

Research Article



The psychology of mother language: Diversity or adversity towards peace building and cohesion among ethnic communities in Kenya

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Abstract

Human Communication is inseparable from human language. Miscommunication, misinterpretation and non-communication can contribute to conflict. The psychology of mother language is key in the interpretation and meaning of words. Usually, conflict between different ethnic groups often result from different language contact. Kenya, a multi-ethnic society has experienced a myriad of conflicts in the recent past. An effective conflict resolution tool should take the cultural and linguistic factors into consideration. A language learned in childhood carries strong emotional resonances while ethnic identity is a manner in which persons, on account of their ethnic origin, locate themselves psychologically in relation to which they perceive others as locating them in relation to those systems. Most Kenyan children are denied a chance of developing literacy in their mother language denying them of their culture, their language and history losing confidence in themselves, family, society and their nation. Patriotism becomes elusive. They may become vulnerable to radicalization. It is against this backdrop that this paper sought to determine the state of peace among ethnic communities in Kenya, the role of mother language in enhancing peace and determine whether mother language diversity fuels adversity and explain the psychology of mother language on peace building and cohesion.

Keywords: adversity, diversity, mother language, peace and cohesion, psychology

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Introduction

Human communication is inseparable from human language. People communicate with each other with language. Miscommunication and non-communication can contribute to conflict. It happens when communication is not enough with information or a misinterpretation of the words intended but a different meaning by which it is the beginning of miscommunication. Both African and international second language studies show that children who go through strong bilingual models which involve late exit from mother-tongue (L1) to a second language (L2) perform better linguistically and academically than those who go through subtractive and transitional models in which there is early-exit from L1 to L2 (Baker, 2000; Benson, 2005; Brock -Utne & Alidou, 2006; Cummins, 2000; Heugh, 2006; Truong, 2012). Despite these well documented findings on the benefits of using the learner's mother tongue as a language of instruction, the debate on the language of instruction has persisted not just in Kenya but in several African countries. In Kenya, English is used as a medium of instruction right from nursery school, or in some contexts from standard four, through university. As a result of this early introduction of English as a medium of instruction, most Kenyan children are denied a chance of developing literacy in their mother tongues. Due to this lack of development of mother tongue languages, Kenya like many African countries has not been able to attain the level of literacy and mass education which are instrumental in socio-economic development as well as in the promotion of peace and democracy in the African countries (Alidou, 2006). Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), "Learning in the mother tongue has cognitive and emotional value..."(P.5). Also, Krishnaji (1990) claims, several psychological, social and educational experiments proved that learn Findings

Findings

The state of peace among ethnic communities in Kenya

Based on the survey of extant literature, Kenya's peace and security challenges are varied. The roll call includes clashes between herders and farmers, conflicts over land and violence involving state security agencies to mention a few. Kenya is increasingly vulnerable to violence as attested by the Post-Election crisis in 2008. This can erase decades of development and further entrench poverty and inequality (UNDP,2020). Intercommunal violence in Kenya relates to violent conflicts between non-state groups that are organized along a shared communal identity. Such conflicts may revolve around issues such as access and ownership of land or water resources, cattle raiding, or support for opposing political parties. Anderson (2002). The scale of intercommunal violence in Kenya has risen and intensified since the advent of multi-party politics in 1992. Intercommunal violence has produced visible internal and cross-border impacts such as the loss of lives and properties; the displacement of persons and communities; rise in inter-group tensions and distrust; and destruction of socio-economic infrastructures and processes. The specific triggers of intercommunal violence in Kenya vary across regions and counties.

Intercommunal conflict most often occurs in certain hotspots in Kenya such as the Rift Valley, the North and the Coast. The Rift Valley experienced the first major incidence of communal violence in 1991 and intermittently since then (in 1998 and 2007 for instance) over historical grievance over land (Kimenyi, Mwangi & Ndunguu,2005) There is a long duree of election-related violence in Kenya; of the five elections held in Kenya since the introduction of multiparty democracy, three are generally classified as violent, namely elections in 1992, 1997 and 2007. It is no coincidence that the Rift Valley was the epicentre of electoral violence in 1992, 1997 and 2007 and afterwards. In the lead up to the 1992 elections for example, pre-election violence broke out in the Rift Valley, Nyanza and Western provinces, mostly targeted at the

Kikuyu, Luhya and Luo, all associated with opposition groups. The violence ended in 1993 with 1500 dead and 300,000 displaced (African Watch,1993)

By the 2007/8 elections, political violence had become normalized: ‘acts of political violence are observed and reported without any expectation that prosecution or other consequences might arise.’(Anderson and Lochery, 2008) .The 2007 election violence is estimated to have led to the internal displacement of over 350,000 persons, and at least 1300 deaths (CIPEV, 92008) Kenya and the broader East Africa region is a reference point in the analysis of American-led ‘Global War on Terror.’ Kenya in particular suffered violent extremism well before the September 2001 AlQaeda attacks on specific targets in the United States. In August of 1998, U.S. embassies in Nairobi (Kenya) and in Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) were car bombed that resulted in the death of 248 people in Kenya and 12 in Tanzania, while the number of the wounded was estimated at 5,000.²³ Kenya’s struggles with violent extremism have not abated since then. For instance, in spite of the series of internal and cross-border security operations by Kenya, extremist groups, specifically Al-Shabaab, continued to carry out attacks such as Malindi and the Technical University of Mombasa (2017);²⁴ Garissa University College attack (2015); Mpeketoni massacre (2014); Westgate Mall attack (September 2013); and Eel Adde attack, where hundreds of Kenyan combatants and noncombatants were killed.²⁵ Still, the history of political violence linked to violent extremism in Kenya predates the 1998 embassy bombing. For instance, Kenya’s Somali-dominated North-eastern region had witnessed a nationalist insurgency movement in 1963, shortly after Kenyan independence.²⁶ In addition, Kenya’s Coast Region had witnessed persistent clamour for independence by its majority Muslim population since independence. The agitations manifested as the Shifta insurgency in 1963 that was aimed at liberating the Somali region in northeast Kenya, then known as the Northern Frontier District (NFD), to merge with the newly-formed Somali Republic.²⁷ The two regions are made up of communities who perceive rightly or wrongly, to be marginalized in Kenya’s socio-economic and political power structures. The two regions also have common history of violent conflicts linked to ethno-religious identities. These subsisting schisms provide important context for understanding the attraction of violent extremist ideologies and groups, especially Al-Shabaab. ²⁸

Conflict and Conflict Resolution

Conflict is a situation whereby individuals, groups, or countries are involved in disagreement over an issue. Usually conflict between different ethnic groups often results from different language contact. There are instances when an indigenous language has a proverb, a song, a story or a myth that paints another community or other communities in negative light. An indigenous language or autochthonous language is a language that is native to a region and spoken by indigenous people. An effective conflict resolution tool should take cultural and linguistic factors into consideration. Conflicts may be categorized with respect to whether they occur at the micro-micro, micro-mezzo, mezzo-macro or micro-macro levels that is, among individuals, individuals and groups, groups and communities, and between community groups and government or within private or civil society organizations. Usually, conflicts are the result of problems created by people.

Conflicts must be understood in their social context, involving values and beliefs, fears and suspicions, interests and needs, attitudes and actions, relationships and networks’. Conflict created from misunderstanding. Misunderstanding is usually aggravated by the fact that one person/party underestimates or is ignorant of the range of value systems or mis-interpret the norms that exist in different language, cultures and social environments.

Again, language also plays a crucial role in causing and resolving conflict. Language is one of the communication means. The best language is the indigenous language. Conflicts are inevitably present in many interpersonal relationships; and their destructive/constructive character depends on the way they are handled. Conflicts must be understood in their social context, involving values and beliefs, fears and suspicions, interests and needs, attitudes and actions, relationships and networks'. Conflict created from misunderstanding. Misunderstanding is usually aggravated by the fact that one person/ party underestimates or is ignorant of the range of value systems or mis-interpret the norms that exist in different language, cultures and social environments.

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Language can cause or mitigate conflict because of its 'positive and negative powers'. When people are sensitive about their language, language tends to be a positive tool in life. People tend to tolerate, listen, understand and co-operative with those who have similar values and belief system. Since no society functions without culture, and culture is symbiotic with language. This is the inherent power of language plays a significant role in conflict management and peace building. Because language is part and parcel of culture, and culture in itself is a means in which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge and attitudes towards life. Language must have a place in the management of conflicts and peace building elsewhere.

The century old indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms focus on the principles of empathy, sharing and cooperation in dealing with common problems which underline the essence of humanity. Cultural approaches to resolving and managing disputes play a vital role in promoting peace and social order in communities. Language, cultural values and attitudes provide the basis for interaction and the norms by which individuals and communities in the planet.

Communication is instrumental in peace building. Peace building is defined as the process intended to address the root causes of conflict, to reconcile differences, to normalize relations, and to build institutions that can manage conflicts without resorting to violence. Peace building involves putting structures in place for removing the roots of conflict.

The Communication for Peace building work has its roots in the philosophy and practice of Communication for Development. In the arena of conflict transformation and peace building, communications have historically played a role in shaping the views of policy-makers and influencing popular opinion on conflicts. Communication is an irreducible element of peace building. Communication is central to many aspects of work in conflict and post-conflict settings.

There are four ways to conceptualize how communication has been applied to peace-building in case of conflict in a society, group or a community. First, one might look at the channels of communication flows between the following entities- (a) between individuals in conflict; (b) within a group where conflict exists; (c) within groups or communities in conflict; (d) between communities and organizations such as multilaterals, government, and NGO's where cooperation and coordination are issues.

Peace has a certain quality. It has to go beyond the absence of violence and include also the development of social justice and political equality. This includes harmonious relationships between the different individuals and groups in society, and the availability of mechanisms through which grievances and discord can be managed in non-violent ways. This kind of peace is often called 'positive' peace

having certain conditions of complete peace linked with notion of justice assessed by the moral quality of outcome of justice. Peace building can be pre-conflict or post conflict. The former tries to prevent a conflict from breaking out and later one is resolution of conflict.

In the era of globalization, a new concept of development emerged emphasizing cultural identity and multidimensionality. Generally, conflict resolution is a community process involving the identification of the root cause of the problem, and bringing all parties involved to address the underlying issues. The growing interdependency of nations and global issues such as economic and financial crisis, ecological and security crises gave rise to a new perspective on development and social change. The theory and practice of communication for development is an evolving field, with different approaches and perspectives unique to the varied development contexts. This participatory model also stressed the importance of cultural identity of local communities and of de The UN 1992 report 'An Agenda for Peace', which defined peace building as action to solidify peace and avoid relapse into conflict. The UN Secretary-General's Policy Committee has described peace building as follows: "Peace building involves a range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development. Peace building strategies must be coherent and tailored to the specific needs of the country concerned, based on national ownership, and should comprise a carefully prioritized, sequenced, and therefore relatively narrow set of activities aimed at achieving the above objectives." In 2000, another report defined it as "activities undertaken on the far side of conflict to reassemble the foundations of peace and provide the tools for building on those foundations something that is more than just the absence of war".

Conflict use to leave deep-rooted sense of distrust and fear that must be addressed if there is to be a just and lasting peace. Reconciliation is broadly considered as a process centrally needed in societies emerging from violent conflicts. Reconciliation processes in post-conflict societies are often highly complex. It is believed that no intractable conflict can really end without some kind of reconciliation process if the parties to the conflict are going to interact again in the future. Therefore, a meaningful process of reconciliation must therefore be rooted in local social and cultural contexts.

Conflict transformation is to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structure, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships. (Lederach, 2003, p.14)

The role of mother language in enhancing peace

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Development, peace-building, reconciliation and conflict resolution are complex terms which have no common definition and are often centered on developing more intangible outcomes such as changes in relationships and attitudes that do not lend themselves readily to quantification. In addition, evaluation is further complicated by the following factors that the outcomes from Peace-Building are essentially long-term, which makes short-term monitoring and evaluation difficult. It is difficult to isolate the impact of specific Peace-Building interventions from the complex political, economic and social contexts in which they are located.

Language and Conflict Transformation

Conflict transformation is to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structure, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships. (Lederach, 2003, p.14) In the core of every conflict there is a need to be fulfilled. This need can be material or psychological

in nature. Human beings live in communities in order to ensure their material and psychological needs are fulfilled. Living in communities “itself” is a need. Every community comes into being on the basis and number of relationships among individuals. An individual can be a member of different communities simultaneously. In every community, the quality of individuals’ lives depends on the nature of the relationships with other members of that community. These relationships are formed and maintained through proper and regular communication. Through communications member of a communities inform each other about their needs. All communications among the members of a community require a common language (or languages). The quality of communication depends on the linguistic abilities of individuals, their awareness of language and culture of self and others, their personal and communal backgrounds, environments, circumstances, and social status in each community.

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of life. In fact, it is a natural and necessary component of life that opens the door for further communication. If communication is successful, needs are met, current relationships strengthen and new ones are built. But if communication fails or is broken, needs fulfillment is interrupted and conflict moves towards violence. Thus, violence is the result of unfulfilled needs. John Paul Lederach (2003) states: Many of the skill-based mechanisms that are called upon to reduce violence are rooted in the communicative abilities to exchange ideas, find common definitions to issues, and seek ways forward toward solutions. (p.21-22). From the given statement, a chain of related concepts is prominent. One, that the tools needed to reduce violence are directly linked with communicative abilities; in other words, they are linked with language. Next, that language is used to exchange ideas. These ideas should be a source of negotiation to “find common definitions to the issues”. In other words, finding common definitions is essential to find common grounds which is a measure in the meaning making process.

The process of common meaning-making brings into existence a working together relationship between parties in conflict. This working relationship that is more founded on communicative skills can then lead to finding solution making strategies and resolutions to transform conflicts. Figure 1 visualizes my present understanding of needs, conflicts, and violence. When a need emerges, the possibility for conflict also emerges. When a conflict arises, there is one of the two ways to go –either to transform the conflict or opt not to transform it. If the conflict is transformed, the result is peace, harmony, and positive relationships. But if the conflict is not transformed, the result is violence.

Violence traumatizes its victims directly or indirectly. Traumatized victims are vulnerable to the notions of hatred that lead to revenge. Hatred and revenge turn victims into new agents of violence. Thus, a cycle of violence is generated that needs to be intervened in a well-planned, appropriate, timely manner. According to Yoder (2005, p.25) “Trauma creates needs.” She further maintains, “The most urgent need for trauma survivor is often for safety and security –physically, emotionally, and spiritually.” Yoder (2005, p.25). Needs (Material/Psychological) Conflict Transformed Untransformed Peace/Harmony Trauma Victim Hatred Violence Trauma Healing

Providing physical, emotional, and spiritual safety and security is the very first step towards trauma healing and towards preventing the victim to be drawn towards hatred and revenge. Trauma is a product of violence; however, it can be a factor for the generation of further violence. Language is used for trauma healing. Traumatized people are motivated to tell their stories and share their emotions that are mainly caused by the trauma. Psychologists and psychiatrists consider sharing and deep listening to trauma survivors a healing tool. In Peace Circles, participants form special circles in which trauma survivors tell their stories and the participants listen to him/her from the heart. When we listen to each

other's stories, we develop a positive feeling that someone is listening to us, that someone is out there who is interested in their stories and feelings. Thus, language becomes the first tool of healing people's trauma. Language plays an important role from the initial stage of describing a need. The variety of language used in describing a need can be an indicator of the intentions of the parties in conflict and whether they are willing towards transformation/resolution or not. Thus, if language can play a part in transforming a conflict, it can similarly contribute to exacerbating it.

The UN 1992 report 'An Agenda for Peace', which defined peace building as action to solidify peace and avoid relapse into conflict. The UN Secretary-General's Policy Committee has described peace building as follows: "Peace building involves a range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development. Peace building strategies must be coherent and tailored to the specific needs of the country concerned, based on national ownership, and should comprise a carefully prioritized, sequenced, and therefore relatively narrow set of activities aimed at achieving the above objectives." In 2000, another report defined it as "activities undertaken on the far side of conflict to reassemble the foundations of peace and provide the tools for building on those foundations something that is more than just the absence of war".

Conflict use to leave deep-rooted sense of distrust and fear that must be addressed if there is to be a just and lasting peace. Reconciliation is broadly considered as a process centrally needed in societies emerging from violent conflicts. Reconciliation processes in post-conflict societies are often highly complex. It is believed that no intractable conflict can really end without some kind of reconciliation process if the parties to the conflict are going to interact again in the future. Therefore, a meaningful process of reconciliation must therefore be rooted in local social and cult Every language spoken in the world represents a special culture, melody, color, and asset and to everyone the mother language is certainly one of the most precious treasures in our lives.

It's a duty and responsibility to preserve it and pass it down from generation to generation. Whether we are urged by necessity or because of other reasons, learning another language brings a lot of advantages in our life. A new language opens a new window in our world view and makes us more aware, open-minded, and respectful to other cultures, lifestyles, customs and beliefs. Moreover, knowing another language has been proven to contribute to helping us understand our mother tongue better. However, much research indicates that most children eventually learn a second, or even more, languages to a native-like fluency level, what immigrant families are not often aware of is that many of their children are at risk of losing their mother tongue.

Mother language has a very powerful impact in the formation of the individual. Our first language, the beautiful sounds of which one hears and gets familiar with before being born while in the womb, has such an important role in shaping our thoughts and emotions. A child's psychological and personality development will depend upon what has been conveyed through the mother tongue, Guvercin (2010)

With this in mind, as psychologists say, it matters tremendously that language expressions and vocabulary are chosen with care when we talk to children. A child's first comprehension of the world around him, the learning of concepts and skills, and his perception of existence, starts with the language that is first taught to him, his mother tongue. In the same manner, a child expresses his first feelings, his happiness, fears, and his first words through his mother tongue. Mother language has such an important role in framing our thinking, emotions and spiritual world, because the most important stage of our life, childhood, is spent in its imprints. A strong bond between a child and his parents (especially mother) is

established by virtue of love, compassion, body language, and also through the most important one, which is the verbal language. When a person speaks their mother tongue, a direct connection establishes between heart, brain and tongue. Our personality, character, modesty, shyness, defects, our skills, and all other hidden characteristics become truly revealed through the mother tongue because the sound of the mother tongue in the ear and its meaning in the heart give us trust and confidence. “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart,” says Nelson Mandela.

Does mother language diversity fuel adversity among communities in Kenya?

Mother Tongue education both effective and elusive (Mulama,2006). Language is a part of identity on a personal, communal, societal, regional, national, and international level. Language, on one hand, can bring people together; on the other, splits them into several divisions. In other words, language can unite or divide people. Language has the power to draw boundaries as well as omit them on the world map. Thus, language has the power to bring peace and harmony among individuals, communities and societies. Likewise, it has the power to create conflicts within and/or between communities.

The Power of Language

Each person possesses the most powerful, dangerous and subversive trait that natural selection has ever devised. It's a piece of neural audio technology for rewiring other people's minds. This is one's language, because it allows one to implant a thought from one's mind directly into someone else's mind, and they can attempt to do the same to person, without either of people having to perform surgery. Language and words leave imprints and impacts on the mind and heart of the listener(s) as well as the reader(s) on a permanent, long-term, and short-term basis. These imprints and impacts provide opportunities for meaning-making. Meaning-making is a cognitive process that encompasses a series of procedures through which meaning is derived; for instance, observation, reflection, judgment, response, reaction, clarification, explanation etc. can be named. All humans make meaning of what they listen, read, or observe based on their existing knowledge, understanding, and capabilities. In fact, right now I am busy in a process of transferring meaning acquired based on my linguistic cognitive capabilities and you, the reader, are busy in making meaning out of my writing based on your existing knowledge.

New meanings acquired through the cognitive process led to a synthesis of the previous meaning with the newly acquired one. Based on the meanings made, human beings form their attitude to respond, react, and engage with the participants of a conversation. A number of linguistic and non-linguistic factors have a direct influence over the meaning-making process. Some of these factors are intrinsically internal (inside the language) such as choice of words (lexicon), order of words (Syntax), sounds patterns (phonology) while others are external (outside the language) that are more related to the user (speaker) for example social status, gender, age, variety of language, tone of voice, emotional and psychological state, beliefs, education, profession, life experiences etc. Other factors include time, space, theme of conversation, culture, values, channel of communication, communities, societies, social and institutional structures.

A question that might arise is: what is the need for the meaning-making? Well, meaning is an intrinsic part of communication and a social need that is necessary for relationship-building and maintaining. Relationships are natural needs and sources to meet the needs of human beings that facilitate their existence in their respective communities and societies. These relationships can be perceived as

positive or negative depending on factors that determine social status. The nature of relationships has an impact over the quality of communication, while the quality of communication can strengthen or weaken relationships. Another question that might arise is: is meaning-making a conscious process or a subconscious one? To me it is both depending on the individuals and the periphery of the situation in which the conversation takes place. However, whether the meaning-making process takes place consciously or subconsciously, it affects the attitude of the individuals. An experiment was conducted by a group of researchers to check the subconscious effect of linguistic and visual inputs on the memory of human beings and how they play out in their attitudes. The Priming Experiment Priming is a non-conscious form of human memory concerned with.

The psychology of mother language on peace building and cohesion.

Mother tongue is one of the most powerful tools used to preserve and convey culture and cultural ties. Children who are unaware of their culture, their language, and their history will lose confidence in themselves, the family, society and the nation to which they belong and will have no other option than seeking an alternate identity. A child will identify himself with the language and culture he knows best. For this reason, the attitudes and beliefs of immigrant parents are so important in this aspect. If they want to prevent this from happening, they should find ways to help their children maintain and improve their mother language without neglecting to give affirmative messages and keeping positive attitudes about other cultures. We must not also forget that we live in a multicultural society and we should teach our children to learn about other cultures and respect them as well.

UN observed 'The International Year of Indigenous Languages' in 2019 that aims to raise awareness of the consequences of the endangerment of Indigenous languages across the world. UN has declared 21st February as International Mother Language Day as per request of Bangladesh to show respect to historic language movement of the than East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The theme of International Mother Language Day 2019 is "Indigenous languages matter for development, peace building and reconciliation". It has been taken with an aim to establish a link between language, development, peace, and reconciliation. It aims to improve quality of life, wider international cooperation and visibility and strengthened intercultural dialogue to reaffirm the continuity of indigenous languages and cultures.

Conclusion

Intercommunal violence in Kenya relates to violent conflicts between non-state groups that are organized along a shared communal identity. Human Communication is inseparable from human language. Miscommunication, misinterpretation and non-communication can contribute to conflict. The psychology of mother language is key in the interpretation and meaning of words. Kenya, a multi-ethnic society has experienced a myriad of conflicts in the recent past. An effective conflict resolution tool should take the cultural and linguistic factors into consideration. Mother language has a very powerful impact in the formation of the individual. A child's psychological and personality development will depend upon what has been conveyed through the mother tongue. Mother language is one of the powerful tools used to preserve and convey culture and cultural ties. Since most Kenyan children are denied a chance of developing literacy in their mother language, it has made them unaware of their culture, their language and history losing confidence in themselves, the family, society and their nation. Patriotism among such children has become elusive. They have grown to be citizens who neither have a reason to identify with nor protect their nation but seek an alternate identity. They have therefore, become vulnerable to

radicalization against their own nation. It is against this backdrop that this paper sought to determine the state of peace among ethnic communities in Kenya, the role of mother language in enhancing peace, strategies for harnessing mother language for peace and cohesion, determine whether mother language diversity fuels adversity among communities and explain the psychology of mother language on peace building and cohesion.

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