

Language Use and Political Correctness for Peaceful Coexistence: Implications for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

All of language is a combination of sounds and words that translate into concretizing abstract meaning. This is interpreted and results into action which can be violent or non violent. Proper language use can serve as a non violent way of resolving differences. Problems arise when the linguistic constructs we use result into people thinking and acting in negative ways. This paper examines the concept of political correctness and how language should be used in order not to hurt, insult, reject, stereotype or show prejudice. It highlights political correctness in human relationships as it affects gender, race, sexual orientation, physical challenges, religion and culture. It acknowledges the importance of social interaction using language and points out the need to change wrong use of language through conscious effort. The paper draws from the position that language's grammatical categories shape speaker's ideas and actions. In discussing the concept of political correctness, the effect of political incorrect use of language is shown in some historical occurrences in Northern Nigeria. Recommendations given include the teaching items on the school curriculum in line with political correctness.

Keywords: Language, Political Correctness

1. Introduction

Peace is an essential ingredient for society to thrive and grow. Achieving peace however has preconditions. These include justice and mutual respect among members of the society. Mutual respect for others can be achieved through respect for other's opinions, beliefs, cultures, gender, race and values. This can be shown in the way people are addressed, spoken to or spoken of, the way they are described or even in the way people interact with one another using language. The language we use can affect our relationship with others and hamper peaceful coexistence. Peaceful coexistence invariably contributes to sustainable development and unless the relationship among people is that of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence is threatened.

Several factors combine to ensure that peaceful coexistence is achieved. While some of these factors are active, as they are directly responsible for peaceful coexistence or the absence of it; others are passive, as they indirectly lead to peaceful coexistence or otherwise. Language is identified as one of the factors that can foster peaceful coexistence (goygoy, 2011). It goes on to explain that language can start conflicts and end them. This is so because language is a medium through which humans communicate their thoughts and feelings. It concretizes thoughts that come from one person to another. Through language, humans can communicate feelings or thoughts of peace or conflict.

Language is a human activity which gives expression to thoughts. In using language, words are employed and words, Political Correctness (n.d) says, can create either opportunities or

boundaries because words have "power." On the power of words, Navigators (1979) say that a careless word may kindle strife, a cruel word may wreck a life, a bitter word may hate instill and a brutal word may smite and kill. Problems arise when the linguistic constructs we use result in negative reactions. The use of language such that it results in negative reactions detrimental to the growth of the society can be called political incorrect use of language (Political Correctness n.d). Since the wrong use of language can start conflicts, correct use can avert or end them.

Political correctness is a useful area of consideration when using English language particularly in second language situations. This is because both social and cultural contexts of language are taken into consideration. Zobotkina (1989) says political correctness is not only an essential, but an interesting area of study in English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. This is because it presents language as used in carrying out different speech acts which provoke reactions as it can persuade, incite, complain, condemn, and disapprove. Language is used for communication and creating social linkages, as such must be used communicatively. Using language communicatively involves the ability to use language at the grammatical level, sociolinguistic level, discourse and strategic levels (Canale & Swain 1980). Understanding language use at these levels center around the fact that differences exist among people, who must communicate with one another, and the differences could be religious, cultural, social, racial, gender or even ideological. Therefore, using language to suit the appropriate culture and context is of great significance.

Equally, language use is different from one society to another. Since differences exist, and people must interact, it is important that the medium of interaction which is language is used in such a way that friction or disaffection does not arise. According to Sapir-Whorf's hypothesis, language represents thought, and language can equally control thought. Several clashes have been reported as a result of the use of inflammatory utterances by some groups which were found provoking by others.

Political correctness has a prominent role to play in ensuring peaceful coexistence particularly in heterogeneous societies like Nigeria. There is a relationship between language and thought, as such, attitudinal or cultural change can be achieved through linguistic change. If we can change the kind of language we use, we can not only change the negative things we feel or say about others but also consequently change the desire to want to use language to hurt, incite, discriminate, reject or even insult them.

2. Language

Language is a human activity where sounds are connected to abstract conceptions in order to concretize them. Apart from sounds, symbols can also be used in the case of written language. Language helps humans to reach out and by so doing expand their frontiers. According to Dekonztrukctohon (2011), the nominative function of language gives us an awareness of an existence, identity or attribute of beings in our social world. The performative function of language allows us to distribute meanings to the language or words that we use to refer to something. In most cases however these meanings that we intend to share are not exactly received and interpreted by others as we expect them to. We understand things through language. We associate meanings to language through language. We add knowledge to the existing known things through language. We define and identify who we are and who others are to us through language. Simply, we create the world we live in and the realities in our lives through language.

Consequently, different social, cultural or religious groups carve their identity using language. They do so by giving themselves names or descriptions of how they should be seen or referred to. When society fails to recognize this, there is always an attempt to fight back or even unleash terror by members of such groups. Shedrack (2004) presents the function of language as the medium through which stimuli can be relayed from one individual to another so as to provoke a reaction. It can also serve as a non-violent medium of managing conflict in the form of negotiation,

collaboration, dialogue, mediation, conciliation, arbitration and adjudication.

3. Political correctness

Political correctness is a description of the practice of using speech that conforms to liberal opinion. This is achieved by avoiding language which might cause offence to any disadvantaged or minority group (Political Correctness n.d). It went on to explain that the expression "politically correct" came about in the 1970's and was intended to mean "inclusive." Inclusive here means the use of language that would not cause an individual of any demographic (social or cultural) group to feel excluded, offended, or diminished. Political correctness not only covers that, but equally includes the use of language to collaborate, negotiate, pacify and persuade. This then means that it is not enough to use language that will not hurt or diminish, but also use the language in such a way that one's choice of words should depend on the ideas passed on and the time and place of use because this can set the tone.

The theory behind political correctness, Bennett (1995) says is according to Murphy's Law. This law stems from Sapir Whorf's hypothesis that language represents thought, and may even control thought. Since this is the case, then the language that represents thoughts of violence may control the thought of violence. Murphy's Law explains that using language to hurt someone is a form of violence. This form of violence though passive, can still achieve the same effect as the active form of violence. The law admits that if we change the language we think in, the language we use will effect change in how we think. This will have a beneficial effect on the society as it will be a start towards removing disaffection and conflict from the society. Language and its effective use can bring about non-violent methods of conflict resolution (Shedrack 2004).

Forms of discrimination like; Racism, Sexism, Homophobia are all attitudinal projections and impositions by society in form of brain washing. All forms of discrimination or other attempts to exclude or hurt others came about through a gradual process of transfer of what we think to others. Political Correctness (n.d) is of the view that people are not born believing them, they are imbued with these values from the society in which they grow up. In other words, they are attitudinal projections which are further nourished by politically incorrect use of language. This attitudinal projection can change if conscious efforts are made to change them and this can begin with a friendly use of language. Monroe (2012) admits that the most potent change is brought about not through violence but through gradual, careful and peaceful persuasion and re-shaping using the correct form of language.

Unlike as suggested by its name Political Correctness has nothing to do with politics. It may have indirectly, but not directly. Even though politicians most especially, are expected to be at the forefront of politically correct use of language, the term Political Correctness is a term that refers to the use of language in such a way that human relationship is nurtured. This term has nothing to do masking the truth but telling it not with the language meant to hurt or spite. Dekonztruktcohon (2011) says that political correctness is not a term reserved for politics or the political class, but an expected social behavior where people who understand the subtleties, complexities and implication of language use can expect to be always in social accord with anyone or any group. Equally, it is not about censoring as people are free to use any kind of language that they want to, but one thing to consider, which is most important is the kind of language to use. Political Correctness (n.d) comments that the political correctness movement operates well within the open marketplace of ideas because enlightened and tolerant people turn down language that is not inclusive or can hurt another person because of its detrimental effects.

4. Issues

Some critics of political correctness see the idea of political correctness as diminishing the creative use of language and affecting grammaticality. For example, Tsehelska (2006) explains that instead

of saying;

Every student has to pass his examination.

The politically correct form is;

Every student has to pass their exams.

This responses to gender sensitivity but violates the traditional rules of grammar that emphasizes subject-verb agreement. This is true but language is not static. It evolves and where language needs to change in order to conform to human needs, such changes should be welcomed. Besides, language rules a human creation consequently, new rules can be made. (Tsehelska 2006) is of the view that though the above construction is in conflict with the rules of grammar, it conforms to new rules of gender neutrality and that is what should matter. Political Correctness (n.d) confirms the criticism of the politically correct movement as it says that:

Critics argue that political correctness is censorship and endangers free speech by limiting what is considered acceptable public discourse. Other critics say that politically correct terms are awkward euphemisms for truer, original, stark language, comparing them to George Orwell's Newspeak. Some critics of political correctness claim that it marginalizes certain words, phrases, actions or attitudes through the instrumentation of public disesteem.

Whatever critics of political correctness may think, societies are beginning to see the need for avoidance of tension through the kind of language being used. This can be seen in some countries where hate speech legislations are springing up with the intension of curbing incitement, racial or religious hatred. An example is the Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights which grants freedom of expression to all on condition that conformity to restriction on offending others is adhered to (The Middle East Forum 2012). The forum explains that most of these legislations are intended to guard against the kind of Xenophobic and anti-Semitic propaganda that was in the past responsible for the holocaust. Others include the Denmark Article 266 (b) and the France Press Law of 1888 which criminalizes incitement, expressing and spreading racial hatred; the use of threatening, vilifying or insulting language and spreading hatred or violence on the basis of one's origin or membership (or non membership) of an ethnic, national, racial or religious group.

It is important that language users recognize that there is the need to identify the kinds of language that can be directly or indirectly offensive and not only avoid them, but discourage their use. Language should be used in precise, effective, and non-offensive ways. Political correctness does not advocate that people should change what they want to say and all turn out talking nicely. It is advocating that people change how to say what they want to say. Language is not meant to be used to hurt, malign or project people in bad light, or stereotype them based on their presumed differences. Language is meant for interaction because man cannot exist in isolation. Human differences need to be constructed through language for other humans to see these realities and build social relationships. Social relationships in turn build other kinds of relationships that translate into sustainable development.

5. Danger of Political Incorrectness to Peaceful Co-Existence

When our linguistic constructs influence our way of thinking negatively, peaceful coexistence is threatened and social stability is jeopardized. The king of language used that are most likely to create feelings of disaffection are; the use of emphatic forms where a subtle form is expected or the use of a subtle form where an emphatic form is most preferred, the use of offensive words, the use of blatant expressions or words, the use of stereotypes or even hyperbolic forms of expressions. The negative influences that emanate from language use can be called politically incorrect use of language.

Political incorrectness is often reflected in sexist language, pejorative language and taboo language (Zabotkina 1989). Sexist Language Zabotkina goes on to say, is a term referring to the use of male-dominated phrases which suggests that members of one gender are less able, less intelligent and less skillful. Pejorative language is the use of words or phrases disapproving or suggesting that something is not good or is of no importance. This is often done in the labeling of nationalities, aged people or some class of people. Taboo language has to do with words or phrases which are likely to offend somebody. Dekonztruktschon (2011) says, "We fail to understand people and so we subject them to remain powerless when we use pejorative terms that inflicts on their identity". Black people for instance do not like to be called Negroes by people of other colors. This is because the term carries with it a historical stigma of the slavery and abuse of their rights as human beings. They may be calling each other nigger or niggah, but that is performing an exclusive function of language that works for them to identify with each other (Dekonztruktschon 2011).

An example of political incorrectness can be seen in how Adolf Hitler sought to appeal to the sentiments of Germans using politically incorrect usage as a result of which he created hate in Germans for other races other than the Aryan race. Cousin (1986) reports that Hitler's book "Mein Kampf" was reported to be the most effective book in the destruction of humankind. He explains that for every word in the book, 125 lives were lost; for every page, 4,700 lives and for every chapter, 1,220,000 lives. Similarly, the Rwandan conflict of ethnic cleansing was further fuelled through the use of hate inciting utterances and the use of derogatory words to describe a particular group who were referred to as "nyenzi" or cockroaches.

Yilbyen et al (2012) presents a similar scenario in Nigeria where some religious adherents see their religion as superior to others and thus refer to others as "infidels", "kafiri" or "arne" and such other names (arne or kafir is Arabic word for heathens or unbelievers). These names are used derogatorily and with much venomous hate. They admit that this is enough to spark off a row or more serious conflict. Conflicts were recorded in Northern Nigeria as a result of insensitive use of language. In Kaduna for instance violence broke out on the 16th November 2002 following an article credited to one Daniel Isioma which was published in "This Day" Newspaper, where the writer carelessly made a remark about the Prophet Mohammed and the beauty queens of the Miss World Beauty Pageant that was to be hosted in the Country that year (Terwase n.d). In this crisis, He reported that over 250 people were killed and churches destroyed. In the same vein, crisis erupted on 18th February 2006 in Borno because of a cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed in Iylands-posten Newspaper (Terwase n.d). Here over 50 people were killed and 30 churches burnt. In Kafanchan, the March 1987 Violence erupted because a Christian preacher was alleged to have delegitimized Islam in his preaching. According to Terwase, other writers recognize disparaging literature or publications by both Christians and Muslim elites as the major cause of violence in the country.

Some words and phrases that have found their way into the English lexicon are as a result of attempts to describe or refer to certain groups of people with contempt. These include among others, words like; *black* which connotes something evil, sinister, and bad as used for the people from Africa or of African descent. This has however been replaced by African or African American. So also the word *Oriental* or *Asiatic* which is now Asian or Pacific Islander, *Bush Indians* are now referred to as Native Americans. Terms like *old*, *aged* and *geriatric* are now replaced by words like older person, senior citizens or seniors. Others include words like *blind* which is now being referred to as visual challenge and *deaf*, with hearing impairment. The terms *challenged*, *differently abled* and *special* were coined to describe people with clinical diagnoses or mental disabilities (Zabotkina 1989).

Other words which are derogatory or offensive but which are being used to describe some people of group include; *Faggot* used for those with a different sexual orientation from the conventional and who prefer to be referred to as gay; *Whore Bitch*, or *Prostitute*, used for commercial sex workers or sometimes in the Nigerian context, it is used for ladies who are not

married and are financially independent; *Bastard*, used for children born outside wedlock, or just simply to annoy someone; *Osu*, as used in Igboland as a form of discrimination based on descent (Dike 2002); *Terrorists*, now commonly used for muslims or people wearing long beard; *Chink*, used derogatorily to refer to a Chinese; *Monkey*, used in referring to blacks particularly in places dominated by whites; *Freak*, *Psycho* and *Weirdo*, used in referring to people who are considered to behave differently; *Wimp* is used in referring to someone who is considered a coward; *Geek*, used to describe people who are skillful on computers; *Nerd* or *Bookworm*, used to refer to people who are always studying. In the Nigerian society, some of these politically incorrect forms are not necessarily English words but they are language in use all the same. They include words like; *Arne* or *arna*, *Kafuri* or *kafurai*, *Ashewo*, *Ajekpako*, *Holy Holy* and *Malo*. Of recent, words like *indigenes*, *settlers* and *none indigenes* are beginning to attract not so friendly reactions particularly in Plateau State.

In compliance with politically correct usage, language users now strongly advocate the use of gender neutral forms of expression or gender specific forms (Tsehelska 2006). As a result, words containing masculine segments such as *mankind* and *man-made*, were made all gender inclusive by using synonyms such as *humankind* and *artificial*. Today even the names of some occupations are consciously being reviewed in response to political correctness. This can be seen in the following examples: *flight attendant* because the terms *steward* and *stewardess* are no longer used, *sales person*, instead of *salesman* or *saleswoman* which have been outlawed, *police officer*, instead of *policeman* and *chairperson* or *chair* instead of *chairman* (Tsehelska 2006).

6. Conclusion

There is possibility of changing attitude particularly negative attitude, through changing the language or forms of expressions we use. Word choices have significant impinging effects on the perceptions and attitudes of both speakers and listeners. The language we use affects the messages we communicate as they can be reacted to negatively by our listeners or readers. All that political correctness does is change how you things should be said and not what should be said. In exercising freedom of speech, a speaker or writer should equally bear in mind that the listeners equally have freedom to react. Political correctness ensures the freedom of both the addressed and the addressee without any form of exclusion, hate or cruelty. It is a way of giving a sense of belonging to people who have been the victims of real or perceived oppression and other group of people that language is biased against. This way, peaceful coexistence as far as language choice is concerned, is ensured.

7. Recommendations

- A speaker or writer should use language that embraces all categories of listeners or readers so as not to deliberately offend anyone or group of people. In the 21st century where the world, though becoming a global village, is equally becoming more complex, language use that it considered "politically correct" does not mean that the truth should not be told; neither does it mean that you should not offend anyone. What it simply means (Herrick 2012) says is that, no one will be able to accuse you of having said anything wrong.
- Accurate descriptions should always be given and where exclusionary titles are given, they should be used only when addressing known holders of such titles. For example, it is gender insensitivity to use *Chairman* except if the person chairing is known to be male.
- Avoid using religious terms when speaking in a group made up of people from different religions. Expressions like *In Jesus' name*, *God Bless*, *Insha Allah* and so on should be left only for gatherings made up of people of the same faith.
- Be sensitive in your language choice such that ambiguities are avoided as much as

possible. Some expressions have offensive slurs among ethnic, gender, social or even religious groups; get to know your audience.

- Avoid being verbose by saying something only when you must, and when you have something constructive to say, as some things are better left unsaid.
- Avoid being saucy and pedantic and use words that groups and individuals have selected to describe themselves in describing them as well. This is particularly so with people with various disabilities.
- Language users should always learn about people's language conventions wherever they find themselves. Sometimes, it is wise to seek for assistance on appropriate terms, forms of expression and bias in language.
- Political correctness can and should be infused in some school subjects including English language lessons.

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