

# Language, Rhetoric and Violence in Nigeria's National Assembly

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**Abstract:** With over 250 indigenous languages and ethnicities, Nigeria typifies the proverbial tower of Babel for which English is both the official language and a tool for political stability. The National Education Policy (2004) adopts English as the medium of instruction from primary four upwards while the country's Constitution (1999) provides that English is the language of business in its bicameral legislature. Since the dawn of democratic rule in Nigeria in 1999, physical fights and other aggressive behaviors have remained constant features of the legislative houses. Using the descriptive analytical methodology, this paper contextualizes the linkage between language, rhetorical (in)capacity and violence. It contends that the dialogical discontinuity between thought and expression and lack of appropriate rhetorical skills among some legislators are traceable to their low educational level and the use of a second language (English) for official business. The paper recommends the improvement of the educational qualification benchmark for membership of the National Assembly.

**Keywords:** English language, violence, National Assembly, legislator(s), communication, fighting

## INTRODUCTION

The concern of this paper is the exploration and contextualization of the linkage between rhetorical (in)capacity and the recurrence of violence in Nigeria's National Assembly. This line of inquiry is informed by the fact that fundamentally, every act of violence may be regarded as a failure of persuasion (Bardowell 2017). While factors such as religious pluralism, cultural diversity and intolerance, ethnicity, political marginalization, and elite contestation for power have frequently been implicated in the regime of violence in Nigeria (Bello 2013), the apparent nexus between language, rhetoric and

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violence in the country's legislature has hardly been interrogated. We argue that such interrogation is important because rhetoric is a modality of language use and sharing of meaning which is crucial for the success of society to the extent that human existence involves several situations where the support of other people is needed for the success of a proposed action (Young 1996, 130). Since Nigeria gained political independence from Britain in 1960 up to the subsisting democratic dispensation, both chambers of its bicameral legislature: House of Representatives and Senate have serially witnessed orgies of violent and bloody confrontations. In the Senate, recent examples of such violence include: the fight between those in support and those in opposition to Senator Arthur Nzeribe's motion for the impeachment of the then President, Olusegun Obasanjo in April 2000; the contentious vote of confidence on the then Senate President, Dr. Bukola Saraki in September 2015; the ill-tampered debate over President Muhammadu Buhari's claim in April 2018 that the civil war in Libya gave rise to the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria; the reactions by members to the threat by Senator Dino Melaye in July 2018 to beat up and impregnate a fellow Senator, Mrs. Remi Tinubu, who called him a "dog" and a "thug", among other instances.

In Nigeria's House of Representatives, instances of legislative violence include: the reaction of members to the suspension of eleven legislators ("the progressives") in June 2010 who accused the Speaker, Oladimeji Bankole of misappropriation of the sum of ₦9 billion (about US \$25 million); the violent reaction to the move by a splinter group of the then ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) to address members of the House in September 2013; the violent disagreement which followed the selection of the majority leader of the House of Representatives in June 2015, to mention only a few. The point of departure of this paper is that considering many factors such as ideological and partisan differences, conflict of interests, divergent impulses and temperaments, intense competition for influence in public policy formulation and resource allocation, which make parliamentary rows and fisticuffs inevitable, Nigeria presents a unique situation in legislative violence. Using the descriptive analytical approach, we argue that the recurrence and intensity of physical violence in the country's bicameral legislature show communication breakdown and transactional discontinuity among the legislative interlocutors bordering on rhetorical incompetence. We suggest that the perversity of physical violence in Nigeria's National Assembly is

traceable to deficient rhetorical skill among some of the legislators on account of their reliance on a second language (English) as the medium of legislative communication in the face of the low educational benchmark set by the country's Constitution for membership of the National Assembly. We further contend that the adoption of English as Nigeria's official language in the context of its polyglot background with over 250 indigenous languages and ethnicities (Attah 1987) is merely a political exigency which is attended with a member of cultural and developmental contradictions.

#### NIGERIA: A HISTORY OF LEGISLATIVE VIOLENCE

Political violence refers to the deliberate use of force to achieve premeditated political objectives (World Health Organization 2019). Such violence is often encouraged by internal and external contradictions in the political system. In Nigeria's political space, a predominant view (Ibiyemi and Ebiefie 2015) is that politics and violence are like Siamese twins for the reason that, historically, political activities have always featured various degrees of violence. Historically, the tempo of political violence in Nigeria gathered momentum following the national elections conducted immediately after independence in the 1960s (Bello 2013). For instance, the federal and regional elections conducted in the western region between 1964 and 1965 gave rise to wanton violence during which many lives were lost. In the Northern Region, political violence also found expression in bloody clashes between supporters of the Northern People's Congress (NPC) and supporters of other political parties especially the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) and the Action Group.

Following the Nigeria civil war (1967-1970) and several years of military rule, subsequent elections in the country were also characterized by massive violence. The 1983 national election was attended with violence leading to the loss of many lives following the declared victory of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) in Oyo and Ondo States which were considered the strongholds of the Unity Party of Nigeria. Over the years, the trend has continued. Available statistics indicate that between June 1999 and the end of 2002 for instance, over 10,000 lives were lost to violent political clashes in Nigeria. There is mentioned that, in 2001 alone, the Nigerian Red Cross was involved in the resettlement of over 250,000 individuals and 32,000 families as a result of acts of political violence in parts of the country. The spectre of political violence in Nigeria seemed to reach its apogee with the

abduction of the then incumbent Governor of Anambra State, South East Nigeria, Dr. Chris Ngige on 10<sup>th</sup> July 2003 in a grand plot by political power merchants and godfathers to unseat him (see Aver et al. 2013). Since the inception of the current democratic dispensation in the country in 1999 till date, the number of people who have lost their lives in political clashes in Nigeria is comparable to the number of people killed during the civil war (Ibid.). According to the Human Rights Watch (2003), political violence in Nigeria has persisted because little concrete action is taken against those who use violence to further their political ambitions.

Given the widespread occurrence of political violence in Nigeria, it is hardly surprising that it has negatively conditioned the tenor of socio-political relations among the political actors in particular and the citizenry in general. Aver, Nnorom and Targba (2013, 261) underline that “[the] culture of violence has not only been imbibed and sustained as part of the country’s political behavior since independence, it has been one of the potent causes of the low participation of Nigerians in politics and other social activities.” R. Howell (2004, 26) echoes these sentiments by stressing that political violence negates peaceful co-existence, law and order. Over the years, violence has increasingly become an index of political and social engagement in Nigeria and the country’s legislature is not insulated from the menace. Indeed, the roots of violence in Nigeria’s post-independent politics are traceable to the crisis in the Western Nigerian regional government in 1962 which led to physical fighting in its House of Assembly as “fists, chairs and other harmful weapons found new use as missiles during debates” (Nwabuzor 2000, 1).

At independence in 1960, the country was composed of three regions: Northern, Eastern, and Western Regions. The fourth region Mid-west was later created in 1963. Each region was controlled by a dominant political party within its sphere of influence. Thus, the North was controlled by Northern People’s Congress (NPC); the East by the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC), and the West by the Action Group (AG). According to Ibiyemi and Ebiefie (2015, 215), the crisis erupted within the ruling Action Group in the Western Region in 1962 leading to a split of the party. Following the crisis in the ruling party, the Premier of the Western Region, Chief Samuel Akintola, was removed by the Regional Governor who appointed Alhaji D.S. Adegbenro as the new Premier. Irked by his ouster, the deposed Premier, Chief Akintola refused to accept his removal. At the

ensuing meeting at the Western Regional House of Assembly, the legislators fought freely prompting the invitation of the police who used teargas to disperse the members. Sequel to the development, the Federal Government declared a state of emergency throughout the Western region and appointed Dr. Moses Majekodunmi as the Administrator of the region. Since the violent confrontation among the legislators of the Western Regional House of Assembly, physical fights have remained regular features of Nigeria's legislative houses at both the central and the regional (state) levels.

In both chambers of Nigeria's National Assembly, legislative violence is also viewed as a function of rhetorical deficit and communicative incompetence among many of the legislative interlocutors who are forced to use a second language (English) as the medium of communication during plenary. Essentially, parliamentary activities are carried out through debates in line with institutional practices and established rules of engagement. The importance of rhetoric as handmaid of parliamentary debates is that political legitimacy is underpinned by the challenge of getting people to listen to and accept what is said (Paine 1981). This underscores the transactional nexus between communication and fulfillment needs. As Siddiq (2016, 12) has stressed, "if communication is successful, needs are met, current relationships are strengthened and new ones are built. But if communication fails or is broken, needs fulfillment is interrupted and conflict moves towards violence. Thus, violence is the result of "unfulfilled needs". Nwabuzor (2000, 2) avers that "the frequent recourse to physical fighting by members of the National Assembly is suggestive of the short temper in their makeup and their inability to engage in peaceful debates".

#### PROBLEMATIZING ENGLISH AS MEDIUM OF LEGISLATIVE COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIA

In Nigeria, effective communication in English language in the National Assembly is often impaired by a combination of linguistic and socio-cultural factors connected with the circumstances that fostered English as the official language and medium of legislative business. This is implicated in the reoccurrence of violence in Nigeria's House of Representatives and the Senate. The foundation for the adoption of English as Nigeria's official language was laid by the colonial administration in the Education Ordinance of 1882 which provided that English shall be the medium of educational instruction

and manpower training in the areas that later became known as Nigeria. It was subsequently reenacted by the Education Ordinance of 1896, 1918 and 1926 respectively (Baldeh 1990, 4). Upon Nigeria's attainment of independence in 1960, the spirit of the colonial language policy found expression in the adoption of English as Nigeria's official language.

However, since independence, Nigeria's language policy has been a study in ambivalence. This is because the recognition that language is the carrier and transmitter of culture and values from one generation to another made Nigeria's policy makers to accord some measure of importance to the development and promotion of the country's indigenous languages (Attah 1987). Similarly, the imperatives of linguistic neutrality, international connectivity and the exigencies of socio-political stability in the face of the country's ethno-linguistic diversity informed the adoption and retention of English as Nigeria's official language. The result is that the temper of Nigeria's language policy oscillates between the dictates of "political and cultural sovereignty" and the imperative of international connectivity. The National Policy on Education which was articulated in 1973 and revised in 1981, 1998 and 2005 respectively, captures the ambivalence of Nigeria's language policy when, in section 1 sub-section 10(a), it provides that "every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment". In pursuit of this goal, section 2(c) of the National Policy on Education provides that government shall "ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community." To entrench the objective of promoting indigenous languages, section 4.19(e-f) of the National Policy on Education further provides that "the medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years" while English shall become the medium of instruction from the fourth year.

The implication of the language policy is that the Nigerian child is expected to be bilingual with his knowledge base founded on the mother tongue and English as a second language. For the legislature, section 55 of the Constitution of Nigeria (1999) provides that "the business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English." Also, section 65.2(a) provides that the educational qualification for membership of the National Assembly is the school certificate or its equivalent. A community reading of sections 55 and 65.2(a) of the Constitution of Nigeria and sections 1.10, 2(c) and 4.19 of the National

Policy on Education unambiguously indicate that for members of the National Assembly, English is a second language and consequently that they are burdened by the established impairments or handicaps which second language users traditionally bear. The trajectory between frequent communication breakdown and proclivity for violence stems from “forcing” legislators to grapple with the challenges of using English as the medium of communication; leading to physical fighting as channels of conflict resolution.

Many studies (Tomori 1967, Davies 1967, Oji 1988, Eyesi 2004, and Akwanya 2007) have all shown that Nigerian children (and by extension Nigerian adults) are victims of partial language deficiency or lack of proficiency in the English language as evidenced by their poor performance in the school certificate examinations. Part of the explanation for this state of affairs is that the environment of the Nigerian school child contains many languages with the effect that the first language interferes with the learning of the second language. The linkage between communicative incompetence and the predilection to violence seems inescapable having regard to two related factors. The first is that the Constitution of Nigeria places the qualifying benchmark for membership of the National Assembly at School Certificate level of education or its equivalent. The second is that over the years, for reasons already enunciated, the performance of Nigerians in English language in the West African School Certificate Examinations has been generally poor.

In locating the nexus between the poor language capacity of some members of the Nigerian National Assembly in English as a second language and medium of legislative communication and their violent proclivities, we find support in the theoretical model of language ability and physical aggression among infants which holds that poor language capacity leads to aggressive behaviors owing to the impairment of the ability to effectively communicate in social situations. Poor language ability can give rise to frustration and the use of aggression as an alternative tool for communication (Girard et al. 2014, 23). It can also impede the ability to effectively resolve social conflicts thereby increasing the recourse to aggressive behaviors. This tendency is not limited to infants and children because “longitudinal studies with both clinical and non-clinical samples have supported the association from poor language to increased externalizing problems such as aggression from the ages of five into adolescence and adulthood” (Ibid.).

In Nigeria, experience has shown that incompetence in the use of English as a second language finds expression in inappropriate language use in various discourse situations. The disconnection between effective communication and grammatical correctness is hinged on the fact that appropriateness in language use is what makes for meaning-making, acceptability and ease of comprehension of what is communicated (Adetugbo 1979). The importance of appropriateness in language use as a vehicle of effective communication is further underscored by the fact that communicatively competent interlocutors are usually aware of the parameters and determinants of co-variation and linguistic etiquette which have implications for meaning-making and needs fulfillment, on one hand, and communication breakdown and violence, on the other. Consequently, it seems logical to assert that the difficulties associated with the use of English as a second language and medium of communication in Nigeria's National Assembly are implicated in inappropriate language use and communicative incompetence, rhetorical deficiency and collateral physical aggression. This is because "the purpose of rhetoric is to persuade, conquer, convert and ultimately change others" (Hardesty 2013, 2). So, the serial inability of many members of the National Assembly to verbally persuade their colleagues in given discourse situations often gives rise to violence evince lack of rhetorical skill. Therefore, the use of interpreters, translators and the transcription of vital documents from English to the local languages become imperative in the National Assembly. Such measures will accord to the intendment of section 55 of the Constitution of Nigeria as regards the indigenous languages "when adequate arrangements have been made therefore".

## CONCLUSION

Politics and violence seem to be constant companions in Nigeria as many political leaders in the country easily ride to power on the crest of violence. Since the inception of the current democratic dispensation in Nigeria in 1999, physical fights and violent confrontations have been regular fares in the nation's bicameral legislature: the Senate and the House of Representatives. The recurrence of violence in the National Assembly represents a failure of rhetoric arising from communicative incompetence and persuasion deficiency of the legislators in the use of English as a second language. In the face of the established linkage between poor rhetorical capacity and aggressive behavior, the conclusion that recurrent physical fights in the National

Assembly is a manifestation of failure of discourse seems inescapable. The use of interpreters, translators and the transcription of vital legislative documents from English to the major Nigerian languages can stop the trend.

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