

LANGUAGE: A PANACEA TO INSECURITY CHALLENGES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The level and dimension of insecurity which was based on secondary data and observations among authors in different places, zones and works of life as expressed in their comments, as well as, on concrete evidences of insecurity incidence in different parts of Nigeria, indicated that the insecurity challenge in the country is enormous and complex. Language works as two edged sword. It can be used to build relationships and at the same time used to destroy the same relationships. The inability of humans to utilize language positively has led to most conflicts in Nigeria. This paper therefore looked at the role of language in propagating insecurity. After detailed consideration of the available literature, it is affirmed that language is one of the most

important catalyst of security. Among one of the recommendations made is Nigerians in all spheres of human endeavour should be discouraged on the use of inciting or foul language that can lead to quarrel and rioting or can cause tension among or between ethnic nationalities.

Ever since the marriage between the northern and southern protectorate in Nigeria in 1914, the country has been bedevilled by countless anomalies ranging from cultural, social, educational, economic and political upheavals which have remained with us even after being granted our freedom. The worst of these anomalies today is insecurity which seems to have eaten deep into the foundation of our unity and it is gradually hazardously reducing this foundation.

Part of these insecurity challenges are directly or indirectly caused by some of our leaders. They sometimes heat up the polity through the use of inflammatory and unguarded language (statements) that causes violence and destruction. Tracing back our road to independence, some of our founding fathers (nationalists) who the people looked up to made insidious and unguarded utterances at the slightest provocation that tended to halt the unity of this nation. For instance, phrases such as, “the mistake of 1914” of Sir Ahmadu Bello, during one of the conference; or the phrase “a mere geographical expression” of Chief Obafemi Awolowo.

The phrases are pointing to the union of northern and southern protectorates in 1914. According to Ahmadu Bello, it was a mistake to join different nations of diverse cultures into one. Also, “a mere geographical expression” of Awolowo is stressing the different ethnic nationalities forced together as a country or sovereign nation but lacking in cohesiveness in all ramifications because of differences in culture. These incisive expressions cause disunity among the different ethnic groups and such should be avoided.

The use of unguarded and inflammatory statements by our political and religious leaders has continued and often times, these lead to violence causing insecurity of lives and properties. Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the concept of language, insecurity versus security and language and its use as it relates to insecurity in Nigeria.

The Concept of Language

The meaning of language is so diverse, that no one definition of it can cover all its functions. The issue remains that people define it in such manner that it captures their essence of using it and the situation in which they are involved. In essence, there are camps in the definition of language. Few would be given here.

Webster’s New World Dictionary defines language as “the expression of communication of thoughts and feelings by means of vocal sounds, and the combination

Charles Chukwuma Motanya and Musa Galadima Toro

of such sounds to which meaning is attributed”. According to Ajayi and Oyetayo in (Oku, 2004) language is a veritable vehicle of interaction and a means of education through which human beings pass their culture from one generation to another. Language makes it possible for human beings to think together, feel together and to act together (Ike, 1998). Prasad (2009) views language as a “system of conventional, spoken or written symbols by means of which human beings as members of a social group and participants in its culture, communicate”. According to Essien (2003), “language is a system of structured arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which human beings make meaning and communicate with each other in a given community”.

From these definitions, language can be said to be a means of communication which has to do with the sharing of meaning. The term “language” for the purpose of this paper, connotes two meanings. The first meaning indicates the group that uses a particular language for expressing actions and inactions, intentions and demands for what they need at a given time or moment or the use of words that convey meanings to the intended expressions and understood only by the user.

The other concept is an indication of the use of words or expressions by eminent people in authority who the people look up to as models and whose commands they can obey. It is these groups of personalities that can incite or drive people to rise against other people or communities. In essence, that inciting language (unguarded) from these elements can cause violence, disobedience, disruption of public peace, threat to lives, topple government or cause chaos. The inciting (inflammatory) language may be oral or written. It is this concept of language that this paper refers to.

Insecurity Versus Security

The concept of insecurity can be best understood by first presenting the concept of security. According to Imobighe (1985), security is a feeling of being protected and a feeling of freedom from danger, fear, anxiety, oppression, and unwanted violence. Akin (2008) views security as, “the situation that exists as a result of the establishment of measures for the protection of persons, information and property against hostile persons, influences and actions”. It is the existence of conditions within which people in a society can go about their normal daily activities without any threats to their lives or properties. It embraces all measures designed to protect and safeguard the citizenry and the resources of individuals, groups, businesses and the nation against sabotage of violent occurrence, (Ogunleye Adewale, Alesa and Ogunde, 2011). According to Igbuzor (2011) it demands safety from chronic threats and protection from harmful disruption.

Security can also be described as stability and continuity of livelihood, predictability of daily life, protection from crime and freedom from psychological harm (safety or protection from emotional stress which results from the assurance or knowing that one is wanted, accepted, loved, and protected in one’s community and by people around. It focuses on emotional and psychological sense of belonging to a social group which can offer one protection). The above gives a composite definition of security as the

protection against all forms of harm whether physical, economic and psychological. Security in general is not the absence of threats or security issues, but the ability to rise to the challenges posed by those threats with expediency and expertise.

Insecurity on the other hand is the antithesis of security. However, because of the very many ways in which insecurity affects human life and existence, the concept of insecurity has usually been ascribed different interrelations in association with the various ways it affects individuals. Some of the common descriptors of insecurity include; want of safety, danger, hazard, uncertainty, want of confidence, doubtful, inadequately guarded or protected, lacking stability, troubled, lack of protection and unsafe, to mention a few. All these have been used by different people to define the concept of insecurity. These different descriptors however run into a common reference to a state of vulnerability to harm and loss of life, property or livelihood. Beland (2005) defined insecurity as “the state of fear or anxiety stemming from a concrete or alleged lack of protection”. It refers to a lack of inadequate freedom from danger.

Two views are of essence to this paper; these are:

- i. Insecurity as the state of being open or subject to danger or threat to danger where danger is the condition of being susceptible to harm or injury, and
- ii. Insecurity as a state of being exposed to risk or anxiety, where anxiety is a vague unpleasant emotion that is experienced in anticipation of some misfortune. A major point about insecurity implied in these definitions is that those affected by insecurity are not only uncertain or unaware of what would happen but they are also not able to stop it or protect themselves when it happens. It is in this view that we would describe insecurity in this paper as; “not knowing, a lack of control, and inability to take defensive action against forces that portend harm or danger to an individual or group or what makes them vulnerable.” “Vulnerability” is the situation that we do not know and we cannot face or anticipate. It is also something we may know would happen but we are not able to face it. This is the situation we face in Nigeria especially this period of political transition due mostly to the use of inflammatory language by the political actors and their cohorts.

The Roles of Language as it Relates to Insecurity in Nigeria

A careful reflection on the chronological chronicles of events in the country from independence in 1960, to this contemporary epoch of globalization and democratic dispensation and governance, one can say that the name Nigeria is synonymous to insecurity. Several factors have been responsible for Nigeria’s insecurity problems. They include; lack of institutional capacity resulting in government failure, unequal distribution of materials to the citizenry, ethnic religious conflicts, weak security system in the country, very high unemployment rate, use of inflammatory and unguarded words (language). Among all the factors mentioned above, this paper is most interested in the role of language in Nigeria’s insecurity challenges and how the same language should be

Charles Chukwuma Motanya and Musa Galadima Toro

used to guaranty a secure Nigeria. There is power in good or positive words, and there is also great power in evil or negative words. A story was once told about a king who decided to test the wisdom of his Chief advisers on food by asking them to prepare the best meal ever. The winner prepared OX TONGUE with rich sources. Asked to explain his choice, he quickly replied, “what could be better than a tongue. In life, with the words of the tongue we share joy, bring hope, comfort and support, retell stories of the memories of the ancestors and passion the dreams of the time that is still to come. Nothing is so fine as the gift of the tongue.” The king decided to prove his wisdom beyond doubts. He now asked him to prepare the worst meal in the world. The adviser prepared the OX TONGUE meal again. The surprised king asked him to explain. He answers thus; “what can sow doubt and confusion more skilfully than the tongue? There are few other things that can spread so much. It can lie and deceive, stir up hatred and anger, play the coward and terrify! A tongue can be the worst instrument in the world. The above story shows the power of words in building or destroying friends, families, communities, nations etc. The Holy Bible also confirms this thus; “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Proverb 18:21). Nimmer (2011) has also observed that: Language has an important role in creating worlds that communities identify themselves with. Language functions as an instrument for creating, normalizing and reinforcing particular world views, affixing certain knowledge and institutions in society.... Through language, identities are created and maintained and as such, language is never neutral (229).

From the above, the use of words in events can build or destroy a society or nation depending on who uses it and for what purpose. The recipients of such words would always impact on security through interpretation or response to such words. History has shown that right from the early days of Nigeria’s existence till date; many of her leaders lacked the art of proper language use. They use language anyhow without really considering the after effect of their speech. Many of them have used inflammatory words (languages) which are aimed at sowing hatred among the different tribes in Nigeria. Some even go to the extent of brewing open war through their unguarded statements thereby making the country insecure. The greatest security challenge in Nigeria in this present era is the by-product of the reckless speeches made by some so called elites and leaders.

A review of some of these statements is necessary for this work to be complete. During the struggle for Nigeria’s political independence and self rule, some nationalist who the people looked up to made insidious and unguarded utterances at the slightest provocation that tended to puncture the unity of this nation. For instance, phrases such as “the mistake of 1914” are accredited to late Sir Ahmadu Bello, during one of the independent conferences. Also, eleven days after Nigeria’s independence, Ahmadu Bello said:

The new nation called Nigeria should be an estate of our great grandfather Othman Dan Fodio. We must ruthlessly prevent a change of power. We use the minorities in the North as willing tools and the South as a conquered territory and never allow them to rule over us and never allow them to have control over their future (Parrot Newspaper, 1960).

The phrase, “a mere geographical expression” is also accredited to Obafemi Awolowo. The above was how Awolowo saw the relationship among the various ethnic nationalities. In recent time, such reckless, unguarded and inflammatory language have and is being used by our leaders and their allies whose main ambition is to grab political power by all means not minding its effect on security. According to Aliyu Gwarzo a front line campaigner of power shift said, “No Goodluck or anyone also can stop us from taking back our power next year 2015, we will maim, destroy and turn this country into Africa’s biggest war zone and refugee camp”. In reply to this, Asare Dokubo an ex-militant turned politician said that they will make oil exploration impossible if the president is not returned as president.

Governor Chibuike Amaechi also said in one of the All Progressive Congress, (henceforth APC) campaign that if his party by any chance loses the presidential election, they will form a parallel government. Another such statement is accredited to him during a party rally in Rivers State thus, “[some pastors collected six billion Naira and they are circulating documents and telling you not to vote for a Hausa man; not to vote for a Muslim” Still on the election matter, Lai Mohammed the national publicity secretary of the APC made the following statements at different press conferences “when the president is defeated, he will declare himself winner, the same way it happened in the NGF (Nigeria Governors Forum). He will try to split the country the same way he did to the NGF”, another statement of his reads, “in 2015, if the PDP (Peoples Democratic Party) loses to APC and they are trying to play this kind of game with Nigerians, then they will know we all own this country”.

Aliyu Magatakarda Wamakko (2015) reporting to Daily Trust news paper said “we are alerting Nigerians that if anything happens to us, they should know where it is coming from we are aware that several of our leaders, especially the National Publicity Secretary, have been marked down for arrest in the days to come; we know there are evil plots to frame some of them on trumped-up charges. Former President Olusegun Obasanjo is guilty of reckless and unguarded statements that heat up the polity leading to security problems. He said that the postponement of the election was part of the grand plans by President Jonathan to win election by all means, “the President wants to get power by hook or by crook.” He likened President Jonathan to former Cote d’Ivoire leader Gbagbo. On his preparedness for elections, Assistant Inspector General of Police, Mbu Joseph Mbu said “nobody, no matter the position, will be above the law.... We are not afraid of any person, I repeat, anybody who attacks my men violently, we will respond violently as we are battle ready” (Sun Newspaper, 2015). The statement below is accredited to John Odigie-Oyegun (the APC national chairman).

Charles Chukwuma Motanya and Musa Galadima Toro

We are aware that the president has forwarded a secret memo to all commanders of divisions and battalions of the Nigerian army for a three day strategy meeting in Kaduna from today (Monday) on how to use the military to intimidate voters in favour of the ruling party if the election had proceeded as scheduled (Punch, 2015).

All the above are just a few of such inflammatory, reckless languages used by our leaders for their selfish purposes. These statements have caused riots, industrial actions, killings, hatred and fear among Nigerians. People no longer sleep with their two eyes closed because of the kind of tension evoked by such unguarded, gutter language. Good use of language can also save the above insecurity situation caused by unguarded statements as stated in the story at the beginning of this paper. With the use of good language, some world leaders were able to instil the spirit of national love and patriotism in their citizens. Such spirits have become unimpeachable in the minds of their nationals who would go to any length to defend their national integrity. To be able to appreciate the role of proper language use in catalyzing the propagation of security, peaceful coexistence and nation building, there is need to make reference to the role of speeches of some world leaders during their struggle for the emancipation of their people. Such a leader like Late Mao of China was able by his mastery of language to hold Chinese people together. It would also be recalled that it was for the same reason of language mastery that China was able to resist the British government during the Opium war of 1400 to 1402. Closely related to the above, Mahatma Ghandi made the Indians in series of his powerful speeches to hold that it was either independent from Great Britain or nothing else. These speeches strengthened the national spirit and they had their independence under Ghandi.

Similarly, under George Washington, the United States was formed into the strongest nation in the world courtesy of good language use such as, "In God we trust," "God's own country" etc.

It is also in America that Kennedy J.F. once said, "think of what you can do for America not what America can do for you." With these kinds of words, America has been peaceful and has risen today to the status of the world's most powerful country. The then French general Napoleon Bonaparte used strong language to hold his army together, his popular speech in which he declared that, "if made an emperor of the sea for six hours", "England would cease to exist", strengthened the French army so much, that they conquered the British army. In the Nigerian experience, it would be stating the obvious that the Great Zik of Africa in his, "West African Pilot" and other media instilled the spirit of nationalism and national consciousness on his contemporaries who assisted him in achieving political independence for the Nigerian nation. People like Abubakar Tafawa Balewa also did the same. From the above, it is quite clear that proper language use can achieve a lot of good things which include building a nation, peaceful co-existence of different kinds of people, national consciousness and most importantly a secure environment devoid of fear and threats.

Conclusion

Language is a device for the exercise of power (Tonkin, 2003). This is based on its communicative function as a meaning-making tool (Daramola, 2001, Holliday and Matheissen, 2004). In performing this function, language is used to express the views, arguments and ideologies of those who employ it. In Nigeria, people especially the leaders have used language recklessly for their selfish aim. Inflammatory statements that heat up the polity is the order of the day. With this situation, there is anxiety, fear, riots, kidnaps, and killings all over Nigeria leading to serious security challenges. This paper is of the view that leaders and elites should learn how to talk, when to talk and to whom to say what. With these, speeches would translate to a secure nation where tranquillity reigns for sustainable development.

Recommendations

Death and life, they say are in the power of the tongue. Language is never neutral as it can be used to build or destroy relationships, families and even nations at large. From what has been discussed in the paper, the following have been proffered as solutions to insecurity challenges caused by incessant use of inflammatory and unguarded language: Nigerians in all spheres of human endeavour should be discouraged on the use of inciting or foul language that can lead to quarrel and rioting or can cause tension among or between ethnic nationalities. Users of language especially the elites and leaders should be conscious of the fact that there is a difference between having a language (langue) and being able to communicate effectively with language (parole). Sequel to this, they should know that different occasions demand different languages (context of situation).

Finally, language workshops should be made for teachers and public speakers to enable them acquire the correct rhetorical devices for different speeches.

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Charles Chukwuma Motanya and Musa Galadima Toro

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