**LANGUAGE AS A BARRIER TO COMMUNICATION**

**INTRODUCTION**

Although it takes little physical effort to say something to someone, it also takes mental effort to ensure that what is said conveys ones intended meaning. Even if you create what you think is the perfect message, the possibility always exists that the receiver of that message will misinterpret the message or find it ambiguous. Therefore, the receiver must also make an effort to receive the intended message. Misunderstanding and barrier occur for numerous physical, mental and cultural reasons. Ineffective use of language and communication are chiefly some of this reasons.

**Language–Based Barriers to Communication**

There are over 450 different languages in use every day in Nigeria. The number includes dialects spoken in various regions of the country. We must recognise that communication is a symbolic interaction rich in subtlety. It will never be strictly concrete or objective and always carry the potential for misunderstanding and conflict. Misunderstandings occur for numerous physical, mental and cultural reasons. Ineffective use of language is one reason. Among the most common language based barriers to communication are bypassing, indiscrimination and polarisation.

**Meaning Can Be Misunderstood**

What is said and what is heard and understood by the listener often differ. Such misunderstanding between a sender and a receiver is called bypassing. How many times have you said to someone “But that is not what I meant?” Bypassing usually results from the false belief that each word has only one meaning and that words have meaning in themselves; but a glimpse at our everyday language quickly illustrates that most words have multiple uses and meanings. Words acquire many meanings because they change over time and are used and understood differently in various cultures and regions and often they reflect the knowledge and situation of the user. Therefore, it is crucial as communicator and peace professionals to stay alert to the fact that words can be interpreted differently by different people. Some speakers deliberately introduce bypassing by using euphemisms or double speak to soften or distort meanings. It is important to be aware of this while you interact with people. Politicians and advertisers for instance sometimes will say one thing in order to get people to believe or accept something else. As a listener, you should critically examine what is being said. Both speaking and listening and conflict situation involve ethical considerations. Issues of conscience, which is, what is right or wrong and what is beneficial or harmful are everyone’s responsibility.

**How to Reduce Bypassing**

a. **Be Approachable**. Encourage open and free communication. The most frequent barrier to effective communication; and consequently dispute and conflict is the unwillingness to listen to others. Allow others to question and paraphrase your messages and show respect for their enquiries; Being patient and receptive is not always easy but the effort will ensure a clear exchange of information

b. **Be Person–Minded, not Word-Minded**. Think about words and their meanings, but you should also consider the persons using the words and the meanings they might give to them. Constantly question your own interpretation by asking such question as: “This is what the word mean to me, but what does it mean to others?”

c. **Query and Paraphrase**. Ask questions and paraphrase your message or the meaning you have derived from others message whenever there is a possibility for misunderstanding. Differences in background, age, gender, perception may affect communication. If you are uncertain, ask others to explain and if it is in a peace workshop you may ask the mediator to paraphrase. Restating a message in your own words gives you and the other party or the sender a chance to check that you receive a similar message to what was sent. As the importance and complexity of a message in conflict resolution situation is, so is the need to ask questions and paraphrase.

d. **Be Sensitive to Contexts**. Consider the verbal and situational contexts in which communication occurs. The meaning of a word can be more precisely interpreted by considering the words, sentences and paragraphs that precede and follow it and the setting in which communication takes place.

**Language Can Shape Our Attitudes**

Indiscrimination is the neglect of individual differences and the overemphasis of similarities. It is also a form of perceptual set in which a person chooses to ignore differences and changes in events, things and people. Language plays a significant role in our tendency to see similarities between things even when they do not exist. Nouns that categorise that is teenager, divorce, student, professor, facilitator, northerner, Niger Delta, government official, politician and so on, encourage us to focus on similarities. Statements such as “politicians are crooks and students cheat in exam” may be interpreted to include all politicians and all students, instead of some politicians and some students. They fail to distinguish between individuals. Such generalisation often results in stereotyping. Stereotype is categorising events objects and people without regard to unique individual characteristics. Stereotypes are often negative but they may be positive, for example, all teachers are dedicated professionals or all mediators are dedicated peace professionals or all environmentalists are concerned citizens. Whether the stereotyping is negative or positive, the problem is the same. Individual qualities are ignored. Stereotyping is quick and easy to do because it does not require analysis, investigation, or thought. By precluding distinctions, stereotypes give us neat, oversimplified categories that facilitate our evaluation of people, situations and events.

There are ways to reduce discrimination in our interaction. Indexing points out differences that distinguish various members of a group and thus reduces indiscrimination. Indexing identifies the specific person, idea, event or object to which a statement refers for instance, politicians are corrupt, athletes are dumb or any statement that lumps people ideas, events, or objects into a single category immediately ask, “which ones are you talking about?” No matter what people may think, not all politicians are corrupt. Politician A is different from politician B, and politician B is different from politician C. The same is true of athletes. They might belong to a class or group that has an identity and whose members have similarities, but the group is composed of individuals, each different from the other.

**Language Can Cause Polarisation**

Polarisation is the tendency to view things in terms of extremes – rich or poor, beautiful or ugly, large or small, high or low, good or bad, intelligent or stupid; though some things exist somewhere in between. This definitive way of thinking is aggravated by aspects of language. Polarisation can be destructive, escalating conflict to the point at which two parties simply cannot communicate. This escalation is referred to as the pendulum effect in peace studies. The pendulum represents a person’s perception of reality, which includes feelings attitude, opinions and value judgements about the world. When the pendulum is hanging in the centre, a person’s perception is considered to be realistic, virtuous, intelligent, sane, honest and honourable. Of course, most of us believe that our pendulums are at or near the centre most of the time. When two individuals disagree in their perception of reality, their pendulum begins to move in opposite directions. The distance the pendulum swings represents their differences in opinion or conviction. As the conversation intensifies, each remark provokes a stronger reaction from the party to whom it is directed until both parties are driven to positions at opposite extremes.

For instance, when two roommates (Jegede and Jessica) argue over whose turn it is to clean, one might begin by saying “it is your turn. I did it the last time.” The other is likely to respond: “No I did it the last time. Now it is your turn.” If the disagreement continues and no solution is found, both will become more entrenched in their positions and their comments may turn into personal attacks. The situation can degenerate to the point at which one of the other threatens to move out. Such an extreme outcome is typical of discussion driven by the pendulum effect. Emotions can eventually run so high that the differences between the parties seem insurmountable and a mutually agreeable settlement seems unattainable. Speaker can avoid the danger of polarisation by recognising the potential for misunderstanding and by making statement that does not represent nuanced extreme

**Language can be Sexist**

There is a difference in how men and women may use language and converse with one another. Some communication and language theorists believe that men tend to use language to assert status whereas women use language to establish and maintain social relationships. They also believe that men use language to dominate or compete. The result, according to them is that the game of communication for men and women is the same but the rules are different. When men and women communicate with each other, there is the potential for class and conflict because of different language use. The problem is magnified when sexist language is used either consciously or unconsciously. Our goal should be to use gender- inclusive language, language that does not discriminate against male or female. Unfortunately, English language is structured with an inherent bias in favour of men. There is, for example, no singular gender – neutral pronouns in the English language.

Therefore, traditionally, the masculine pronouns (he, him, and his) have been used to refer to people in general, even if the referent could be a male or female. User of the masculine pronoun is not incorrect grammatically, but its use in generic situations is a social issue. Language sets expectations that at times discriminate against the stereotype use of he and him and the general absence of she or her subtly, but powerfully give the impression that men hold important roles but women do not. Thus, our language creates the expectation that the female gender is inactive and does not hold important roles. Furthermore, sexist language can be misleading, we use only he or she when describing the symptoms, the effect, the reasons, and the treatment; thus, the group that was not included in the discussion might believe that it is a “male disease” or a “female disease” and does not pertain to them. If that happens, half or more of the audience will not pay attention to the speech and this might not heed the precautions and expose them to greater danger. Sexual stereotypes and the assumption that the male gender is superior to the female gender characterise sexist language.

In most society, sexist language involves attitude as much as the use of specific words. Words with a positive connotation are used to describe males for example, independent, logical, strong, confident, aggressive. Females on the other hand, are associated with words having negative connotations for example dependent, illogical, weak. For instance, a sentence like this could be termed a sexist communication. “She is the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the company and she is a woman.” or “Jegede got that position because she is a woman.” These sentences describe women who have risen to high authority positions or that the only reason Jegede got the position was because she is a woman. In other words, they imply that women are less qualified or inferior to men.

Stereotypes do not occur in a social vacuum. On the contrary, they often exert powerful influence on the lives of those who are stereotyped. Gender stereotypes influence perceptions and behaviour of both men and women. Stereotypes of women affect both how they are treated in society and how they see themselves. Language and substituting gender – inclusive terms represent a positive step toward doing away with them. Other stereotypes are reinforced in the use of homophobic language. When someone asks another to “tell me what to look for so I can recognise gays and lesbians and then avoid them.” The speaker is demonstrating both insensitivity to individuals and a general negative categorisation of a group of people, each of whom is unique.

Metaphors used in our culture to describe men and women are often sexist. A metaphor is a figure of speech that associated two things or ideas, not commonly linked, as a means of description. These stereotypical animal metaphors illustrate the use of sexist language. Men are likely to be described as aggressive wolf, and women as harmless pets that is, kitten or chick or as unattractive animals that is, cow, pig, dog. The effective communicator must avoid such negative metaphorical stereotyping. Find more positive metaphors related to men, and use inclusive language in general. It is important that the language we use as peace students be inclusive and not demeaning to any group of individuals. Language influences how we see others around us. Inappropriate language causes perceptual and social problems that should not be tolerated in any society.

**How to Use Language Effectively**

The ability to use language efficiently and effectively as peace students will require not good education alone but, years of consistent practice. Although many variables will influence the effectiveness of language use, five aspects of language according to Seiler (2005) merit special attention. They are accuracy, vividness, immediacy, appropriateness and metaphor.

**Use Accurate Language**

Using accurate language is critical to speaking. Choosing a wrong word can distant your intended message, misguide your receiver, and undermine your credibility. When you speak you need to ensure that your goal should be precision. Do not leave room for misinterpretation. You should constantly ask yourself “what do I want to say” and “what do I mean? And when necessary, consult a dictionary to be sure you have chosen the correct word to express your message. The more words you can use accurately, the more likely it is that you will find the one you need to make your meaning clear. You must expand your vocabulary. Two of the best ways to do this are through listening to others and reading.

Pay attention to words that you do not understand. Whenever, you come across an unfamiliar word, determine the context in which it is sued, and consult a dictionary to find its meaning. Once you have acquired a new word, try to put it to use. Words that are not used are typically forgotten. Expanding your vocabulary takes effort and time, but with practice, it can become part of your daily routine. A word of warning: As you develop your vocabulary, avoid the temptation to use long or little-known words when short or common words would serve the purpose. Also be sure you know the shades of meanings and connotations of new words. Before you use them, remember that words may have different meanings for different people. Sometimes a message is unclear because it is not structured effectively. Poor sentence and word usage can wreak havoc on a statement’s clarity.

**Use Vivid Language**

To communicate effectively, make your message animated and interesting. Direct fresh language given in the active voice can bring a sense of excitement, urgency and forcefulness to what you say. Such vividness tells your audience that they had better listen because what you have to say is important. For example, suppose an NGO is trying to raise money for homeless Bakassi people, it could take one of two approaches in seeking a donation from you:

(i) present statistics to illustrate the number of people who are believed to be homeless; and

(ii) present cases of actual individuals who are homeless, including children and their families. The first approach is rational, informative, abstract, and emotionally distance. The second approach is emotional, urgent, concrete and forceful. The vividness of the second approach is likely at least to get your attention and perhaps influence you to contribute. According to social psychologists, vivid language affects us in several ways. It is more persuasive than a flat, pallid presentation of information, because it is more memorable and has an emotional impact. Vivid messages are more likely to create readily retained and recalled mental images. People tend to listen more attentively to vivid messages than to mainspring or uninteresting messages.

**Use of Immediate Language** Verbal immediacy identifies and projects the speakers feelings and makes the message more relevant to the listener. Verbal immediacy draws listeners in and involves them in the subject at hand. The following statements illustrate different levels of verbal immediacy. The first sentence displays a high immediacy level and the last displays a low immediacy level:

• We certainly will enjoy the football game.

• You and I will enjoy the football game.

• I think you and I may enjoy football.

• People often enjoy football games.

The first statement is directly related to the speaker, the listener, and the situation. It is assertive, and the speaker makes a connection with the listener by using the word ‘we’. In each successive statement, the speaker decreases the intensity of this association with the listener and the event. The language becomes less immediate, more distant in tone. Verbal immediacy also makes the speaker appear relaxed, confidence, competent and effective. Also receivers tend to view messages characterised by immediacy as similar to their own beliefs more readily than those cast in language related to the speaker, topic, or receiver.

**Use Appropriate Language**

Each time you speak, your listeners have specific expectations about the kind of language you will use. Different kinds of language are appropriate to different situations. For instance, the language you would use in addressing the student union president or leader in your school would be much more formal than the language you would use when chatting with friends. You are not likely to call the president by a nickname and would be equally unlikely to call a friend Dr or Mr. or Mrs. or Ms, except in jest. Using language that is inappropriate for a given situation damages your credibility and your message might be misunderstood or misinterpreted or disregarded. It is therefore crucial to assess each speaking situation and adjust your language accordingly.

**Use Metaphorical Language**

According to some language scholars, our way of looking at the world around us is fundamentally metaphorical. Metaphors help us to structure what we think, how we perceived things, and what we do. Metaphorical language pervades our everyday language and our thoughts. A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase relates one object or idea to another that is not commonly linked to it. A successful use of this figurative expression makes an object or idea more clear and vivid. Metaphorically language is culture bound, and most metaphors have meanings only within a specific language community. If your receivers cannot identify with a particular metaphor you use, it will be meaningless to them.

**CONCLUSION**

Learning to use language is important for effective communication in any situation. The ability to use language determines our success, makes communication personal, and allows us to translate our thoughts, feelings, and experiences into meaningful message to our listener. The misuse of language is more than simply a matter of misusing words. It also affects our ability to think.