistic relativity and linguistic determinism – the structure of our language; a set of specific selected words influence man's perception of the world and language use determines thought and action, data was collected and analysed qualitatively. The aim of the paper is to illustrate the pertinence of culture in language use and actions with emphasis to explore the contextual symbolic meanings of specific words in Africa nation states' quest for peace. Specifically, in this paper we examine carefully selected and uttered lexis and their significant meanings in Cameroon, South Africa and Uganda. The results of the study confirmed that words have unique significance in relation to the culture, history and identity of a particular African people. Words used in the Cameroon context, 'all is well', are mostly words of hope and assurance in a war-free nation. The interpretation of some words, 'Rhodes must fall', generate disputes and lead to violent actions in the search for peaceful and prosperous co-existence in an apartheid ridden country like South Africa. Certain words of greetings, 'you still exist', though a total recall of pain and torture in a period of turbulence and massacre in Uganda, portray gratitude and delightedness among citizens.*

KEYWORDS -language, culture, history, identity, peace, Africa

I. INTRODUCTION

In most African societies, language is used for communication and cultural values are embedded in interpreting and understanding communication. Language and culture are vital tools in building a peaceful, harmonious and prosperous African society. Just as builders use mortar or cement to hold blocks together when building a house, so too is language and culture in Africa's quest for peace. Howell's (1990:3) definition of language fits the context of our study, that is, language is the way people talk and communicate with one another. It is the communication of ideas through social interaction. Culture is the things people learn and share in a group which will help them survive together. Using African countries that have either avoided wars like Cameroon, experienced segregation and discrimination like South Africa, or torture and massacres like Uganda, specific lexis are sorted and their meanings analysed.

Three questions remain;

- How does historical context influence language and thought?
- How do words/phrases gain meaning in a multicultural society?
- What role does identity play in the quest for peace?

The specific aims of this paper are therefore to explore the contextual symbolic meanings of specific words in African nation-states and to illustrate the relevance of culture in language use and actions.

However, it is important to raise the fundamental problem, which is, though a common language (English) assist and integrate Africans in the society, it also creates a curiosity for in-depth importance and understanding of culture. A blend of language, identity and personality help Africans in a particular state disagree to agree despite their different cultural backgrounds. Africans also work extensively and act constructively when they reflect on their country's history, and co-exist peacefully in their different African states.

II. METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

Using a random sampling technique, three countries on the African continent were selected. Cameroon in Central Africa, South Africa in the Southern part of the continent and Uganda in East Africa. Data for the

present research endeavour was collected in two facets – from journals and books and through participatory observation. One read keenly, and between the lines so as to sort out excerpts in Uganda. A total of ten (10) excerpts were collected; excerpts that depict all forms of torture, inhuman treatment as used in a dictatorship regime. A classification of seven (7) of these excerpts illustrate death ('kondo-ism', 'firing squad', 'sent to the moon', 'give him what he came here for', 'the floors were littered with loose eyes and teeth', 'hopping like a frog', 'wheel torture'). Whereas three (3) of the excerpts illustrate surprise, supplication and appreciation ('you still exist', 'please', and 'thank you').

A blend of the two methods, that is, reading between the lines and participatory observation led to specific excerpts in Cameroon. These include:

'Don't give up', 'stay out of trouble', 'all is well', 'you're a conqueror', 'His grace is sufficient for us', 'thank God', 'blessings', 'shalom', 'create your own happiness', 'more grease on your elbows'. In South Africa phrases like *'fees must fall', 'no to violence', 'extra hours are paid', 'I'm not your slave', 'Rhodes must fall', 'education for barbarism', 'it's high time I became the boss', 'no to racism', 'free health care' and 'ubuntu'* were gathered.

It is evident that succinct research has been done as far as language and culture are concerned. In order to realise the research gap and create a theoretical concept, the works of Greeburg (1972), Brislin (1986), Howell (1990), Biesele and Barclay (2001) and Mapara (2009) were examined. Greeburg (1972: 66-74) holds that language can be classified and analysed in three perspectives.

- The genetic method which is non arbitrary, exhaustive and unique i.e. there are no other choice of criteria leading to different and legitimate results
- The typological method which is based on the aspect of sound without meaning, and/or meaning without sound, or both
- The areal method which focuses on the effects of a language on other languages whether they are related or not, in other words, a decision as to whether a particular language has influenced a certain language more than another.

The present study does not limit itself to methods of language classification and analyses. It focuses on how language use resist or change societal structures.

Brislin (1986:215-230) has examined cross-cultural interactions and experiences specifically challenges to pre-existing knowledge. Using people with different roles – foreign students, social workers, refugees, and teachers, he confirms that people can relate to incidents. He emphasizes that interactions and pre-existing knowledge lead people away from the belief that their type of cross – cultural experience is so unique as to make communication with others unnecessary. Brislin (ibid) therefore encourages and supports cross – cultural communication and experiences while the present study depicts culture and experiences as a vital tool in the quest for peace.

Howell (1990: 4-6), just like the present study, has explored the connectivity between language and culture. He affirms that language and culture are two separate things yet one cannot exist without the other. As such, people use language to talk about their culture, to describe things in their culture. Unlike the present study whereby culture, identity and linguistic elements are combined to illustrate the effects of language in a multicultural African state, Howell (1990: ibid) limits himself to the interrelated nature of language and culture.

Biesele and Barclay (2001:67-80) emphasize the harmony and success of the San people's culture of couple hunting and tracking. Mapara (2009: 145) has explored aspects of culture that foster development. He holds that besides proverbs, riddles, folktales, songs, legends and myths, elders in African societies culturally empower the youth with skills like hunting, fishing, the production of fishing traps and hoe handles. The present study is no

doubt a continuation of cultural aspects in an African society. It further explores how the interpretation of language based on culture, values and beliefs can transform an African society

According to Yule (2014: 273) linguistic relativity states that the structure of our language, with its predetermined common features (the set of words we have learned and the way external reality is organised) have an influence on how we perceive the world. Linguistic determinism holds that our first language seems to have a definite role in shaping habitual thought, in other words, language determines thought, that is, the way we think about things as we go about our daily lives. Drawing from linguistic relativity and linguistic determinism, a conceptual framework is established where language is analysed in relation to culture. More specifically, in relation to the ideas and assumptions about the nature of things and the people of a particular social group. Consequently, particular linguistic elements compel us to perceive the world in a particular way or prevents us from thinking in different ways. It is in this light that all excerpts are classified and analysed taking into consideration elements of language (linguistic), history and identity in the three selected African countries.

2. Historical influence on language and thought

History constitutes one of the cultural tenets in Africa. This section will dwell on the history of Cameroon, South Africa and Uganda and how these histories contribute in Africa's quest for peace.

2.1 Cameroon

According to Moroney (1989: 67), Cameroon covers an area of 475,442 sq.km and is bounded by Nigeria to the north-west, Chad to the north-east, Central African Republic to the east, Congo to the south-east, and Gabon and Equatorial Guinea to the south. From 1884 until 1916, Cameroon was a German protectorate. After World War I, the territory was divided into British and French mandates. After World War II, the mandates were converted into United Nations trust territories, although still administered by British and French, Moroney (1989: 70).

The rise of African nationalism in 1954 motivated the creation of the 'Union des populations Camerounaises' (UPC) in 1948. Moroney (ibid) states that, disappointed in its attempts to campaign legally for the reunification of the French and British territories and independence of Cameroon, the UPC launched an unsuccessful revolt in 1955 in French Cameroon. The organisation was subsequently banned. Meanwhile, in 1957, the first Cameroon government was formed, headed by Mbida. Within a year, Mbida resigned and Ahmadou Ahidjo, leader of the Union Camerounaise (UC) took over as Premier.

The Republic of Cameroon was declared independent on January 1, 1960 (in the French mandate area). A new constitution was approved by the referendum, and Ahidjo was elected president. Under a plebiscite supervised by the United Nations in 1961 in British Cameroon, the Southern Cameroons voted to federate with the Republic of Cameroon while Northern Cameroon opted to join Nigeria's Northern Region. In May 1972, a unitary state was established, the United Republic of Cameroon and Ahidjo was re-elected president in 1975. Ahidjo ruled until November 1982 when Paul Biya, the Prime Minister took over as president.

2.1.1 Religion

Christian missionary activity was an operational strategy of colonialism in Africa, Segueda 2015: 8). In most African countries, the people's religion was ancestor veneration. The rapid spread of Christianity into Sub-Saharan Africa in the Seventh (7th) century shifted religion in Africa from ancestor devotion to Christianity, Segueda (ibid). Missionaries encouraged Africans to abandon their old beliefs, ways of life, thereby gradually implanting Christianity as religion into African cultures and impacting African traditions. Achebe (1962) in "Things Fall Apart" clearly depicts this notion where Okonkwo and other Igbo clansmen struggle with the impact religion has on their culture. Most Cameroonians believe that the source of peace to an individual (inwardly) and to the society is Christianity as a religion.

2.2 South Africa

South Africa covers a land area of 1,221, 360 sq.km. Her common border countries are Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Zimbabwe and Mozambique (Cf. Moroney 1989:473). Meredith (n.d: 117-128) recounts the history of South Africa where white politicians constructed the most elaborate racial edifice the world has ever seen. The black population was subjected to a vast array of government controls and segregated from whites whenever possible. Every facet of black lives; residence, employment, education, public amenities and politics was regulated to keep them in strictly subordinate role.

According to Meredith (ibid: 120) a group of young activists, demanded radical action amongst which were prominent activists like Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo. In 1956, the government arrested 156 activists, including almost all the senior Africa National Congress (ANC) leaders as well as prominent white radicals, and charged them with high treason, claiming that they have been preparing 'for an overthrow of the existing state by revolutionary methods, involving violence'.

The apartheid government divided blacks into separate groups so that it would inhibit them (the blacks) from acting as a single community against outnumbered whites. The Sharpeville massacre became a permanent symbol of the brutality of the apartheid regime. It provoked a storm of African protest, marches, demonstrations, strikes and violence. To counter the strike threat, the government passed new laws enabling the detention of citizens without trial and ordered the largest mobilisation of the army and the police, (Meredith ibid: 122-123). Night after night, police carried out raids in African townships, all political meetings were banned, and employees threatened with mass dismissals.

As stated by Meredith (n.d: 126), the trial of Mandela and other leading conspirators lasted from October 1963 to June 1964 of which Mandela, then forty-five years old, was sentenced to life imprisonment. The victory of the ANC at the polls in 1994 was as much a personal tribute to Mandela as it was to the movement (the ANC) he led. For blacks, the elections was above all about liberation – a celebration of their freedom from white rule.

2.3 Uganda

Uganda has the total area of 241,139 sq.km of inland, water or swamp. Uganda borders Kenya on the east, Tanzania and Rwanda on the south, Zaire on the west and Sudan on the north, Moroney (1989: 561). Meredith (n.d: 232) holds that at the time of Uganda's independence in 1962, Idi Amin, who was recruited in 1946 to serve as a trainee cook in the king's African rifles, was promoted to the rank of a commissioned officer. In 1964, he (Amin) was promoted to the rank of lieutenant-colonel. Meanwhile, Obote, the prime minister of a coalition government, accommodated the disparate ethnic groups on which Uganda was build (Achloi, Baganda, Langi and Nilotic). Obote also appointed the Baganda king, Sir Edward Mutesa, as head of state in 1963.

Meredith (ibid) states that as Obote set his sights on establishing a one-party state, tribal and factional groupings tended to threaten the stability of the country. Obote also suspended the National Assembly and appointed Amin as the new army commander. In April 1966, Obote published a new constitution installing himself as executive president of a united Uganda, endowed with immense powers. When the parliament tried to oppose Obote, he ordered Amin to attack.

President Obote favoured and supported those from his own tribe, the Langi and Acholi. On the other hand, Amin enlisted and recruited tribesmen from his own district; Kakwa, Madi, Lugbara and Nubians. Amin's coup in 1971 brought the downfall of Obote yet, Amin never felt secured. Fearing a counter-attack by Obote supporters, he organised death squads to hunt down and kill scores of army and police officers he suspected of opposing him. Three murder sites were carved out and truckloads of corpses were taken and dumped in the Nile, (cf. Meredith n.d: 233-234)

Worst of all, after an abortive invasion that Obote supporters launched from Tanzania in 1972, Amin took revenge on civilians suspected of opposing him. Thousands died in the hands of his special squads. In 1979, Amin ordered his troops to loot and plunder at will in an orgy of destruction in northern Tanzania. Tanzania

launched a force of 45,000 men across the border and then decided to oust Amin altogether. Amin's rule left Uganda ravaged, lawless and bankrupt, with a death toll put at 250,000 people, Meredith (ibid: 238)

III. LINGUISTIC ELEMENTS AND THEIR MEANING IN AFRICA'S QUEST FOR PEACE

As history illustrates, Cameroon, after her independence, has been a peaceful country without wars or famine. It is obvious that some resistance and violent demonstrations have been mounted in relation to multi-party politics and economic reasons but all these have always been managed in such a way that the atmosphere in Cameroon remains peaceful. The long-time peace experienced in Cameroon therefore influences the uttering of words/phrases of hope and assurance.

The phrase '*all is well*' has a very significant meaning in the Cameroon context. When one is discouraged and feels like he/she is the world's greatest failure, these words encourage, and strengthen an individual. Put differently, if one has been surviving, despite the difficulties and hardships, it means one can still carry on hoping for better days to come. In a like manner, '*don't give up*' can also be used. If a Cameroonian is able to carry on up to a particular time and age in life, it means s/he is likely to succeed. Since some people are not patient enough to wait for the appointed time, the phrase '*stay out of trouble*' is used. This is an advice for the individual not to get into any forms of malpractices for, there is still hope. If one is hardworking, patient and tolerant, the phrase '*you're a conqueror*' is used. Cameroonians believe that it is difficult to see somebody with the above stated qualities who completely fails in life.

The word '*blessings*' is a short prayer of grace, invoking divine protection on an individual. By using this word '*blessings*', Cameroonians believe there is hope, divine influence and protection. By so doing, individuals generate a certain degree of gentleness and calmness within themselves and in their thoughts and actions. Other lexis of this category include; '*His grace is sufficient for us*'. This is a metaphor through which the sufferings of an individual are compared to those of Christ. Most often, the phrase '*thank God*' is used to compare two or more persons' situations (i.e. situations that are worst and a Cameroonian finds him/herself in a better position).

When Cameroonians use the expression '*more grease on your elbow*', they are in a way encouraging someone to continue contributing in the constructive building of the nation for, there would be a reward one day. 'the expression '*more grease on your elbows*' often associates with expressions like '*shalom*' and '*create your own happiness*'. The expression '*shalom*' signifies peace and well-being. A word that encourages an individual to try to be happy no matter the circumstance, to think of achieving a healthy and prosperous livelihood be it with an individual or with the society.

From the ten excerpts gathered from Cameroon ('*don't give up*', '*stay out of trouble*', '*all is well*', '*you're a conqueror*', '*His grace is sufficient for us*', '*thank God*', '*blessings*', '*shalom*', '*create your own happiness*', and '*more grease on your elbows*') one realises that, all excerpts are inclined to a religious belief. Excerpts also institute a degree of calmness, a peaceful behavioural pattern and most importantly, non-violently nurture the aspects of hope and assurance among citizens.

The history of South Africa proves that acts of violence, suppression and segregation took away citizens basic rights and freedom. Most South Africans, especially the blacks and the poor were restricted from basic necessities like education. This explains why the utterances gathered from South Africa signify pain and rejection.

In the utterance '*Rhodes must fall*', the focus is on Rhodes' statue in most universities in South Africa – the University of Cape Town (UCT), the University of South Africa (UNISA) and Rhodes University just to name a few. To most students, in order to build a better South Africa, Rhodes' statue which symbolises violence and segregation should be replaced with Mandela's statue which symbolises virtue, communality and interconnectedness. Other utterances that have similar meaning in a South African context include:

'No to violence', 'extra hours are paid' and 'I'm not your slave'. Most often, South Africans, specifically children don't want to be spoken to in a harsh tone or beaten. They have a doctrine that says they were once liberated by Mandela, hence, they have all rights to enjoy their freedom. This explains the use of 'no to violence' in South Africa. Also, any job description in South Africa clearly defines the time to start and the time to close. Extending a few minutes beyond the stated time, the employee reminds the employer that 'extra hours are paid' this is an epitome of blue collar jobs. As far as 'I'm not your slave' is concerned, employees master their job description. Consequently, it is very frequent to hear an employee tell the boss that 'I'm not your slave' when errands not found in the job description become a routine.

The next utterance '*fees must fall*' is a plea from the youths to the government of South Africa, to annul tuition fees at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels so as to enable most South Africans especially the poor to educate themselves. During the Apartheid era, most people (blacks), called the education system '*education for barbarism*'. This, because the whites allowed the blacks to learn just what was required of them i.e. if a white needed a black to paint, the black was taught painting and nothing more. If a white needed someone to do gardening, the black was taught just gardening and it ends there. As such, it was a taboo for blacks to study in universities up to the Master's Degree. When a worker is not satisfied with his/her wages yet, keeps on taking orders from his/her employer, utterances such as '*it's high time I became the boss*' are heard.

In '*no to racism*', South Africans recall the segregation and treatment given to them either because they are blacks, coloured or Indians. Some of such forms of discriminatory practices are still manifested today between the various races – whites, blacks, coloured and Indians. This explains the use of utterances like '*free health care*' which is fully applied in South African public hospitals. The patient needs to present only his/her identification papers in order to receive free treatment; be it from white or black doctors. Such patients may at times wait for so long before receiving treatment but one thing is certain; there is '*free health care*' in South Africa. South Africans also strongly believe in '*ubuntu*' i.e. the spirit of loving, sharing and supporting each other in the society.

It is therefore evident that South Africa's history is overshadowed with segregation, suppression, and bondage. Their voices can be heard through the utterances '*fees must fall*', '*no to violence*', '*extra hours are paid*', '*I'm not your slave*', '*Rhodes must fall*', '*education for barbarism*', '*it's high time I became the boss*', '*no to racism*', '*free health care*' and '*ubuntu*' as these express their feelings (pain and rejection) as each and every citizen struggles to reconstruct a peaceful and a prosperous South Africa.

Idi Amin's reign in Uganda was that of torture and massacres. This implanted fear and bewilderment in the minds of Ugandans. As stated by Amnesty International (1978: 12) there was a '*death list*' in Uganda, planned in advance and organised on a country-wide basis. A '*death list*' that constitutes all males between the ages of 15 and 50 of all Acholi and Langi citizens. There were also Decrees like '*kondo-ism*' and '*firing squad*'. The former designed for armed robbery which carries a death penalty and the latter designated for punishment for anyone in Uganda who diverts commodities like cattle, coffee, cement, fish, maize, petrol products, sugar, and tea, Amnesty International 1978: 4,5). Victims in Uganda often heard their torturers say they will be '*sent to the moon*' meaning; they would be shot. This explains the use of an utterance such as '*you still exist*' when people meet in Uganda.

In situations where torture was severe such as victims eyes gouged out and left hanging in their sockets, or the use of electric shock torture where the wires of a portable power-unit are attached to the victim's genitals or nipples or other sensitive places, torturers often say '*give him what he has come here for*'. In most cases, the victims saw that '*the floors were littered with loose eyes and teeth*'. As such, victims cried out the word '*please*'.

Terrible torture strategies were implemented in Uganda. According to Amnesty International (1978: 15) detainees were forced to undergo various humiliating ordeals which cause extreme muscular pain and

exhaustion. Sometimes, the victim being beaten until he/she becomes exhausted or falls down. Such forms of torture included ‘hopping like a frog’ and ‘wheel torture’ (the wheel-rim is repeatedly struck with iron bars while the victim’s head is inside it. Worst of all, victims were ordered to stand in the centre of the rim and lift the rim up. Rape and sexual torture was frequent especially on female detainees. In most of such cases where victims are tortured but they survive, they thank their torturer for whatever he might have done/might not have done for them to escape or to be alive, hence the expression ‘thank you’. In all three countries, it is evident that Cameroon portrays utterances of hope and assurance, South Africa depicts utterances of pain and rejection and Uganda, utterances of bewilderment.

3.1 Identity and perception

Identity according to Martin and Nakayama (2014:170) is about who we are and who others think we are. In South Africa, for instance, segregation was done as people were classified according to races. In Uganda, people who were seen as threats to power were spotted and listed according to ethnic groups and professions. Again, people are often identified according to nations. Consequently, identity can be seen from a racial, ethnic or national point of view.

3.1.1 Racial identity

Debates about race have their roots in the 15th and 16th centuries when Europeans explorers encountered people who looked different from them. Scientists were curious to know if there was “one family of man” and to be aware of the rights that were to be accorded to those who looked different. Cf Martin and Nakayama (ibid: 191). Despite the fact that all humans and all the outward variety are a pretty homogenous species, there is still a distinction between White and Black, Irish and Jewish. Race can be socially or biologically created. Racial categories are based to some extent on physical characteristics.

Black or White is usually distinguished by skin colour (dark coloured skin or light coloured skin), that is, the degree of melanin produced in each individual. The Jewish race can be characterised by features such as large nose that curves downwards, weak chin, sloped forehead sometimes including large ears that protrude away from the head and heavy, fleshy-looking face. The Irish on their part will definitely have a fair skin with varied skin tone (porcelain-white, pasty or naturally dark and sallow) not excluding blue eyes, pale skin and sometimes blonde hair. These racial changes are also constructed by the social contexts. How people construct these meanings and think about race influences the way in which they communicate and react in the society.

3.1.2 Ethnic identity

Ethnic identity often involves a shared sense of origin and history and this may link ethnic groups to distant cultures. Ethnic identity has three dimensions – self-identification, knowledge about ethnic cultures i.e. traditions, customs, values, and behaviours and feelings about belonging to a particular ethnic group, for instance in Cameroon there are ethnic groups like the Bassa, Beti and Pygmies. In South Africa we have the Zulu, Xhosa, Basotho and Tswana while in Uganda there are ethnic groups like Baganda, Banyankole, Langi and Acholi. Put differently, having an ethnic identity means experiencing a sense of belonging to a particular group and knowing something about the shared experiences of group members. Martin and Nakayama (2014:193) hold that ethnic identity is constructed by both selves and others but racial identity is constructed solely by others.

3.1.3 National identity

National identity according to Martin and Nakayama (2014:202) refers to one’s legal status in relation to a nation. Irrespective of the skin colour and typical physical characteristics, which specific ethnic group one comes from, individuals are united by national identity. Someone with a particular nationality can trace his/her ethnicity to a different country.

Conclusion

This paper has revealed that African societies have specific behavioural patterns and cultural groups vary but words have unique significance depending on knowledge and experiences. Language gains its unique significance when referred to with other qualifications such as history, culture and identity. The vocabulary and interpretation of an item/expression is constantly developing so that the present meaning of an expression is often a long way from the original sense of its root.

The interpretation of certain words often generate disputes, lead to violent interactions but such words are intended to create a peaceful and harmonious society. The use of specific words captivated massive efforts to reverse negative values and promote communality and virtuousness as in South Africa's "Rhodes must fall", instigate hope, promote peace and prosperity in Cameroon's "all is well", as well as surmount torture and render the people of Uganda victorious and happy.

African societies should preserve and transfer their culture from generation to generation for culture is an essential parameter in understanding language. Language, culture and human reactions are interwoven and a society's peaceful co-existence depends solely on the manipulation of these three elements.

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How to Cite:

Olivia B. Amabo, "Linguistic and Cultural Tenets in Africa: The Quest for Peace".
International Journal of Arts and Social Science, 2019. 2(2), 47-54. ISSN: 2581-7922.
www.ijassjournal.com