

A Discourse on Intercultural Communication and Nation Building

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ABSTRACT--- *The importance of communication across cultures has long been recognized. However, the effectiveness of communication across cultures depends largely on understanding a variety of differences between participants communicating who are from different cultures. This paper examined how the cultural background of people involved in a conversation can affect the effectiveness of communication. It also identified hindrances of intercultural communication and how it can enhance nation building when these hindrances are addressed.*

Keywords--- Communication, Culture, Intercultural, Nation Building

1. INTRODUCTION

Hall (1959) says that culture is communication and communication is culture. This means that our culture determines the way we communicate with each other. We learn the culture's language, rules, and norms, and we learn them at an early age. From our culture we learn how to speak, what to speak about, to whom to speak. We therefore learn to speak, following the dictates of our culture. Culture and communication are thus inseparable.

It is in our nature to communicate and in every culture; there is that ability to communicate. Communication and culture are both processes. Communication like culture is a human necessity which occurs always at human levels both intrapersonal and interpersonal when human interaction is involved. We often seek to control the attitudes or behaviour of others in a positive or negative way. We act upon and shape our culture through our ability to communicate.

Communication and culture which are inseparably linked are both of primary importance. They become linked through communication within our own cultural setting and through intercultural communication. Thus, intercultural communication becomes a subject of communication and culture. Cultural communication occurs interpersonally and collectively.

Life, culture, communication and nation building are ongoing, changing, and evolving processes without precise beginnings or endings. All such processes may be isolated artificially to study and analyse as processes, also such processes are essential part of the long term history of an individual, nation, culture, or human history. Most of us develop self-conceptions throughout our lives, in the context of the cultural environment around us. Somehow, the total development of our own individual culture and culture at the broadest human levels has played an important part in leading us to our own self identity and the building of our nation. We constantly create our own cultural traditions, norms and values and pass them to others through the on-going process of communication and social discourse. In the same vain, information is constantly passed on through these on-going processes of communication that leads to the day to day development of a nation. Although, it is impossible to offer rules of communication in every culture or to show how culture actually differs from every other one, it is important to provide explanation on what culture, communication and nation building connotes.

2. COMMUNICATION

Communication is difficult to define because of its intersubjectivity. It is a word derived from the Latin word 'communis' which means "to make common". Various scholars have defined communication in a number of ways. Gode (1959) opined that communication is a process that makes common to two or several what was the monopoly of one or some. Chappell and Read (1984) go further to state specifically that Communication is any process by which a thought is transferred from one person to another According to Schramm (1953), communication is regarded as sharing of orientation towards a set of information signs whereas, to Gibson (1987), communication is the transmission of common understanding through the use of symbols. In other words, communication can as well be regarded as an activity

between two or more individuals or groups sharing information in order to teach mutual relationship, and understanding of each other and the world they live.

In other words, communication is a process that involves shared codes or meanings, and feelings through the exchange of verbal and non-verbal messages. The meanings of symbols are in the people who use them, and not in the symbols themselves. Communication is all the ways by which a person influences another and is influenced in return. It may be direct or personal, as when a teacher talks to a student, or indirect and impersonal, as when a television station carries a message.

From the above definitions, we can see that communication involves any process where a community of human beings share experiences, ideas, information and most importantly, meanings. The meaning has to be agreeable to both the sender and the receiver as a message. The message is embedded in the culture of the parties involved in communication. By means of communication, we share ideas and information, live in infinitely varied cultures, and extend knowledge and imagination far beyond the scope of personal experience. Gibson (1987) added that, since the word communication is derived from the Latin word “communis” meaning “common”, unless a common understanding results from the transmission of symbols (language), whether verbal or non-verbal, there is no communication.

In other words, effective communication has to do with the identification of meaning, where in a transaction, the meaning of the symbols as encoded by the source, is the same as is decoded by the receiver, then we say effective communication has taken place. Making oneself understood is much harder than it seems. This can be illustrated by saying something to three different people, what they would hear, may be radically different from the original message. This stresses the importance of meaning to effective communication. Meanings are culturally determined or modified. They represent analysis of the universe as grasped in cultures. Meanings therefore is invented, “assigned”, or “given” rather than something received. This could lead to misinterpretation of messages, but effective communication could be achieved through knowledge of cultures around the world and the different meanings attached or assigned to codes by such cultures.

3. CULTURE

The concept of culture was developed out of the need for an objective term to characterize the similarities and wide differences between groups of people. The usage of the concept has spread to other fields of social thought, but for the most part, the notion of culture implied in such cases is too broad and does not help much to explain human behaviour. Many people, for instance, hold that culture is synonymous with development or improvement by training and education – a cultured or cultivated person, they say is one who has acquired a command of certain specialized fields of knowledge or cultivation in the act of social graces. Persons not so well educated in these fields or those of low socio-economic status are often referred to as uncultured.

Culture is not restricted to specialized field of knowledge nor is it an attribute of persons with good manners. Culture encompasses language, means of making a living, arrangement of family life, the focus of group loyalties and ways of receiving the world, both physical world and the world beyond. It can be defined as shared beliefs, traditions, habits and values controlling the behaviour of a social group.

Edward Tylor (1871) views culture as “That complex whole which includes knowledge, art, law, morals, customs and all other capabilities and habitual behaviour patterns shared and transmitted by the members of a particular society”. Culture, therefore, not only refers to artifacts, but also ideas, technical knowledge as well as habits, modes of behaviour and socialization. It is transmitted from one generation to the other through the numerous agencies of socialization and shared by members of a society.

Andah (1982) also observed that Culture embraces all the material and non-material expression of a people as well as the processes with which the expressions are communicated. It has to do with all the social, ethical, intellectual, scientific, artistic, and technological expressions and processes of a people usually ethnically and or nationally or supernaturally related, and usually living in a geographically contiguous area, what they pass on to their successors and how they are passed on. Culture is then to a large extent produced, and reproduced, distributed, consumed and gradually changed by means of mass media. The flow of information, beliefs, opinions, attitudes and values from the mass media to their audience represents a special case of general process by which a society’s culture – a macrostructure – is transferred to and internalised by the individuals in it.

From the above the definitions, culture could be said to be pervasive, learned, explicit, implicit in character, and dynamic. It gives meaning to life and does not only shape the personality of the members of a society, but also controls their behaviour and directs their relationship within the group. Suffice to say therefore that our culture influences our communication and vice versa to the extent that our communication reflects our cultural heritage.

4. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Intercultural communication is practiced whenever people belonging to different cultural groups come into contact. In the language of Klopff (1991), it is the communication between people of different cultures, and it occurs when a person (or persons) from one culture talks to a person (or persons) from another. Intercultural communication is interpersonal because it involves cultural dimension, linguistic, nonverbal, attitudinal, value and thought-patterning. However, the

difference between these characteristics among those who are from different culture is greater than those from the same culture. Effective communication between people from different cultures is therefore impeded by these differences.

5. NATION BUILDING

Nation building is the process of constructing or structuring a nation using the power of the state. It aims at the unification of the people within the state so that it remains politically viable in the long run. It also involves the use of propaganda or major infrastructural development to foster social harmony and economic growth. Since communication involves any process where a community of human beings share experiences, ideas, information and most importantly meaning, a nation relies heavily on intercultural communication for its development. By means of communication, ideas and information can be shared between nations and people who live in infinitely varied cultures. Through this, knowledge and imagination far beyond the scope of personal experience can be shared to aid nation building. Ideas and information are usually shared to achieve a purpose or an outcome. Such purpose or outcome can only be achieved when communication is effective. Nation building therefore can only be achieved if intercultural communication is effective.

6. HINDRANCES TO EFFECTIVE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND NATION BUILDING

Effective communication with people of different cultures is especially challenging. Cultures provide people with ways of thinking--ways of seeing, hearing, and interpreting the world. Thus the same words can mean different things to people from different cultures, even when they speak the "same" language. When the languages are different, and translation has to be used to communicate, the potential for misunderstanding increases.

Perception as an aspect of communication has a major role to play for the effectiveness of any communication. Most of what we communicate with others is what we perceive. Our culture defines the categories to which we assign things we perceive, and we learn to respond to them as culture dictates. What we perceive is then culture-bound. Perception which is the process by which people select, organise and interpret sensory stimulation into meaningful and coherent picture of the world, therefore, hinders effective intercultural communication. This is so because different cultural aspects are brought into the conversation and since the communicants are from different cultures, they would hardly understand each other. Misinterpretation is usually the result of such conversations. All the factors that cause perceptual differences among members of one culture are compounded when communicating between cultures thus making their interaction more difficult or less effective. In their interaction, there may be obvious differences in codes, experiences, meaning, values and frames of reference.

Nonverbal communication practices are not the same across cultures. The winking of an eye for example could mean different things to people from different cultures. These not so obvious nonverbal variations give rise to potential problems in communicating across cultures. An African, for instance, who visits America for the first time will not understand why his host (an American) greeted his wife (the African) with a peck.

Language barrier is also a hindrance to effective intercultural communication. If a visitor to Nigeria from France cannot speak English, there is a problem. Interpreters are usually used in such situations but trained second-language speakers may be proficient in pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, but because they may lack the socio-cultural and emotional background of the native speakers, they fall short of effective communication. The accurate meaning may not be passed to the person from another culture by the trained second-language speaker. The tendency to assume that the peoples of the world have sufficient similarities to communicate together brings about ineffectiveness of intercultural communication. A lecturer in a university in the United States for example, would teach his students with English, using words that are common only to Americans when he has students from other nationalities, with the assumption that English Language is the same everywhere.

Anxiety and tension also brings about ineffective intercultural communication. A communicator speaking in a strange environment which is intercultural is bound to be anxious because he is addressing people he knows little about.

The worldwide level of technology has greatly advanced easing the process of communicating among people located in different countries. Their ability to share information almost instantly has turned the globe to resemble a village, and as a village its citizens can communicate with one another quickly and easily with the use of various technology-based methods. But then again how come the message is not received in the manner intended when sent by the messenger? The answer is simple: worldwide we share much of the same information and technology, but not the same culture. Our family, recreation, finance and other values are different, as these values spring from diverse experiences, expectations and habits. Even if the language used to communicate is the same, the cultural differences between states are evident and a message can be distorted or at least not understood as one intended.

Ineffective intercultural communication can delay advancements in nation building and contribute to conflicts between groups and nation thereby hindering unity as the flow of information that facilitates key transformations in a nation is hindered. Intercultural communication is of importance to international business and technological development, which are key to nation building, as it examines how people from different cultures, beliefs and religions come together to impart knowledge, work and communicate with each other.

Demand for intercultural communication is increasing as more and more activities that enhance nation building such as international relations, new technological discoveries and businesses go global or international. However, there are barriers and limitations in sharing these information and business transactions to aid nation building when entering a foreign territory if intercultural communication is ineffective.

7. EFFECTIVE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND NATION BUILDING

The existence of hindrances to effective intercultural communication does not mean that effective intercultural communication cannot take place. It has been taking place and as more intercultural contact comes about, more information is emerging as to how to be more effective when communicating intercultural. The key to understanding intercultural communication is perception and its cultural base. Each culture view the sensory world somewhat differently and therein lays the clues to effective communication with people from different cultures.

Extensive cross-cultural research on visual perception, depth perception, and colour perception among other investigation, reveals fundamental perceptual differences between cultures. When communicating with people from other cultures, we should therefore anticipate perceptual differences. We should not make assumptions about the other person's process of perceiving, judging, thinking, and reasoning. Klopff (1991) emphasized this point when he said:

“whenever we communicate, we rely on our cultural background. We tend to be more successful inter-culturally when we understand and appreciate the special character of members of other cultural groups and other cultures as well”.

He further explained that each participant in an intercultural transaction should understand the other's values, and the participant should adapt his or her communication to the other's value, and the adaptation should be on-going and constant.

A study of the nonverbal aspects of communication across cultures must be a crucial part of the perceptual education, since nonverbal practices differ from culture to culture. Participants must develop a systematic and less spontaneous adaptation to the alternative cultural frame of reference with an understanding or appreciation of its code systems such as language and nonverbal cues (Szalay, 1974). Verbal or nonverbal communication can have different meanings to different people and thus careful consideration and examination of the others' environment can ensure a better delivery of a message and overall a much more successful communication process. Understanding of language with the socio-cultural and emotional background of native speakers enhances effective communication.

People communicating across cultures should listen attentively with empathy and try to understand the speaker before evaluating. If they do not understand, they should ask question, trying to understand the speaker's meaning in order to evaluate correctly. This will increase effectiveness in communication. Despite their many differences, all cultures have characteristics in common. These are called cultural universals, general classes of characteristics that help us to locate the distinctions between cultures. Cultural universals include age-grading, etiquette, marriage, cleanliness, names, education, cooking, to mention but few. Intercultural specialists name universals as important to understanding communication practices across cultures. They provide the basis for comparing cultures as they show potential areas of cultural variation. The knowledge of these areas of variations makes it easier to communicate effectively intercultural. Learning the various cultures of different people will lead to what Adler (1974) calls a “multicultural person”. He states that the person can be seen as a new kind of person, a person who is socially and psychologically a product of the interweaving of cultures in the twentieth century. Communication and cultural exchanges are the preeminent conditions of the twenty first century. People are committed to the fundamental unity of all human beings and at the same time they recognize, legitimize, accept, and appreciate the fundamental differences that lie between people of different cultures. With intercultural persons, intercultural communication is effective because they understand more about different cultures, and with the goal of nation building remain open to the imminence of experience and commitment to essential similarities between people everywhere, while paradoxically maintaining an equally strong commitment to their differences.

Technological development has brought about effectiveness in intercultural communication. With the world's mobile population, faster transportation, transnational business dealings, and rapid expansion and distributions of communication networks such as telephone (GSM), communication satellites and jet airplanes, more and more face-to-face contact between people of very different cultural backgrounds is becoming common place. More and more control is therefore exerted over intercultural communication and this further enhances nation building.

An increase in shared characteristics among social groups and an increasing social homogeneity are a key to nation building. Effective communication will lead to the creation of a cohesive, productive, just and affluent society as it facilitates key transformations in nation building through information sharing. Understanding intercultural communication is a particularly important task when a country is still in the process of national integration and nation building. Overcoming cultural differences is key to nation building as free flow of information will facilitate unity and development in the nation.

8. CONCLUSION

Since communication and culture are inextricable, people's communication will always reflect their way of life. Culture's impact on intercultural communication depends on the degree of differences between the cultures involved. The more cultures differ, the greater the influence culture will have on communication while the more they are similar, and the less influence culture will have.

Despite the apparent unifying effects of globalism and the widespread use of English, the world is still a much diversified place. All people are proud of their language, heritage and culture. However, no matter the degree of influence culture may have on communication, nation building can be enhanced through effective intercultural communication between peoples of different cultures who have taken the time and effort to study the differences and similarities of cultures across the world.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Sociolinguistics should be introduced as a course in tertiary institutions since culture is a variable of sociolinguistics. Its study will further enhance intercultural communication and then nation building.
- The media should promote knowledge of cultural diversity within the country, as well as tolerance and respect for the right of people to differ interculturally. This will allow unity which is crucial to nation building to thrive.
- Individuals from different culture who are communicating should make the effort to observe the behaviour of people from other culture and follow their lead when communicating. By this they may begin to understand where the underlying cultural meanings of words and sentences and non verbal communication in general differ in ways new to them.

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