

## Language of Violence in Classroom Interaction in Lagos

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### Abstract:

One's existence as a person remains dependent on the recognition and confirmation of others. Injurious words put this existence as a person into question to a greater or lesser extent; our status as the embodiment of a community is thereby refused or belittled. The technical repertoire of linguistic violence is large: an injury can be inflicted by insult, humiliation, degradation, vilification, debasement, and much more. Teachers should discourage such lexis as: mad, fool, witch and bastard in classroom interaction.

### Introduction:

"Our civilization is decadent and our language so the argument runs.... It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism, like preferring candles to electric light or hansom cabs to aeroplanes. Underneath this lies the half conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes".  
George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," p. 12

Violence is not simply an action or a practice, it has many dimensions. It is a perception, an expression, a way to be seen or heard, a form of domination, a mode of discrimination and a lack, absence or decline of communication. Violence is a social, economic, cultural and political issue, instilled in language. Language acts as a map that mediates reality through everyday communications; so violence becomes instilled in reality. Evans (2010) reiterates that violence is not simply material force: it is the use of force as a tool for some human purpose, individual or social. Hirschi (2002) is of the opinion that every society exploits the possibility that actions can be controlled by the fact, memory, and anticipation of pain inflicted by others. Children are hurt to make them behave, sometimes with blows and sometimes with words, but equally with pain. Theories of child development make it easy to forget how often parents make children cry and how basic this violence is to the socializing

process (Kessler, Avenevoli & Merikangas, 2001). Theories of economic and ideological domination, likewise, can obscure how the powerful exploit the powerless through pain. Violence exerts its social effects as much through what it means as through what it physically does (Sullivan, Kung, & Farrell, 2004).

Levin (2007) explains that there are two types of violence: First, the physical, hard violence which is executed by things like fists, canes, batons and guns. Second, the softer forms of violence such as verbal violence are executed by: the Brain's speech centre, the vocal cords, the lips and tongue- in the form of violent words. Soft violence usually happens with no consequences, no responsibility and no accountability for the perpetrator. This is otherwise called 'Violent Language'. Violent language includes "All harsh and rude speech, wounding the feelings of others by gesture, expression, tone of voice and unkind words" (Miller, 2007). It also entails showing contempt towards another person, by entertaining unreasonable dislike for or prejudice towards anybody, by frowning at, by hating and by speaking ill of others". Hatred is an intense feeling of dislike which is often associated with feelings of anger. There is a connection between the emotion of hate and human language by stating that Hate is spread through our words. "If hatred lives in language, the seeds of hatred exist in human cognition" (Lakoff & Ide, 2005).

### **Reasons for Violent Language**

Violence is not merely capable of depicting violence or locating its consequences with language; rather, one's speech in its execution can be a form of enacting violence (Jaccard & Turrisi, 2003). Violence can be defined as an instance of someone inflicting injury upon someone else. The addressee of violence is always a person. In the concept of 'person', however, there is already a "double corporeality" attached; we are always both physical and symbolic bodies, we are unquestionably individuals and at the same time part of a community. As a result, we can give and receive both physical and social injuries. Agnew (2006), hinging his explanations on Cooley's theory opines that one's existence as a person remains dependent on the recognition and confirmation of others. Injurious words put this existence as a person into question to a greater or lesser extent; our status as the embodiment of a community is thereby refused or belittled. Verbal injuries, like all acts of violence, are not purely individual acts. Physical as well as verbal force always appears together in historical and social orders as symbolically coded, i.e., as legitimate, recognized, or illegitimate violence (Beeghly, 2003). Like Max Weber's sociological analysis of violence, violence-forming/formed speech acts can be adopted for the implementation, reproduction, or resistance to power and authority relationships. On the one hand, violent speech acts presuppose authority relationships in order to be

effective at all, but on the other hand function as instruments to construct or transform these relationships.

Miller (2007) reveals that the technical repertoire of linguistic violence is large and an injury can be inflicted by insult, humiliation, degradation, vilification, debasement, and much more. Consequently, there is a demand for a differentiated description of the 'rhetorics of injury' which are applied in violence-forming/formed speech (Stith, Rosen, Middleton, Busch, Lunderberg, & Carlton, 2000). What mechanisms are used? Contempt, for example, can be realized distinctly through different forms of linguistic violence – as the distinction and distancing of the speaker from the addressed subject, or as the barbed reminder of the addressed subject's social place.

### **Classification of Violent Language:**

Miller (2007) classified violent language thus:

**Defamation:** Defamation is: A false accusation of an offense or a malicious misrepresentation of someone's words or actions. Defamatory communication tends to harm the reputation of another. Defamation is false, malicious and injurious statements about the reputation of another.

**Slander:** Slander is words falsely spoken that damage the reputation of another.

**Character Assassination:** Character assassination is an attempt to tarnish a person's reputation. It may involve exaggeration, misleading half-truths, or manipulation of facts to present an untrue picture of the targeted person. Such acts are often difficult to reverse or rectify, and the process is likened to a literal assassination of a human life. The damage sustained can last a lifetime. Character assassination may involve doublespeak, spreading of rumours, innuendo or deliberate misinformation on topics relating to the subject's morals, integrity and reputation. It may involve spinning information that is technically true, but that is presented in a misleading manner or is presented without the necessary context.

**Antilocution:** Antilocution is defined as: Verbal remarks against a person, group or community, which are not addressed directly to the target. This is generally referred to as 'Talking behind someone's back'.

**DYSPHEMISM:** Dysphemism is the use of an: Intentionally harsh word or expression instead of a polite one; they are rough opposites of euphemism. For example, the dysphemism of the neutral term rebel is: a terrorist; the euphemism of a rebel is: a freedom fighter.

## **Theoretical Framework: JOHAN GALTUNG'S Theory of Violence**

Galtung (1988) states that violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations. The opposite of violence is peace, which encompasses "peace with nature, peace between genders, generations and races, where the excluded are included not by force, and where classes, nations and states serve neither direct nor structural violence." He differentiated between personal violence and structural violence. In structural violence, violence is built into the structure, and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances. It is the unequal distribution of resources, and the unequal distribution of the power to decide over the distribution of resources that give rise to structural violence. In this interpretation, resources are seen as not only material or economic, but also nonmaterial. So, for Galtung (2002), when one husband beats his wife there is a clear case of personal violence, but when 1 million husbands keep 1 million wives in ignorance there is structural violence.

**The Biological Level :** Because humans are physical creatures, it follows that there can be biological risk factors for violence. At this time, little is known about biological risk factors because this research is in its infancy. While very few people believe that biological factors ultimately will account for more than a small amount of family violence, some violence do appear to be associated with intellectual deficits, organic problems, head injuries, and hormones. Buss (2005) argues that critically, biological risk factors are potentially helpful only for understanding the behaviour of people who are violent in all spheres of their lives. Biology cannot be referenced when people use violence against family members but not against strangers, employers, or friends.

**The Psychological Level:** Buka, Stichick, Birthistle, & Earls (2001) expound that humans are characterized by complex and symbolic thinking, remembering, emotions, needs, and desires. It follows that there can be psychological risk factors for violence. Psychological risk factors of violence that routinely are relayed through the mass media often are trite and mundane and rely on circular reasoning. Psychological theories are of no help in understanding why "spankings," "pushes," "shoves," and "slaps" are a routine feature of family life; they become necessary when violence is obviously and most certainly abusive. While recognizing biological and psychological risk factors, sociological perspectives strongly argue that these rarely are sufficient, and often are not even necessary, to understand violence. Travers (2010) asserts that the search for the risk factors of violence cannot end at the level of individual biology or psychology.

**The Interactional Level:** Because classroom violence involves people, who know one another, violence might be associated with characteristics of interaction. The

interactional level therefore can account for only some violence. Too much emphasis on this interactional level can divert attention from understanding the complexity of violence. Loseke (2003) cautions that it could serve to unjustly blame victims.

**The Social Structural Level:** While recognizing that in some ways that each group is unique, sociological perspectives focus on examining characteristics shared by many. Ackerly (2000) explicates that a full understanding of something as complex as group violence requires looking closely at how social environments can be a risk factor for violence. There is not one sociological theory that can adequately account for all violence.

**Control Theory:** Rather than asking why some people are violent, control theory asks why most people are not violent. The theoretical answer is that people are controlled by bonds to other people and to social institutions and by the fear of punishment (Tyler, 2006).

### **Reproduction: Symbolic Violence in Educational Systems**

If Bourdieu is correct, then educational systems are characterized by inculcation and a need to reproduce the social relations of production in schools and society. These fulfill schooling's obligation to pass on an arbitrary cultural design, or what Bourdieu calls the *cultural arbitrary*. This term refers to the culture of the dominant classes, which is actually, though not in appearance, based on power. Educational systems cannot escape these social and economic functions: they must reproduce the social relations between classes as they exist in schools and the labour market.

Bourdieu's theories of symbolic violence in educational systems are presented in a series of propositions and glosses that have their own logic and internal consistency. They begin with pedagogic action as the central relationship in the schooling experience, seeing it as the point at which children are regularly subjected to symbolic violence. It is in the act of instruction that an arbitrary cultural scheme is dictated to students by school authorities. It is in the pedagogical act that meaning and values are dictated by agents of the dominant classes on weaker ones. "Every power to exert symbolic violence," Bourdieu wrote, "every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force, adds its own specifically symbolic force to those power relations." This leads to a second thesis about the twofold arbitrariness of pedagogic action: "All pedagogic action is, objectively, symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power." Bourdieu defines the cultural arbitrary as those communications between teachers and their students which cannot be deduced from any principle, "which are devoid any sociological or psychological referent." Bourdieu and his associates studied variations in the efficiency of students from different social and scholastic backgrounds and their

ability to receive pedagogic communications successfully. They wished to uncover the primary principles underlying the inequalities in academic achievement of children of different social origins and sexes.

Bourdieu's theories sought to explain how cultural and linguistic competencies, or capital, were used to stratify social classes and knowledge in schools. He wished to understand schooling as it was developing during a transition period in France and in other parts of the modern world. Furthermore, his use of a Marxian theoretical framework meant that the schooling of youth was to be closely related to the social, economic, and industrial structures in society. We will deal with these issues when we critique Bourdieu's theories. Here it is enough to say that Bourdieu was interested in the way that society maintained itself and reproduced its cultural and social structures through familial and educational indoctrination.

In *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, Bourdieu and Passeron offer a theory of symbolic violence written in precise language and covering pedagogic action, authority, and work. This was followed by other propositions and glosses about school authority, the educational system, and the reproductive functions of schooling in modern society. Their logic and preciseness stand in contrast to the work of others writing about the schools today. Indeed, the theoretical framework they develop is one of the most comprehensive and stimulating in the social sciences and deserves attention and interest.

### **Sensitization of Teachers Towards Violent Lexis in the classroom**

Today in Nigerian communities as well as in schools abusive pellets are common place. What many do not realise is that verbal violence is at the root of physical violence and it seems a lot of people are really forgetting the effects of the lexis of violence on others. The question that bugs the mind is what is the provocative lexis in classroom interaction?

#### **Students' use of violent languages**

<b>Abuse –</b>	You're mad! ( <i>Onyara</i> ) , You're crazy, shameless animal, stupid, Big fool, Your head is not correct. Your father. <i>Oni ranu. Mumu. Ashewo</i> – prostitute. Witch. Son of a bitch
<b>Bossing –</b>	I'm Í your mate? What do you mean? Are you out of your senses? What's the matter with you? Don't ever mention it to me again.
<b>Cursing-</b>	Bastard ( <i>omo ale</i> ), You wil never prosper!
<b>Shouting –</b>	I hate you. Let thunder fire you ( <i>otoro gbabuegi</i> ),

**Threatening** – Take your time. Just try it. Try me.

From observation, it was deduced that usage of violent lexis are precursors to violent actions and reactions among students. Abuses, cursing, shouting and threatening are common place. Violent lexis among adolescents is a widespread crisis with potentially fatal consequences. One's existence as a person remains dependent on the recognition and confirmation of others. Injurious words put this existence as a person into question to a greater or lesser extent; our status as the embodiment of a community is thereby refused or belittled. Verbal injuries, like all acts of violence, are not purely individual acts. Like Max Weber's sociological analysis of violence, violence-forming/formed speech acts can be adopted for the implementation, reproduction, or resistance to power and authority relationships. It is important therefore that teachers are sensitized to this phenomenon to rise and address the issue in classroom interaction. Adolescents are inexperienced in relationships and may, therefore, overlook obvious signs of abuse as well as misinterpret abuse as love. Change of language is the first and decisive step. Finally, teachers should discourage such lexis as: mad, fool, witch and bastard in classroom interaction.

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