

## **Language and Communication in Conflict Management: A case study of the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon**

### **Abstract**

This paper sets out to analyse the language and communication strategies that are being used in attempts at resolving the crisis; to determine if these strategies are liable in the escalation or de-escalation of the conflict. It has been noticed that the language and Communication used by the social actors to manage the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon has not been effective, and thus futile. This research aims at investigating the role language and communication play in the process of conflict management and resolution. It sought to examine the ways language is being used in resolving the Cameroon Anglophone conflict. This paper is undertaken within the framework of the Critical Discourse Analysis which studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, produced and resisted through text and talk and Systemic Functional Linguistics which holds that one does not speak and write in isolated sentences but in meaningful units called texts which are produced in and influenced by context. The research approach used in this study was the qualitative design. The data was collected with the aid of 3 interviews and content analysis of 3 speeches of the Head of State on the Anglophone conflict. The data was analysed using the content analysis method. From the findings, it was discovered that the language and communication used in managing and resolving the crisis is not adequate enough to put an end to the crisis. The choice of words used by the actors rather cause pain, anger, and hurt in the hearts of the people rather than easing the pain, thus escalating the conflict. The findings of the study indicate amongst others that the actors of the conflict do not make use of the language strategies in their attempts at resolving the crisis probably because they do not give language the important role it plays in conflict resolution. The communication strategies used in managing the crisis is not efficient enough to successfully resolve it, and the vocabulary used by the actors of the conflict rather cause the conflict to escalate as they rather cause hurt and anger in the hearts of fellow actors, causing more violent actions to be exhibited.

**Key words:** Language, communication, conflict management, Anglophone crisis.

## **Introduction**

Language and communication are sine qua non in this world of words and continued eruptions of conflicts or disputes. What defines human's humanity is language which is the vehicle of communication. Language is often regarded as the key to the heart of a people. Language and communication, therefore, are very crucial in the management and resolution of conflicts or disputes between the two parties in conflicts. Language and communication are two sides of a coin. Language is central to human communication as it is used for varieties of functions on a day-to-day basis. It is impossible to survive without communicating in a day. There are several definitions of language as there are scholars on the study of the subject. Language is a system of signs and symbols through which a speech community communicates. It is the tool used for sharing information within particular groups of persons; 'It is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntary-produced symbols' (Sapir 1921); language is an acquired/learned arbitrary system of vocal/written symbols through which human beings interact in terms of their cultural experience (Carol 1953); it is a system of communication in speech and writing that is used by people of a particular country or area (Oxford, 2010).

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1995) defines communication as the process of obtaining information or expressing thought and feelings. Going by this definition, it is obvious that human beings are naturally communicators. Shannon and Weaver (1977; 412) also define communication as "all the procedures by which one mind may affect another". This implies that communication can take place not only in oral and written media but also in music, pictorial arts, theatre and, of course, all human behaviour. The definitions above clearly indicate that communication is a process that involves the transmission of message from a sender to a receiver and which has the goal of eliciting a reaction or reactions (feedback). What happens, therefore, can be explained in a way of stimulus-response process.

According to Ngoh (2019), the latent discontent of the Anglophones in the management and governance of the state sipped through the vent in April 1995 with the All Anglophone Conference (AACI) in Buea which produced the Buea Declaration and the 1994 AACII in Bamenda. On 9<sup>th</sup> May 2015, some 700 Common Law Lawyers from the North West and South West Regions and other Regions met in Bamenda and amongst others, accused the government

of a cautious and well-thought-out programme of carving away and replacing the Common Law-inspired rules of criminal, Civil procedure and of Evidence, with a system and culture of French-inspired or copied Civil Law, and was strongly and unequivocally rejected by them, demanding the restoration of the referred Common Law-inspired rules of practice and procedure.

The lawyers demanded that the divisions of Common Law should be clearly defined and should operate side-by-side in ENAM; the non-adulteration of the educational sub-system in the North West and South West Regions; the creation of a Law School; and the protection of the Anglophone minority. The Common Law lawyers finally gave the government a reasonable period from the date of deposit of these resolutions to react positively; the government, unfortunately, dawdled. In February 2016, the Cameroon Education Forum (CEF) drew the attention of the government to the plight of the English sub-system of education in Cameroon. In a memorandum to the Prime Minister, the CEF lamented that about 20 years since the regulation on education was signed, its provisions were unswervingly violated, ignored, or only partially implemented, thus giving reasons for suspicion of bad faith by education authorities in our country.

Conferring to Ngoh (2019), before the Anglophone Teachers' Trade Unions officially went on strike in November 2016, Wilfred Tassang of the Cameroon Anglophone Teachers' Trade Union (CATTU), in supporting the lawyers' strike, said that "the fight at hand is not a teachers' fight. If it were, it will be talking living and working conditions. This is an Anglophone struggle... This is time for us to rise up as one." Tassang's statement was very revealing because it exposed the crux of the problem. It was a political issue and not a demand for trade union grievances of good living and working conditions; but the government failed to decipher the essence of Tassang's statement (Ngoh 2019). Later on, a joint notice was issued by the Fako Lawyers Association (FAKLA), the Meme Lawyers Association (MELA), the Manyu Lawyers Association (MALA) and the North West Lawyers Association (NOWELA) on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2016 stating:

"We shall be synergising with SYNES, Cameroon Teachers' Trade Union (CATTU), Teachers Association of Cameroon (TAC), Traders Associations, Taxi Drivers Unions, bus companies and Commercial Motorbike Riders Associations, as well as "Buyam Sellam" Associations across the North West and South West Regions."

The lawyers' strike action was downplayed by the government despite the fact that it was well respected. On 21<sup>st</sup> November 2016, the Teachers' Trade Unions in the North West and South West Regions declared an indefinite strike action until the grievances which they had earlier tabled to the government were addressed notwithstanding Tassang's statement. The decision by the lawyers and the teachers' trade unions to solicit support from the population without having schooled the various sectors on the end-game and from whom they should take instructions would haunt them down the road. Mancho Bibixy, a radio animator in Bamenda, seized the opportunity and launched his "coffin revolution." He, accompanied by a large chanting crowd protesting against a number of things, of which were the following; the dirty state of the Bamenda City Council; the dilapidated road network; and the slow advancement of the water project in Bamenda (Ngoh 2019). The protest march degenerated and became violent as the forces of law and order engaged in running confrontations with the protesters. The confrontation led to hundreds of protesters wounded, some were arrested and detained in Bamenda, while others were whisked off to the Yaounde Kondengui Maximum Security Prison.

Today's conflict can be traced to late 2016, when English-speaking lawyers and teachers organized peaceful protests, a movement born of frustrations that the government had assigned French-speaking judges and teachers to English-speaking courts and schools. English speakers claimed that officials in Yaounde were essentially forcing the minority Anglophones to assimilate into Francophone legal and educational systems. During the Paris Peace Summit in France that was held from the 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> of November 2019, President Paul Biya declared there were key differences between the French and English speaking Cameroonians because of their contrasting experiences under colonial rule:

"My country is complex. ...After the First World War... Some were under British colonisation and others under French. The result has been a juxtaposition of culture and civilisation that makes things quite difficult. Well, we have done everything we can to put the two languages, English and French on an equal footing but, the mind sets, as well as the judicial system are different...."

During his speech, Paul Biya also revealed that the plan had been to integrate the Anglophone minority into the French system.

"We had the possibility of integrating the English speakers directly into the francophone system, which was predominantly used by 80% of our people but, I believe that countries are now concerned about affirming their identity and that is why we are setting up a special status that recognises the specificity of the English speaking area...."

A lot of the conflicts in our lives come from the language we use, and how we communicate with others. Ineffective communication creates conflict even in situations where there is no real “conflict issue” or disagreement about a substantive issue. Poor communication causes hurt feelings, anger, frustration, and tends to erode relationships, sometimes to the point where the relationship is not fixable. Many a times we call these situations personality conflicts, when in fact they are a result of poor communication. Therefore, to manage or prevent conflict, the first key is communication. It is upon this background that this thesis seeks to examine the way language and communication is used in managing the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis.

### **Objective**

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the role of language and communication in the management and resolution of the Anglophone conflict. In other words, this study seeks to examine the ways in which language has been used and can be used as a tool for resolving the Anglophone problem in Cameroon.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) and Systemic Functional Linguistics would be used to analyse data in this paper. CDA is a multidisciplinary approach, which tackles a number of important social issues. It draws on many of the methodological tools of more traditional fields such as critical linguistics, text linguistics and sociolinguistics (Osisanwo, 2011). In fact, Norman Fairclough’s approach or model draws upon the Hallidayan systemic functional linguistics (SFL) theory; his concern with language, discourse and power in society allows the integration of sociological concepts as well. CDA researchers do not merely ‘simply appeal to ‘context’ to explain what is said or written or how it is interpreted’, rather, they have come to see language as a form of social practice (Fairclough, 1992:47). Discussions on the origin and developments of CDA have often centred on the quartet of Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, Teun van Dijk and Paul Chilton (Blommaert, 2005: 21).

Systemic Functional Linguistics conferring to Halliday & Matthiessen (2004) is a wide term which covers various types of analyses, including the analysis of expression (phonetics and phonology), the analysis of content (lexicogrammar and semantics) and the analysis of context. Context is a fundamental concern because it significantly contributes to the process of meaning making. One does not speak and write in isolated sentences but in meaningful units called texts which are produced in and influenced by contexts.

## **Methodology**

The qualitative design was used in this paper. Three persons were interviewed and 3 speeches of the Head of State on the Anglophone conflict were analysed. The data collected in this study was done using the semi-structured interview, which was the most preferred type of interview for the study. This type of interview is flexible and allowed the interviewee to provide more information. The researcher had to explain to the respondents the purpose of the interview before proceeding. The interview was tape-recorded, with permission and consent from the interviewee, in a bid to permit the researcher not to miss out on anything said by the interviewee.

In this paper, data for the content to be analysed was collected from the following documents; research-related documents; books, published printed sources, journals/periodicals, and published electronic sources. These documents provided the secondary data that was used in this study. The speeches of the Head of State on the Anglophone conflict were collected from electronic sources.

## **Discussions and Results**

This paper sets out to analyse the language and communication strategies that are being used in attempts at resolving the crisis, to determine if these strategies are liable to the escalation or de-escalation of the conflict, with the assumption that communication is poorly carried out and the language is not properly used, leading to an escalation of the conflict. The qualitative design was used in carrying out this research. Here, interviews were carried out, and speeches analysed. The major findings of the study confirm the assumption that communication is not effective, and the language used in managing the conflict is mostly inappropriate. As Adejisola (2009) says, although, language and communication are not really what bring about the settlement, they are the instruments that are actually used to dialogue, negotiate, mediate, facilitate and settle disputes in our societies. As a result of this, language and communication have to be used effectively to ensure a de-escalation of a conflict situation.

The Anglophone regions of Cameroon have as main language of communication the English language. As the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis says, the speakers of the English language would think and perceive reality in a way that is unique to the language as English speakers. The culture of the users of the English language is embedded in their language, and the way the language is used has the power to bring peace and harmony amongst conflicting parties, or

escalate the conflict totally. Words carry meanings that make sense to members of a shared linguistic and social environment, and conflict resolution relies heavily on word choices. The language has the power to bring peace and harmony amongst conflicting parties as it is the words human beings in the world use as an accelerator to harmonious living or existential war fronts (Kisembe 2018). The language used in managing and resolving the Anglophone conflict therefore has a crucial role to play as it can escalate or de-escalate the conflict. The proper use of language by the actors of the conflict can help in a successful management and resolution of the conflict. Language has the ability to create conflict as well, depending on how it is used. If the word choices are rather inflicting pain, insulting, name-calling and harsh, there is the probability that a conflict would emerge. For the language not to create conflict, the choice of words have to be taken into consideration and selected intentionally and carefully.

Conflict is inevitable in society. It happens whenever there are people with different expectations. Conflict can be avoided if steps are taken early in a discussion to diffuse anger and facilitate communication, and it can be resolved by applying a series of thoughtfully applied steps. From the data collected, asking the right kind of questions, listening and to understand the other party and getting feedback on how to improve the situation are the best tools suited in managing the conflict especially in its early stages. Listening carefully to what the other person is saying to understand the person would go a long way to settle the dispute. The best thing that can be done to get people to the point where they are willing to show some vulnerability and trust you with some of the real reasons why they are upset is to engage in active listening, giving them active physical and verbal signs that you are with them and understand what they are saying. Occasional use of words and phrases like “very good”, “yes”, “indeed” will indicate that you are paying attention. Also, smiling, nodding the head, eye contact, indicate active listening. Open-ended questions should be asked when communicating to manage the conflict, instead of interrogative close-ended questions. This would make the parties go deep to say what they think is important about the situation. These tools would have been best suited at the early stages of the Anglophone conflict in managing the crisis. Using efficiently the communication tools in managing and resolving the crisis would go a long way to put an end to the crisis. The communication tools could be verbal or non-verbal, and could also be the effective use of linguistic skills in managing the conflict.

Of the 3 persons interviewed, answering the question on how language and communication can serve in the management and resolution of the Anglophone Crisis, all the interviewees indicated that the actors are supposed to have a mastery of the context of the crisis so as to know what language to use in communicating and how to communicate. The interviewees also made mention of the fact that diction plays a very important crucial role in conflict resolution and indicated that if the actors of the Cameroon Anglophone conflict can chose their words carefully when communicating, it would go a long way to aid in managing and resolving the conflict. The emphasized on the fact that the language used by the actors portrays a lot of hate speech which has to be curbed so as to effectively resolve the crisis. There is the belief by the interviewees that communication should be cordial and thus non-violent. The language used should not be the type that would rather cause pain to the other person, but should be subtle and accommodative. The interviewees in their answers to this question also think that there has to be a mastery of the language used in resolving the crisis. The meanings of words, both semantically and pragmatically should be understood by the senders and recipients of messages. There should be the avoidance of ambiguous words.

NGOs and Civil Society Organizations in their attempts at resolving the crisis, make mention of the fact that they communicate peace through messages, sending out striking captions through flyers and posters, using nonviolent communication, with intentional selections of their words such that the messages do not escalate the conflict instead. According to them, this has not yet been effective in resolving the crisis probably because the messages and advocacy campaigns have not yet reached the actors of the conflict, or their attempts are not seen as significant by the other actors of the conflict. The choice of words used according to the interviewees rather causes the conflict to escalate, rather than deescalate, giving it a negative effect on the crisis. The diction according to these persons is much more provocative and insulting, rather causing more pain than relieving it. The hate speech portrayed by the actors of the conflict in the language used in resolving the conflict rather has a negative effect on it, making it less effective in the management and resolution of the crisis.

In this paper, the speeches of the Head of State made on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December in the years 2019, 2020, and 2021 were analysed. The following portions of the end of year speeches of the

Head of State talking about the ongoing conflict in Anglophone Cameroon and the attempts made by the government to resolve the conflict were analysed.

### **December 2019**

“For those who persist in going down the wrong road and continue to use violence, we will have no other choice than to combat them in order to protect all our fellow citizens. Our Defense and Security Forces will, once again, perform their duty with restraint, but without weakness. I wish to reassure them of my full support and high esteem.”

### **December 2020**

“I hail the patriotic spirit of those of our fellow citizens in the North-West and South-West Regions who are not only increasingly cooperating with the Defense and Security Forces, but are also courageously fighting these armed gangs. They have realized that these gangs are not acting in the interest of the people. I would also like to commend here the bravery of our Defense and Security Forces that have not failed in their duty to protect the integrity of the national territory, the people and property. They deserve the respect and consideration of everyone. I encourage them to keep it up and to remain a republican force that respects human rights.”

### **December 2021**

“I would like, once again, to reiterate Government’s firm determination to restore peace in the regions that are under security threats. It should be clearly understood that wherever the perpetrators and sponsors of such acts are hiding, they will be relentlessly tracked down and will face the full force of the law. In this fierce fight against barbarism, I urge the Cameroonian people to step up collaboration with our defense and security forces in order to neutralize the fanatics of armed violence and to preserve the integrity of our territory.”

According to Van Dijk (2000), Critical Discourse Analysis primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. In the above speeches made by the Head of State, there is the use of social power abuse and dominance as he talks from time to time about instructing the Security and Defense forces to neutralize war mongers who have not heeded to his appeal to lay down their weapons. He is seen here using his power as the Head of State to dominate and subdue his citizens with the help of the Security and defense forces. The power and dominance

of the Head of State over his citizens is enacted and reproduced by the vocabulary and choice of words he uses in his speeches addressing the nation. His power as the Head of State influences his language and communication as he automatically has power over the citizens of the country and dominates them, possible reasons why power and dominance are portrayed in his language.

If the actors of the Cameroon Anglophone conflict can choose their words carefully when communicating, it would go a long way to aid in managing and resolving the conflict. Any act of communication involves choices. The right choices will produce right results. The power of language resides in the organisation of these choices. The interviewees emphasized on the fact that the language used by the actors portray a lot of hate speech which has to be curbed so as to effectively resolve the crisis. There is the belief by the interviewees that communication should be cordial and thus non-violent. The interviewees in their responses also think that there has to be a mastery of the language used in resolving the crisis. The meanings of words, both semantically and pragmatically should be understood by the senders and recipients of messages. There should be the avoidance of ambiguous words. All conflicts have a context within which they happen and usually a history. The context of the conflict will give an insight to the actors on what language to use, and how to communicate using that language. If there is lack of mastery of the context of the conflict, then it would probably not be managed effectively. Our successes and failures are directly related to what we say and how we say it. How we communicate determines greatly on how people see us, whether as civil, competent, credible, professional and ethical. This is true with both written and spoken word but particularly true of oral communication. No word or phrase means the same thing every time or in every circumstance. Speech on a subconscious level can be irreversible. When the choice of language results in the creation or aggravation of conflict, there is something linguistically amiss with the speaker, listener, or both. The language used should not be the type that would rather cause pain to the other person, but should be subtle and accommodative. If all of this is carried out efficiently, there is the possibility of language and communication serving a positive role in the management and resolution of the Anglophone conflict.

According to Sapir, language is the heart of a people. Language as an instrument of communication can be used to influence personality; to declare war, to provoke, to incite; to oppose ideas, intentions and actions; to scatter, to condemn, blackmail, insult, destroy, tell lies,

claim or testify falsely, to despise, abuse and to generate violence. In another perspective, it could be used to entertain, appeal, inspire, comfort, amuse, appreciate, build, enlighten, educate, establish cordial relationship, settle disputes and make peace with people or communities; to generate peace or to resolve conflicts within and among religious, political, community, industrial, ethnic /tribal groups. Judging from the above illustrative definitions, one can deduce that the function of language is to relay stimuli from one individual to another so as to provoke reactions in the person who hears or reads the communicative signals or linguistic form. Language therefore has the ability to escalate a conflict as well as the ability to de-escalate a conflict, depending on how it is used to communicate. With the situation of the Cameroon Anglophone conflict, the language used by the actors is rather causing the conflict to escalate as it rather generates violence and incites and provokes war.

Talking about choice of words and diction, in the speeches of the Head of State, some appellations like “warmongers”, “terrorists”, referring to some actors of the conflict are seen. It was earlier discussed that diction plays a vital role in conflict resolution and has to be selected wisely by the actors in order for the conflict not to be escalated. These harsh words used by the Head of State on his citizens rather causes more pain, anger and hurt in the heart of individuals rather leading to an escalation of the conflict. Being the Head of State, it is expected that some fatherly love would be shown on the citizens where there is no name calling and use of hurtful words, but rather accommodative and soft language used in order to resolve the conflict.

In relationships, effective communication resides in saying the right thing at the right time, adapting communication to the other person, avoiding the use of offensive language, being aware of the effect of communication on the other person, and making the message as clear as possible. Since most conflicts are grounded on misunderstandings resulting from poor communication, the use of effective communication in this conflict situation can lead to positive consequences. The choice of words used according to the interviewees rather causes the conflict to escalate, rather than deescalate, giving it a negative effect on the crisis. The diction according to these persons is much more provocative and insulting, rather causing more pain than relieving it. The hate speech portrayed by the actors of the conflict in the language used in resolving the conflict rather has a negative effect on it, making it less effective in the management and resolution of the crisis. The hate speech and wrong use of diction could probably be as a result of

the unwillingness by the actors to resolve the conflict, or the frustrations the conflict has brought upon the individual lives of the actors. It could also be as a result of the use of emotions and anger in managing the conflict.

The quality of communication in discourse also depends on the awareness by the participants of the language and culture of that language used to carry out the discourse. Language and culture are inextricably related. One cannot be learned without knowing the other. Language is related to all the features of human life in society, and comprehension of the surrounding culture is key to learning a language. For communication to be successful, the individuals have to be aware of the language and culture. Managing and resolving the Anglophone conflict will entail that the actors have the linguistic ability of the English language when communicating for the quality of the communication to be good. They have to be competent and performant for this to happen, without which the communication would not be effective. In communication, the speaker's explanation is both sentential and extra sentential. The participants are expected to understanding as they communicate in their various attempts at resolving the crisis. Also, the actors of the Anglophone conflict are expected to understand the culture of the English language, which is the main language of communication used in the two Anglophone regions of Cameroon. As earlier discussed, language and culture are intertwined and one cannot go without the other.

There are four communication skills in the English language; listening, reading, speaking and writing. These skills have a vital role to play in the conflict resolution process. Without listening, it is impossible to assess that which makes it difficult to achieve a win/win outcome. Active listening is important because if we cannot listen to the person sitting across from us, we cannot effectively engage with them. In a negotiation process, part of the process is to assess what the opposition wants and needs. The parties conflicting should actively listen to one another for a win-win situation to be met. All forms of written communication be it an email, a report, a post on social media have the same goal, which is to disseminate information in a clear and concise manner. Most of the times, this objective is not achieved. Poor writing skills often lead to confusion and embarrassment. The messages in written communication live on, perhaps in perpetuity. When writing, there are two things to remember; write well. Poorly constructed sentences and careless errors make look bad; ensure the content of the message is

something you want to promote or be associated with for the long haul. Verbal communication occurs when we engage in speaking with or to others. It can be face-to face, over the phone, or on zoom. When engaging in verbal communication, it is not just about the words, but also about the complexity and calibre of those words, how the words are strung together to create an overreaching message, as well as intonation (pitch, tone) used while speaking. What we do while we speak often says more than the actual words. Non-verbal communication has to do with facial expressions, posture, eye contact, hand movements, and touch. All of these skills have a crucial role to play in conflict resolution situations and if they are not used effectively, the objectives would not be met. The participants have to master these skills so as to be able to communicate effectively for the conflict to be resolved.

The interviewees in their answers to the question on the possible ways of communicating effectively, believe that the messages communicated should be correct, precise and concise. According to them, the messages communicated should be correct or true, straight to the point and clear. The communication should be done considering the receivers of the message. If this is done, the probability of the conflict being resolved would be high. Language and culture are intertwined and go together. Speakers of a language have a particular culture that may be unique to them. For effective communication to take place such that it would resolve the crisis, the interviewees believe that the communicators should take into consideration the culture of those they are communicating with. Listening should be active while communication is taking place for the communication to be effective. Active listening would mean the communicators pay keen attention to the communication, and understand themselves as they listen to each other communicate. The interviewees believe if this is done, the communication will thus be effective enough to resolve the conflict.

## **Conclusion**

Through the data analysed, it can be concluded that the vocabulary used in managing the Cameroon Anglophone conflict is not adequate enough to cause an end to the crisis. The actors of the conflict do not make use of the language strategies in their attempts at resolving the crisis probably because they do not give language the important role it plays in conflict resolution. The communication strategies used in managing the crisis is not efficient enough to successfully resolve it. The vocabulary used by the actors of the conflict rather cause the conflict to escalate

as they rather cause hurt and anger in the hearts of fellow actors, causing more violent actions to be exhibited.

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