

# Language as a Change Agent and a Tool for Tackling Insecurity in Nigeria

Juliana Njoku

## Abstract

The level of insecurity in Nigeria has risen to an unprecedented height in recent times. The spate of killings in different parts of the country, banditry attacks on lives and properties, herdsmen and farmers' clashes, high rate of kidnapping, Boko-Haram insurgency and more recently, unknown gun men (UGM) attacks; are all indices of insecurity in Nigeria. People live in fear and uncertainty as no one knows who the next victim will be. The Nigeria society has become so chaotic that something urgent needs to be done to allay people's fear and calm the situation. This paper looks at how language can be used as a change agent to bring about restoration and peace in Nigeria. Language is a vital means of human communication. Through its ideologies, identities, feelings are shared. It is the pivot around which every human activity revolves. Language has the capacity to spark off conflict and chaos; it also has the capacity to calm or douse a raging storm depending on how it is used. This paper advocates appropriate language use by all people in all quarters. Excerpts of speeches from political office holders that are considered inciting are cited and analyzed in this paper. People have to be conscious of linguistic choices they make and ensure that they are used in appropriate contexts to avoid violent reactions that can lead to insecurity in the country. Communicative Competence and Communication Accommodation theories form the theoretical stand point for this paper. The paper reiterates that proper use of language will usher in the needed change: the restoration of peace and security in Nigeria.

Keywords: language, communication, change agent, insecurity.

## Introduction

Insecurity is a state of being open to danger and attack. It is a situation where members of a given society lack protection of their lives and properties. Insecurity in Nigeria has risen to unprecedented heights in recent times. People live in fear and uncertainty, not sure of what will happen next. Gun shots occur without warning in different parts of the country and people scamper for safety. Unfortunate ones get hit and die for no reason. Human life is no longer sacrosanct in Nigeria as people are killed indiscriminately on a daily basis.

Causes of insecurity abound in every part of Nigeria. It started in the South-South with kidnapping of people including expatriates and vandalization of oil pipe lines as the people agitated for the emancipation of the Niger-Delta region. It shifted to the North East (Borno State) in the garb form of Boko Haram insurgency, which engaged in suicide bombings, abduction of school children, razing of whole communities, killing and burning of houses and properties. As a

result, many people became internally displaced as they fled their home for fear of being attacked. Parts of the North central region suffered frequent herdsmen and farmers clashes with loss of lives and destruction of livelihoods. Kaduna State and Zamfara in the North West; also witnessed armed banditry that sometimes disguises as herdsmen on the rampage, attacking and terrorizing innocent people, as well as abducting students and their teachers.

South-West and South-East regions are not spared. Lagos State witnessed the ENDSARS protest by angry youths, which hoodlums hijacked and turned into Mayhem. Highways in these regions have become unsafe for travellers as kidnapping on them has increased. In Nigeria today, kidnapping has become a very lucrative business. Added to this is the recent unknown gunmen (UGM) attack in the South East, especially in Imo and Anambra. In fact, no part of the country is safe and the situation is not healthy as it negatively affects the nation's economy. If something urgent is not done, the Nigerian nation will degenerate into a state of anarchy. Based on this backdrop, the paper looks at causes of insecurity in Nigeria and how language can be used as a major tool to tackle issues of insecurity in Nigeria.

Excerpts of speeches of political office holders that are considered as threats or inciting are analysed in this paper. Efforts are made to demonstrate how proper use of language can douse emotions and promote peace and security in Nigeria. The paper is hinged on the theories of Communicative Competence by Dell Hymes and Communication Accommodation by Gilles Howard.

### **Insecurity as a Concept**

Onifade (2013) cited in Zubairu (2020), sees security as a situation that emerges from the establishment of ways of protecting individuals, information, and properties from hostile people, influences, and behaviour. Security has to do with a situation in which people can travel around within a given natural space, without threats to their lives or properties. On the other hand, insecurity is the opposite of security. Achumba (2013) posits that insecurity is lack of safety or the existence of danger, hazard and uncertainty. It is not being adequately guarded or protected. Zubairu (2020) citing Adebamjoko & Ugwuoke (2014) opines that insecurity is the state of being subject in every respect to terror, threat, risk, molestation, bullying, harassment etc. Without security, it will be difficult for individuals within a state to participate in productive activities.

### **The Concept of Change Agent**

Change means to alter, to modify, to reconstruct, to transform, to recast and so on. Change is the solution introduced to solve a problem. According to Barseghyam (2015), change is a transition from one accepted theory to another, or from one employed method to another. IGI Global also defines change as a general transition of something or phase to another state or condition.

A change agent therefore is someone who promotes and enables change to happen within any group or organization. In business, a change agent is an individual who promotes and supports a new way of doing something within the company, whether it is the use of a new process, the adoption of a new management structure or the transformation of an old business model to a new one. Lanenburg (2010) sees a change agent as the individual or group that undertakes the task of initiating and managing change in an organization. In fact, anyone who has the skill and power to stimulate, facilitate and co-ordinate change efforts is referred to as a change agent.

In this paper, we borrow the concept of a change agent and confer it on language which has the power to bring about a desired change in a society depending on how it is used, who uses it, when and where it is used. Most conflicts that degenerate into violence and insecurity are caused by improper use of language (for example, threats and statements that are inciting). In the same way, language can be used as a change agent to douse emotions and bring about peace and security.

### **Language as a Concept**

Language is the principal method of human communication. It consists of words used in a structured and conventional way and conveyed by speech, writing or gesture. Bhasin (2020) defines language as “a formal system that includes sounds, signs, symbols, and gestures that are used as an important means of communicating thoughts, ideas, and emotions from one individual to another (p. 1). Language is a medium, used to offer shape to our thoughts and ideas, it is used to forge interpersonal relationships both in personal and professional front.

Effective and appropriate use of language matters a great deal in this our Global World. This is important, so that people will not misconstrue or misunderstand what we are trying to convey. Hence, Bhasim (2020) admonishes that we should make sure that the language we use is appropriate for the specific audience it is intended for, to enable them grasp the intended meaning.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is hinged on the theories of Communicative Competence and Communication Accommodation. Communicative competence was developed by Dell Hymes in 1966, as a reaction to Noam Chomsky’s (1965) linguistic competence which focused on correctness in grammar; that is knowing and adhering to the rules of grammar. According to Dell Hymes, having an accurate knowledge of the grammar rules of a language is not enough to make the learner competent in the use of that language for communication. The learner also needs communicative competence which entails knowing what to say, to whom, in what circumstances and how to say it. In other words, communicative competence refers to the language user’s grammatical knowledge of his language, as well as his social knowledge about how and when to use this language to accomplish specific communication goals.

Scholars who followed after Dell Hymes such as Brumfit and Johnson (1979), Canale and Swain (1980) and Van Ek (1986) expanded on the idea. For instance, Canale and Swain proposed 4 components of communicative competence namely: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competencies. The grammatical component of communicative competence equates to Chomsky's Linguistic competence. This refers to the knowledge of the language code: grammatical rules, vocabulary pronunciation, spelling and so on. The sociolinguistic component refers to the knowledge of socio-cultural code of language use; which entails what to speak, when to speak, how to speak and to whom. Discourse competence refers to the ability to combine language structures into different types of cohesive and coherent texts. While strategic competence refers to the knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that can be called into action to forestall breakdown in communication.

For effective communication, a language user must possess and call into action these components of communicative competence as situation and context demands; most especially the socio-linguistic component which affects this paper directly. Not complying with the socio-cultural code of a language in communication may cause disaffection, misinterpretation, antagonism, violent reactions and social upheavals. Many political office holders have breached the rules of communicative competence and have therefore prepared the ground for insecurity in this country.

Another theory relevant to this paper is the Communication Accommodation theory developed by Howard Giles in 1971. It is a theory of communication that concerns the behavioural changes that people make to attune their communication to the people they are communicating with. The basis of the theory is the idea that people adjust or accommodate their style of speech to one another. The theory focuses on both intergroup and interpersonal communication. People belong to various groups in society: ethnic, religious, political affiliation and so. The way we interact with others depends on how we see ourselves and how we see others. A good communicator can actually accommodate to a larger audience. In fact, the theory focuses on the role of communication in our lives.

According to Giles (1971) there are two categories of the accommodation process: convergence and divergence. Speech convergence is adapting to the other communicator's way of communicating in order to connect and reduce the social distance. Speech divergence on the other hand is purposely speaking and acting differently from the person or group with whom they are communicating. This can create barriers in communication as the social distance is maintained. For the purpose of this paper, the focus is on speech convergence. According to Giles, speech convergence allows us to accommodate the person (s) we are talking to and make them feel appreciated and valued. The question is, how many of our political office holders show accommodation in their interaction with the people? This will be demonstrated in the excerpts that will be shown later. Good communication in relationships reduces conflicts, builds trust and strengthens bonds.

## **Causes of Insecurity in Nigeria**

There are many social issues that tend to spark violence which brings about the state of insecurity in the country. These include: Unemployment, Corruption, Marginalization and Inequalities in the country, Exploitation of ethnicity and religious differences, bad governance and poor leadership, threats and inciting statements etc.

According to Zubairu (2020) unemployment causes poverty and extreme poverty leads to crime which in turn gives rise to insecurity. Poverty is described as a situation when people live below a defined standard of living, that they become identified and classified as poor, while unemployment is defined as not being engaged in any meaningful work and lacking the basic needs of life. Oguntuase (2021) opines that we need no one to tell us that unemployment, especially among the youths, has turned Nigeria into a potential recruitment ground for terrorist groups such as Boko Haram. Every year, tertiary institutions graduate many students who are thrown into the labour market with no hope of job opportunities in sight. As Zubairu (2020) put it, many become frustrated and engage in violent and criminal acts such as lucrative kidnapping, militancy and armed robbery. Corruption in the system is a destructive cankerworm feeding fat on the fabric of the nation, states Oguntuase (2012). Many politicians stash away cash meant to develop the country in banks abroad. When the government privatizes important facets of public life, by - passing representation, discussion and choice processes, the resultant effect is infrastructural collapse. When there is no power generation and enabling environment for entrepreneurs and business start-ups to thrive, people are bound to channel their energies into crime and violence which breeds insecurity.

Social exclusion, marginalization and inequalities in the provision of basic infrastructures in certain parts of the country are also causes of insecurity in Nigeria. Those who feel marginalized gather their kits and kin and take up arms to express their dissatisfaction. For instance, the new railway network in the country favours majorly the North followed by the South-West; the South-East was almost excluded. Again, the current government gave the key political positions to people from the North while the South-East was left in the cold (Zubairu 2020). When a vast majority of the public has a sense of deprivation, it results in anger, loss of hope and frustration. All these logically provide a strong fertile ground for aggression and general insecurity. Recall the incident that led to the ENDSARS protest in Lagos, which ended in Mayhem. The consequence of this is growing uncertainty.

The most worrisome cause of insecurity in Nigeria is rooted in the use of language. When political office holders engage in hate-speech, threats and provocative statements, the result is usually violence and insecurity. Zubairu (2020) notes that it is not the country's diverse ethnic make-up that causes insecurity in Nigeria, rather, political and religious leaders across the nation, most times exploit the situation to achieve their selfish ambitions. They whip up sentiments in the minds of the people and stir up resentment, hatred and mistrust among the different ethnic groups and among the country's major religions. This leads to violent confrontations between

members of one ethnic group or religious groups against another. To buttress this fact, the Council of Traditional Rulers of the South-East in their press release of October 18, 2021 warned against the use of provocative rhetoric and actions that tend to promote violence, fear and insecurity. They expressed disappointment at the recent statement made by the Attorney General of the federation that the government may impose a state of emergency in Anambra State for the purpose of the just concluded gubernatorial election. They described the statement as unfortunate and said it was another manifestation of the discrimination against Ndiigbo.

Certainly, there are other causes of insecurity, but this paper focuses on the causes that are rooted in the use of language. The next segment will present and discuss selected speeches of political office holders that are considered unhygienic and inciting.

### **Presentation and Analysis of Data**

**Speech I:** A speech made by General Muhammadu Buhari as reported by LikaBennyat, Vanguard news online 2012.

God willing, by 2015, something will happen. They either conduct a free and fair election or they go a disgraceful way. If what happened in 2011 should again happen in 2015, by the grace of God, the dogs and the baboon would all be soaked in blood.

The General interpretation of the statement above is that Buhari feels that the 2011 elections were rigged, that if the same thing happens with the 2015 election, there will be bloodletting. Words matter! Dogs and baboon are they human address terms? 'Soaked in blood' has a connotation of violence that would claim lives. This statement is not only a threat; it is also inciting and can provoke violent reactions. There are judicial ways of seeking redress for a rigged election instead of resorting to violence, and this is coming from a prospective president of the Nigerian nation. He failed in both the principles of communicative competence and communication accommodation.

**Speech II:** Former president Obasanjo's speech to the CAN Chairman cited in Balogun (2004).

Mr. Chairman of CAN, you are talking absolute nonsense, and don't provoke me. When I did invite people to Abuja in April, do you think I invited them for a picnic? CAN my foot! As a Christian, what did Christianity teach you? Revenge? You are an idiot, a total idiot and I have no apology for that.

This is an example of verbal violence, using language to intimidate, dominate and disparage others. Obasanjo resorted to insult and name calling on an issue that should have been settled amicably. These are inflammable statements that can lead to violent reactions.

**Speech III:** By Nasir EI-Rufai, after clashes between settlers and natives in some parts of Northern Nigeria; he posted in his twitter handle:

We will write this for all to read. Anyone, soldier or not that kills the Fulani, takes a loan repayable one day, no matter how long it takes. (Danfulani 2016, news rescue. com/harsh)

The word ‘we’ indicates inclusion to something. It is a confirmation of belonging to the Fulani group that takes laws into their hands by embarking on ‘reprisal’ attacks. The above statement can provoke hostility, inciting the Fulani against others, and others against the Fulanis in Nigeria. According to Danfulani (2016), El-Rufai by this statement, lowered public discourse to the pit of indecency, rascality, capricious whimsicality, and irresponsibility.

**Speech IV:** Mr. El-Rufai displayed former president Goodluck Jonathan’s photograph where he was praying and gave this verdict:

Many prayers of the lazy, docile, incompetent, clueless, hopeless and useless leader

Imagine the enormity of his choice of words! This verbal attack on the person of Mr. President can provoke violence. In fact, this attracted a moral uppercut by Reno Omokiri, one of President Jonathan’s aides in this manner: “It is only a sick and bitter fellow like you that would stoop so low to mock a man praying to his God”. Christians are admonished to pray without ceasing. El-Rufai’s criticism of Jonathan’s spiritual voyage is tantamount to relegating public discourse to a level capable of causing disaffection in the land.

**Speech V:** Buhari in an interview with Al Jazeera television during his visit to Qatar in 2016. (Published in the Nation newspaper of March 6, 2016)

At least 2 million Nigerians were killed in the Biafran war and for \somebody to wake up, (maybe they weren’t born) looking for Biafra after 2 millions of people were killed, and they are joking with the security of the country. Nigeria won’t tolerate Biafra.

Buhari dismissed those who are agitating for the republic of Biafra as jokers who are toying with the nation’s security. He flouted the principles of communicative competence which considers appropriate choice of words and some degree of politeness. He also exhibited social distance from the people and lack of accommodation. Political offices holders need tutoring on the use of language in addressing issues concerning the people they lead.

### **The Power of Language in Combating Security Challenges in Nigeria**

Language, the highest form of human communication has the power to escalate or contain the various shades of insecurity in different parts of the country. Wallwork (1971:12) posits that “language is an instrument of action, of influencing and persuading people, of conveying orders and information, as well as a thought process”. Thus, language can be used to usher in the desired change, which is security as well as harmonious co-existence in Nigeria.

To achieve this, there should be reconstruction and rebuilding of individual and societal attitudes, values and preferences. There should also be transformation from hostility to

amicability. Bloomfield (2003:3) opines that the process of reconciliation includes the search for truth, justice, forgiveness and healing which enables individuals to co-exist and to develop a degree of co-operation. All these can be attained through dialogue, negotiation and mediation and not through force. We have seen visible efforts of the military and other security agencies using lethal force and combat missions to tackle insecurity in Nigeria, yet the situation is still escalating. Hence this paper recommends non-kinetic language based approaches to tackling problems especially dialogues, awareness campaign, political inclusion and social empowerment.

Reiterating this fact, the South-East Council of Traditional Rulers in their press statement of October 18, 2021 has this to say:

The dire situation in the country today calls for statesmanship and open sincere dialogue in the search for compromises.... Mutual forgiveness and healing towards the evolution of a more loving nation; instead of the growing militarization which may ultimately threaten the very existence of this country (Para. 11). Insecurity can be curbed through dialogic and mediation processes. Dialogue and mediation cannot happen without the use of language. Thus language plays a pivotal role in human and societal existence. Language has the capacity of either formenting conflict or resolving conflict depending on the way it is used. When we communicate, we are involved in the act of giving and receiving messages. The response that a communication act evokes could be negative or positive. The negative or positive response to the act of communication depends greatly on language use. Appropriate use of language elicits positive response, while bad use of language elicits negative response. Appropriate use of language here means making the right choices of words, knowing when, where and how to use the words. Thus, communicative competence is a necessary skill a communicator needs to acquire. This is important so that meaning intended in a communication act will be understood and not be misinterpreted. It is when meaning is misinterpreted that rancor and altercations occur. This in turn degenerates to violent and chaotic situations. Appropriate use of language makes for a peaceful and harmonious society, while inappropriate language use fuels crises and leads to traumatized and chaotic society.

## **Conclusion**

Insecurity in Nigeria has recently assumed a dangerous dimension that even threatens the very existence of the nation. Something urgently needs to be done, either to stamp it out or to reduce it to the barest minimum. Insecurity poses a threat to life and property. It hampers business activities and discourages local and foreign investors. All of these negate the country's social and economic growth. Insecurity has also affected the Nigerian education system, when school children are abducted from the North-East and North-West the schools close down thereby interrupting academic activities. Even in some parts of the South-East, many school children were deprived of writing 2021 WAEC Examination; in fact, insecurity has affected negatively every facet of the society. Despite the combat operations by the military and other security agencies to tackle security issues, insecurity has continued to grow. This paper therefore



advocates for other plausible mechanisms that can be adopted in solving security challenges. The paper submits that lasting peace, progress and security can come from dialogue, mediation and negotiation (which are language based) and not through armed combat and a general atmosphere of fear and intimidation.

### **Recommendations**

1. Government should create communication channels to effectively disseminate information, create awareness and give the people a sense of belonging and inclusion.
2. Non-Kinetic approach should be used to call to order, dissenting groups agitating for separation. Round table conference and dialogue would yield better results than the use of force.
3. The youths should be empowered through gainful employment or provision of enabling and favourable climate for entrepreneurship and for small scale businesses to thrive
4. Political office should be mindful of the linguistic choices they make as they engage in communication transactions.

### **References**

- Achumba, I.C. (2013). Security challenges in Nigeria and the implications for business activities and sustainable development. *Journal of Economic and Sustainable Development*. Vol. 4 No.2.
- Balogun, F.A (2004).Open letter to President Obasanjo. Daily Sun Lagos; July 1
- Bennyat, L. (2012). Unguarded utterances of Mohammodu Buhari. May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2012 [www.vanguard.com](http://www.vanguard.com)
- Bhasim, Hitesh (2020). The importance of language explained in detail. Marketing 91. <https://www.marketing91.com>
- Bloomfield, D. (2003). Reconciliation: An introduction. In D. Bloomfield, T.Barners& L. Hmyse (Eds). *Reconciliation after violent conflict: A handbook* Sweden: Bulls Tryckeri AB.
- Brumfit, C.J. and Johnson, K. (1979). *The communicative approach to language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Canal, M. and Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics* (17) 1-47
- Danfulani, J. (2016). EL- Rufia: The law and the rest of us. [Newsrescue.com/harsh](http://Newsrescue.com/harsh)

Giles, H. (2001). Speech accommodation. In R. Mesthrie (Ed) *Concise encyclopedia of sociolinguistics*. Elsevier. 193 -197

Oguntuase, O. (2012). National security challenges: The panacea in youth empowerment. *Youth speak*. [editorial@risenetworks.org](mailto:editorial@risenetworks.org)

The South East Council of Traditional Rulers (2021) Press Statement (to Ndiigbo and Nigerians)  
Monday 18<sup>th</sup> October, 2021

Wallwork, J.F. (1997). *Language and linguistics: An introduction to the study of language*  
London: Heinemann

Zubairu, (2020). Rising insecurity in Nigeria: Causes and solutions. *Journal of Studies in Social Sciences*. Infinity Press [www.infinitypress.inj](http://www.infinitypress.inj)