

**LANGUAGE USE IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION BETWEEN HODs AND STAFF IN
NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES: A STUDY OF NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY, AWKA**

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Abstract

This research, the language use in conflict resolution between the Head of Department and the staff in Nigerian universities was carried out to access the implication of language use during conflict resolution in a Federal University in Nigeria. The study is anchored on three research questions. Previous literatures or studies in this area were reviewed and some gaps were discovered thus necessitating a study in this direction to close the gap. The researcher applied descriptive survey as the research design for this study. The population consists of three Departments in the Nigerian University under study. Stratified random sampling technique was applied by the researcher to select data for the study. Thirty-one items researcher-questioners were developed, validated, trail-tested and used to draw the data from the respondents. The instrument was administered by the researcher and data obtained were presented and analyzed using frequency and simple percentage to answer the study questions. The researcher discovered that HODs in the study Departments do not show consideration for the feelings of their counterparts in discourse, although they discuss calmly with their staff, greater number of respondents prefer to apply strategies for avoiding conflict rather than for minimizing conflict after it has ensued. The researcher therefore recommends that in addition to discussing calmly with their staff, HODs in the study Departments must begin to show consideration for the feelings of their staff in interaction.

Key Words: Politeness, rapport management, language use, Head of Department, conflict resolution.

Introduction

In social life, conflicts are common features. In fact, no human society is without conflict. According to Kilonzo and Irita (2019, p.5) observation, “conflicts occur in all kinds of human relationships and in all social settings”. Conflict is a process where people’s interests and activities confront, block and disable the realization of one party’s objectives. They further added that the potential differences among people are wide and so any meaningful interaction can signal conflicts. Furthermore, conflict in tertiary institutions is multifaceted - HOD versus HOD, HOD versus Staff, staff versus staff, staff versus students. Preferential treatment and ineffective communication even where there are no basic incompatibilities among others, are some of the causes of conflicts in tertiary institutions/ universities.

Education according to world view as the bedrock of Development in every area and or stage still stands unchallenged. Attaining or maintaining a high standard of education is the desire of various countries of the world. Nigeria’s case however, is a different ball game which has been an age -long cry about the fallen standard of education. The aggregate of the causes of this troublesome standard has been tackled from different perspectives viz: government agents, learners’ perspectives, teachers’ factor and program angle.

The Head of Department is the person in authority within his/her Department and he/she is administratively responsible for its entire working. He/she is the one who is required to anticipate problems which may arise for the Department as such and for its individual members of staff. He /she must be aware of and be ready to respond / react to change in the environment of his/her Department. The head is required to formulate particular policies- however much of these policies may subsequently be the subject of discussion among staff or subject to a democratic process of decision

making. At the very least, it can be said that the head of department has a duty to lead. He/she is accountable to the University Senate/Council and the eyes of the Vice Chancellor in the Department.

Statement of the Problem

Many conflicts could be avoided if caution is placed in language use in discourse. In managing conflict for example, politeness should stand as the watch word. Language is used to maintain, construct and threaten social relation. In full, language must be explored to promote harmony and smoothness of relations free from confrontation among staff. The study feels the absence of skills during interaction and in resolving conflicts results in tension and misunderstanding, therefore a good deal of importance should be attached to pragmatics use of language in interaction.

Conflict in tertiary institution setting like any other setting is a reality. The world view education as the bedrock of development in every clime, it remains unchangeable. To this effect, maintaining a high standard of development, every organ of education must work together in harmony.

Conflict and its resolution in school setting have been a major concern of scholars for some years now but little or no attention had been given to the language use as the centre of conflict or a means to resolve conflicts. Studies on politeness in communication among staff have been neglected in the world of academics. Hence, the need to fill this gap in scholarship. Therefore, this study investigates the place of language use in the causes and resolution of conflicts between HOD and staff in Nigerian Universities.

Purpose of the Study

Every research aims at filling a research gap; consequent upon which this study aims at:

- Identifying the cause of conflict among HODs and Staff in the tertiary institutions in Nigeria with regard to language use.
- Analyse the positive and negative effects of language use in conflict resolution between HODs and Staff in the Nigerian Universities
- Suggest possible ways of avoiding conflicts among HODs and Staff, with the use of language.
- Gather data that can help future researchers, especially those who may wish to research on a related topic.

Scope of the Study

the study is restricted to the investigation on language use in conflict resolution between the HOD and Staff in the Nigerian Universities with focus on Nnamdi Azikiwe University as a case study. The limitation of the investigation on only one Nigerian University is because the study does not require large data for its investigation.

Furthermore, the selection was guided by the representativeness and accessibility of the Nigerian University under investigation.

Research Questions

As a pointer for this study, the researcher anchored on the following questions:

1. What is the effect of language use on conflicts between HOD and staff?
2. What is the effect of language use in conflict resolution between HOD and HOD?
3. What pragmatic and rapport management strategies can be applied to resolve conflicts among staff and staff?

Conceptual Framework

Conflict Resolution

The concept, conflict has received several definitions from different scholars. This study will pay particular attention to that of Oboegbulem and Alfa (2013) that define conflict as “a struggle over values or claims to status, power and scarce resources in which the aim of the conflicting parties are not only to gain the desired value but also to neutralize, injure or eliminate the rival” (p.91). Furthermore, Shahmohammadi (2014 p.630) define it “as a form of friction, disagreement or discord arising within individuals and or a group when the belief or actions of one or more members of the group are either resisted by or unacceptable to one or more members of another group”. Again, Tschamon-Moran (2011 p.3) added that “conflict pertains to the opposing ideas and action of different entities resulting in an antagonistic state”.

Causes of conflict were identified by Shahmommadi as specialization, common resource, goal differences, interdependence, authority relationships, status differences, jurisdictional ambiguities, roles and expectations. Rahim (2001) gave diversity as a source of conflict. Again, he explained that increasing heterogenous factors as differences in age, cultural background, ethnics and values greatly generate conflicts among employees in workplaces.

More so, Oboegbulem and Alfa is of the opinion that effective administration of tertiary/school system depends largely on a cordial and cooperate working relationship among HOD and staff, staff and staff or students. This is a different task however, Kilonzo and Ivita (2019 p.1) posit that “conflict is an integral part of human organisations”. Therefore, efforts must be made to manage or resolve it and to

promote development and progress. Accordingly, Shahmohammadi observes conflict handling strategies such as avoiding, collaborating, compromising, accommodating and mediation which can all be applied through proper application of language.

Language

“Language is the key to the heart of a people” says Sapair (1963 p.65). Therefore, language is conceived as a purely human and non-intuitive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols. This functional knowledge of language symbols that human being experience has achieved in the way of dealing with situation can be communicated through language.

Language is crucial in life. It has dual functions, that is, “management of social relations and transfer of information” as Spencer-Oatey (2008 p.47) observes. The dynamic nature of language use is such that can lead to conflicts together with its resolution. Invariably, this dynamic nature of language use gives importance to an area of pragmatics that has come to be recognized as politeness. Politeness is a strategy in pragmatics used to minimize tension, trivialize issues for mutual understanding and to promote peaceful co-existence.

Furthermore, Kitembe (2018) is of the opinion that language is used to resolve or escalate disputes. According to him, conflict resolution relies seriously on word choices because the word used by people in discourse escalate harmonious living or otherwise, (p.102). Lakoff (1973 p.292) also opines that “language uses us as much as we use language”. This is because, as much as our choice of forms of

expression is guided by the thoughts we want to express, to the same extent, the way we feel about the things in the real world governs the way we express ourselves about these things.

However, language use can cause or reduce conflicts. Therefore, language users must carefully choose their words in order to have harmonious social relations instead of disrupting peace in the centre of man's existence and survival as a social being. People can hardly co-habit in isolation of language due to its communicative function. Communication undoubtedly is paramount for harmonious living and face saving. Because of this, people should not strive to attain linguistic competence rather a set also learn pragmatic competence which is the knowledge of correct or proper use or application of strategies in an appropriate context.

Rapport Management

Rapport management is a politeness framework proposed by Spencer-Oatey, in (2000) and revised in (2008). It is a theory that explored in the study of understanding school of conflict resolution strategies. Spencer-Oatey identified such rapport strategies as "change of topic, apologizing, accepting turns in discourse, using address terms and honorifics". "Managing gestures, eye contact and other body languages". Rapport management is one of the theories that arose as a result of the short coming of earlier theories of politeness. One of the weaknesses in the earlier politeness theories it stands to remedy is that theories is individual-based rather than relationship and society-based. It considers social and contextual factors as well as cognitive notions. According to Spencer-Oatey "rapport management has three major motivational bases thus: face sensitivities, social rights and obligations and interactional goals".

Furthermore, Spencer-Oatey proposed a set of strategies applied to manage rapport. These rapport management strategies operate in diverse domains that are illocutionary domain; discourse domain; participant domain; stylistic domain and non-verbal domain. More so, she proposed a set of factors that might affect the choice of rapport management strategies. They are: orientation, contextual variables, participant and their relationships, message context, social or interactional roles, acting type and overall assessment of context that may change in the cause of interaction.

Language use and Conflict

The power of language in conflict is so influencing that it even controls the action of the user. Language has the power to entertain, insult, teach, satirize, reconstruct and even to destroy. A listener or reader held to complete attentiveness when appropriate language is in application. A reader smiles when he/she reads something that interests his /her person. The same reader may begin to cry when an account reveals of genocides and the members that perished are much.

Language has a strong role in conflict management from the perspective that it has the history of man as being a tool to igniting and escalating a conflict on the one hand and pacifying or checking the destructiveness of conflict on the other hand. In fact, language could be bad or good pending on the usage. It is a powerful indicator of any conflict-language, when a dominant language displaces other tongues, then the subordinate groups change.

Aniga, (2011 p.3) further explains that “language entails: language and conflict are synonymous for the very reason that language is an integral part of culture and a vehicle of interaction, inter-communication and a practical tool for state administration both in modern and ancient times”. Therefore, adopting a particular language by a particular speech community declares what identity it wants to show of itself and to the world. In the light of the above assertion, there is no gain saying that

language being a vehicle of symbolic value becomes a source of conflict because two persons/groups during interaction usually disagree or clash. Depending on the usage, language is good or bad, its application can promote conflict or otherwise. When it is applied properly, conflict is averted, but when it is otherwise applied, conflict is ignited. Also, culture plays or determines whether or not language is appropriate. The language one uses in resolving conflicts matters a lot- mild/polite language facilitate speedy resolution while impolite language escalates conflicts.

Conflict and Conflict Resolution

Conflict according to Oboegbulem and Alfa, (2013 p.91) “is a struggle over values or claims to status, power and scarce resources in which the aim of the conflicting parties is not only to gain the desired value but to also neutralize, injure or eliminate the rival”. Shahmohammadi, (2014, p.630) further defines conflict as a form of friction, disagreement or discord arising within individuals or a group when the belief or actions of one or more members of the group are resisted or unacceptable to one or more members of another group. Tschannen-Moran (2001) added that “it is pertinent to the opposing ideas and actions of different entities-resulting in an antagonistic state” (p.3).

Empirical Study

Many researches have been carried out in conflict resolution and conflict studies. Chen (2017) did a study that investigated conflict between teachers and students in EFL classrooms- English as a foreign language classroom. Where he used classroom observation, teacher interview and students’ open-ended questionnaires and discovered that teachers use more threatening behavior than students and the causes are students’ unfavourable behavior and teacher’s familiarity toward students among others.

Shahmohammadi did study on conflict management among secondary school students to explore the history of mediation to explain essential elements of adult and peer mediation programs. He concluded that teaching of conflict management and resolution skill to students may provide them with necessary tools to solve their own conflict productively and practically.

Ugwu and Agbjole (2022) studied on impacts of language use in conflict and conflict resolution among senior and junior secondary school principals and concluded that principals apply strategies for avoiding conflict than those meant to minimize a conflict.

Anyabuike (2019) did study on the role of language in conflict resolution in Nigeria as well as implication for translation and concludes that language may not be the leading cause of conflict but certainly a major instrument for the resolution of every conflict.

In (2009) Adejimola did study on language and communication in conflict resolution and concludes that language and communication can be used to trace the causes and management or resolution of the prevalent violent conflicts in the society.

Kisembe (2018) did research on language, culture and conflict resolution and explored the Kiswahili language in intercultural conflict resolution. He targeted to show that a common language is one of the most important features of a diverse community. He concluded that use of language should be considered in national and transnational conflict resolution. Although all these studies are on conflict resolutions but they differ from the present study that focuses on language use in conflict resolution between Head of Department and staff in Nigerian Universities.

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Osumen, Anya and Bateye (2022) did study on the impact of language in conflict management and peace building and conclude that language should not be taken for granted as doing so mars a conflict management outcome as foul language leads to violence.

Methodology

The researcher made use of descriptive survey research method. Abdullahi (1995) views survey research as a systematic collection of data or information from a population or sample of a population through personal interviews and or questionnaire. This design is considered apt because this study collected data from the sample with the help of a questionnaire developed by the researcher through which an entire population under study were described.

The population consists of three Departments in the Nigerian University under study. Stratified random sampling technique was applied by the researcher to select data for the study. Thirty-one items

researcher-questioners were developed, validated, trail-tested and used to draw the data from the respondents. The instrument was administered by the researcher and data obtained were presented and analyzed using frequency and simple percentage to answer the study questions.

Data collected were analysed using frequency count and simple percentage. The AGREE and STRONGLY AGREE options as well as DISAGREE and STRONGLY DISAGREE options.

Results

The researcher presented and analysed data guided by the research questions for this study. The questionnaire items are gathered according to each research question and analysis done at once.

Research question 1:

What is the effect of language use in conflict between HOD and staff?

Statement	A/SA	%	D/SD	%	Decision
1. Antagonism from HOD makes you angry	392	79	104	21	Accept
2. Insult from staff makes you want to retaliate	472	95	24	5	Accept
3. When you shout at your staff, he/she shouts back	480	97	16	3	Accept
4. Referring to your fellow staff with address terms creates conflict.	29	6	467	94	Reject
5. Harmony is achieved when you talk politely To your staff.	366	74	130	26	Accept

6. Turn taking in speech promotes peaceful					
Interaction.	275	55	221	45	Accept
7. Refusing to allow others speak in discourse					
Creates conflicts.	281	57	215	43	Accept
8. Refusing to apologise when faulty brings peace	6	1	490	99	Reject
9. Apologising when faulty creates good					
rapport/relationship.	492	99	4	1	Accept

Analysis

Table 1 above presented data that sought to uncover HOD's view about the place of language use in conflict between their staff in the Nigerian Universities under study. Data revealed that majority of the items were accepted. Out of 9 items only 2 items were rejected while other items were accepted. Hence, the HODs agree that antagonism from them makes staff angry (79%) ; insults from their staff makes them want to retaliate (95%); when they shout at their staff, they shout back (97%); harmony is achieved when talked politely to staff (74%); taking turns in interaction promotes peaceful discourse (55%); refusing to allow others talk/take turn creates conflict (57%); apologising when faulty, creates good relationship (99%); refusing to apologise when faulty creates good rapport /relationships (99%).

Research question 2:

What is the effect of language use in conflict resolution between HOD and HOD?

Table 2:

Statement	A/SA	%	D/SD	%	Decision
1. You interact amicably with your fellow HOD.	404	81	92	19	Accept
2. You interact calmly with your fellow HOD.	384	77	112	23	Accept
3. Your fellow HOD is often rude to you.	326	68	160	32	Accept
4. You are polite when you interact with your fellow HOD.	202	41	214	59	Reject
5. You impose your view on your fellow HOD	96	19	400	81	Reject
6. You give your fellow HOD options when you talk to them.	158	32	338	68	Reject
7. You make your fellow HOD feel good when talking to them.	171	34	325	66	Reject
8. You're friendly when talking to your fellow HOD	272	55	224	45	Accept
9. Your fellow HOD makes you feel good when you talk.	182	37	314	63	Reject
10. You apologise when you are wrong to your fellow HOD.	281	57	115	43	Accept
11. Do you allow your fellow HOD to take turn while interacting	320	65	176	35	Accept
12. You apply polite address term to refer to your					

fellow HOD. 277 56 219 44 Accept

In table 2 above, data presented expresses the awareness of HODs on the effect of language use in conflict resolution among them. Data available reveal that majority of the items (7 of 12) are accepted while only (5 of 12) are rejected. Items 1,2 3,8,10,11,12 were all accepted. Hence, the HODs accept that they converse amicably with their colleagues (81%); talk calmly with each other (77%); their colleagues are rude often (68%). On the other hand, items 4, 5, 6, 7, 9 were all rejected.

Research question 3:

What rapport management and pragmatic strategies can be applied to resolve conflict among staff-staff?

Statement	A/SA		%		D/SD		
Decision							
1. Apologizing when wrong	204	41	292	59			Reject
2. Changing to more acceptable topic	212	43	284	57			Reject
3. Avoid imposition of opinion on others	273	55	223	45			Accept
4. Giving others option when talking	255	52	240	48			Accept
5. Make others feel good	321	65	175	35			Accept
6. Accepting turns during interaction	268	54	228	46			Accept
7. Applying polite address term when referring to others.	299	60	197	40			Accept

In table 3 above, data presented which elicited information on strategies employed by HODs in some Nigerian Universities to redress conflict. The statements proffered were as a result of strategies to adopt in order to avert conflict together with strategies to apply to reduce or minimize conflict. A large number of respondents accepted the strategies meant to avoid conflict and rejected those meant to minimize conflict. The HODs accepted that they avoid imposing their opinions on others (55%). Conversely, the HODs said that they neither apologise when they are at fault nor change to a more acceptable topic when the topic is generating conflict.

Discussions:

Research question 1 sought to find out the effect of language in conflict between HOD and staff, the findings indicate that the HODs understand the effect of proper application in interaction, the respondents are aware that apology when offended, help to minimize conflict in discourse.

The second research question sought to investigate on HODs' awareness on the effect of language use in conflict resolution among them. From the data the HODs are aware that in order to maintain peace in their workplace, there is need to have amicable conversation with each other which will make each other feel good during discourse.

Research question 3 verified information on strategies employed/applied to restore/resolve conflict among staff. From the data presented, it is discovered that in line with the politeness model, Kismet (2018) supports a withdrawal of imposition to interlocutors, which agree with Lakoff's (1973) aversion that conflicts can be avoided in discourse with discussant 'Don't impose' , 'Give option' and 'make

‘A’ feel good’, these strategies are more avoidance-based and will not help a conflict situation that has ensued already.

Conclusion

Effective language use is important in conflict resolution between Heads of Department and Staff in Nigerian Universities. By employing respectful, inclusive and empathetic language, HODs and staff can foster a culture of understanding, build trust and resolve conflicts in a constructive manner. This leads to improved communication, collaboration and a more harmonious and friendly work environment. Furthermore, language sensitivity training and cultural awareness programs can enhance the conflict resolution process, promoting a more peaceful and productive academic community. Ultimately, the strategic use of language can transform conflicts into opportunity for learning and strengthened relationships between HODs and staff in Nigerian Universities.

The researcher recommends that strategies for conflict avoidance are of paramount importance than those meant for minimizing conflict after it has ensued. Therefore, HODs must apply strategies for both avoidance and minimizing of conflict in Nigerian universities. The researcher further recommends to provide regular training for HODs and staff on language sensitivity, cultural awareness and conflict resolution techniques.

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