

EXPLORING LANGUAGE OF COMMUNICATION IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

BY

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Abstract

The language of communication is the glue that holds people in a relationship. It is an essential component in developing a long lasting relationship, because both partners make choices about their language of communication to negotiate the nature of their relationship. Interpersonal relationship develops through language of communication when two people meet for the first time. However, the use of language between them will either move the relationship forward or lead to the termination of the relationship. The paper seeks to address the extent to which language of communication can be applied to building and maintaining interpersonal relationship among partners. The paper explores the speech act theory to understand the meaning in the use of words. The concept of language in this paper was used as a form of communication among partners in relationships which leads to relationship maintenance or deterioration. While mentioning some challenges of language of communication the paper suggest some strategies for improving them in interpersonal relationships. The paper conclude on the role that language as a communication vehicle can play in improving various relationships in order to avoid conflict situations that always arise from interpersonal relationships.

Key words: Interpersonal communication, Language, Communication, Interpersonal relationship, partners.

Introduction

The nature of relationship, either friendship or romantic, determines the styles of communication. Because communication is contexts-dependent, it is generated in the course of interaction. Hence, communication enables the construction and reconstruction of individual and joint histories, which whenever anything goes wrong in a relationship, enables partners to work together to define what happened in a way that allows them to continue. As partners communicate thoughts and feelings, they generate shared meanings for themselves in their interaction and relationship. Communication is also the primary means through which people construct a future for themselves and their relationships. It allows partners to express and share dreams, imaginations, and memories, and to weave all of these into shared understandings of a continuing relationship. Hence, through interpersonal communication we build, refine, and transform relationships (Wood, 2010).

The use of language as a form of communication is considered to be an indispensable human endowment. It is conceptualized as having, perhaps, 'magical and mystical' and 'unique role in capturing the breath of human thought and endeavours' (Adejimola, 2009). Many studies, derived from the famous Sapir-Wharf's hypothesis of 'linguistic determinism' and 'linguistic relativity', have shown that there exists relationship between language and thought. That relationship clearly indicates that language is the vehicle for thought (Adejimola, 2009). Communication starts at this thought level which is termed intrapersonal communication. Intrapersonal communications are then mostly revealed through non-verbal communication which could contribute to relationship maintenance or deterioration.

Hence, the focus of this paper is to examine the role that the use of language as a communication vehicle can play in improving various relationships in order to avoid conflict situations that always arise from such relationships. It seeks also to examine the extent to which language of

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communication can be applied as strategies in building and maintaining lasting interpersonal relationship among partners. It as well addresses issues related to language of communication in relationship development and deterioration and considers the perspectives of various scholars on how to improve interpersonal relationships among partners (Salako, 2006).

According to Adejmolola (2009), through language and communication we can see the heart of people. This implies that language makes it possible to express feelings, emotions, views, ideas, opinions, perceptions as well as judgment about people, objects, places, things, information and situations. Therefore, interpersonal relationship is about interpersonal communication expressed through language between two relating partners.

Communication is also the pathway to human development. This process involves conscious or accidental transfer of meaning in which one person does or says something, thereby engaging in symbolic behaviour, while another person observes what was done or said and attributes meaning to it. Hence, whenever a person observes or gives meaning to behaviour, communication has taken place. Communication relates to the presence and sharing of accurate information about a situation and ability to talk about feelings...hence, it involves interpersonal communication which is important in any interpersonal relationship (Pearson, Nelson, Titsworth, and Harter, 2008).

The relationship between Language and Communication

Adejmolola, (2009) defines "language as a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols". He sated further that "language as an instrument of communication may 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". These variations of illustrating the functions and uses of language reveal its importance in communication. There are various scholarly definitions of communication.

Communication from a layman perspective is the face-to-face, verbal and non-verbal exchange of information, opinions, and/or feelings between two or more people. Adejmolola, (2009) citing Shannon and Weaver (1977) define communication as "all the procedures by which one mind may affect another". Communication also involves a process in which information and understanding are passed to the receiver and the knowledge of its effect is passed back to the sender in the form of feedback. Effective communication is consists of three basic elements: a sender, a receiver, and an understood message. The elements of effective communication reveal that every process of communication must be complete. This means all issues of questions and answers must be satisfactory to those involved in the exchange of information. In addition, such messages must be concise to help easy understanding of the other party and avoids unnecessary repetition. Effective communication should be concrete, factual and accurate to establish believability while the same should be clear, precise and understandable. Also, the messages should be accurate, encoded in the level of language apt for the situation. Ambiguity and discriminatory expressions should also be avoided. Hence, communication in this context is vital to human interaction if appropriate message that will facilitate and sustain interpersonal relationship will be achieved.

The Nature of Interpersonal Communication

Studies have shown that we interact daily with people we have known all our lives, and with these we have just met. Everyday we engage in interpersonal communication with family, friends, and strangers through face-to-face, online, mobile phones and other interpersonal channels. This interaction results into building links and establishing relationships that eventually satisfy our personal and social needs. The way we exchange information in those contexts determine how well we communicate with others and how fulfilling we find such interactions. It is suffice to say that these daily interactions or continuous relationships are sustained by interpersonal communication (Hargie and Dickson, 2004).

Hence, interpersonal communication can be said to involve a direct face-to-face relationship between the sender and the receiver of a message, who are in an interdependent relationship. Because of the primacy interpersonal communication in human interactions, it is characterized by a strong feedback component. Relationship is enhanced when communication is sustained over a long period of time. For strong effects, interpersonal communication combines both words and various elements of nonverbal communication. The purposes of interpersonal communication are to influence, help and discover, as well as to share and play together (Wood, 2010). Hence, according to Wood, (2009):

Interpersonal communication is central to our everyday lives. We count on others to care about what is happening in our lives and to help us sort through problems and concerns. We want them to share our worries and our joys. We communicate to develop identities, establish and build relationships,... interpersonal communication is central to our effectiveness and our everyday lives. It is the lifeblood of meaningful relationships.

Wood, (2010) citing interpersonal needs theory by psychologist William Schutz (1966), asserts that the tendency to create and sustain relationships depends on how well it meets three basic needs. The first need is affection; the desire to give and receive love and liking. The second need is inclusion; the desire to be social and to be included in groups. The third need is control, which is a desire to influence the people and events in our lives.

Theoretical Framework

Speech Act Theory

The Speech act theory was propounded by Searle (1969) but has its foundation from the work of Wittgenstein (1958) and Austin (1962). Ludwig Wittgenstein began a line of thought called 'ordinary language philosophy'. He explained that the meaning of language depends on its actual use. Language, as used in ordinary life, is a language game because it consists of rules. In other words, people follow rules to do things with the language. The theory which is also known as the theory of meaning holds that the meaning of linguistic expressions can be explained in terms of the rules governing their use in performing various speech acts (e.g., admonishing, asserting, commanding, exclaiming, promising, questioning, requesting and warning). In contrast to theories that maintain that linguistic expressions have meaning by virtue of their contribution to the truth conditions of sentences where they occur, it explains linguistic meaning in terms of the use of words and sentences in the performance of speech acts. Some exponents claim that the meaning of a word is nothing but its contribution to the nature of the speech acts that can be performed by using it (www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1308483/speech-act-theory).

Hence, according to Searle, (1969) to understand language one must understand the speaker's intention. Since language is intentional behavior, it should be treated like a form of action. Thus he refers to statements as speech acts. The speech act is the basic unit of language used to express meaning, an utterance that expresses an intention. The speech act theory states that "the act of speaking

is the act of performance". Hence, understanding the speaker's intention is essential to capture the meaning of the speech. Without the speaker's intention, it is impossible to understand the words. Searle, (1969) believes that speakers perform acts by observing two types of rules: constitutive rules or definition rules (create or define new forms of behavior) and regulative or behavior rules (these rules govern types of behavior that already exist). Hence, speech act theory has contributed to the rules perspective in communication because it provides a basis for examining what happens when speakers use different definition and behavior rules. By analyzing the rules used by each speaker, researchers can better understand why conversational misunderstandings have occurred (Searle, 1969). The relevance of the speech act theory to this paper is that the appropriateness in the use of language in admonishing, asserting, commanding, exclaiming, promising, questioning, requesting and warning can either sustained or dissolved interpersonal relationship. Hence, understanding the speaker's intention by the listeners during interpersonal communication is vital to continuity of interpersonal relationship between partners. This presupposes that choosing the right language will better enhance interpersonal communication and sustain relationship in the long run.

Interpersonal Communication Sustains Relationships

The foundation of any interpersonal relationship starts from friendship. Friendship according to Devito (2009) is an interpersonal relationship that is mutually productive and characterized by mutually positive regard between two interdependent people. Friendship is an interaction in which communication is highly essential. Friendship must be mutually productive and beneficial. It is characterized by mutual positive regard. For example, two friends should display likeness for each other. Devito (2009) citing Blieszner and Adams (1992) explains three characteristics that friendship should display which are trust, emotional support and sharing interest of each other. He also examines three stages in which friendship must develop for it to be meaningful. The first stage is contact in which one person meets the other person. Communication is less expressive at this stage and each person is careful in self disclosure. The second stage is the involvement stage in which each person sees the other as a casual friend. Each person starts to open up their feelings and thoughts and respond openly to the other person's communications. This is where a sense of support develops. The third stage which involves close and intimate friendship is the stage of intensification of the casual friendship. At this stage, the sense of exclusive unit friendship develops. The uncertainty each person feels reduces and mutual closeness develops. The willingness to sacrifice for each other then develops (Hayes, 2002).

Language of communication in Interpersonal Relationship

Communication is the glue that holds people in a relationship. It is an essential component in developing a long lasting relationship, because both partners make choices about their language of communication to negotiate the nature of their relationship. Interpersonal relationship develops through language of communication when two people meet for the first time and this depends on the use of language between them which will either move the relationship forward to the next stage or lead to the termination of the relationship. We shall review the stages of relationship development by Devito, (2009) and examine possible communication patterns within each stage. The stages of relationship development are as follows:

Contact stage: This is the stage of perceptual contact and interaction with each other. The stage involves forming mental and physical picture of the other person through intrapersonal communication. It is where partners exchange basic information that is preliminary to each person. It is also the stage of first impression. The physical appearance at this stage communicates non-verbally to the other partner. This stage involves the use of nonverbal communication more than the verbal communication and interaction is more cordial. Also nonverbal behaviours, qualities such as friendliness, warmth, openness

and dynamism are revealed. Verbal use of language is limited at this stage while non-verbal communication is more prominent. This involves more observation like a smile, touch, patting at the back, holding hands rather than talking.

Involvement Stage: This is the stage at which the level of mutuality in the relationship is tested for satisfaction to determine whether the relationship will be intensified or terminated. The language of communication at this stage is direct. It may involve asking some direct questions about the other partner's personal life and expecting prompt answers. In addition, the language of communication could be more personal than pervasive. This usually involves the use of words like "Where are you coming from?", "How old are you?" The reaction of each partner will determine the continuity of the relationship.

Intimacy Stage: This is a stage of interpersonal commitment and social bounding, at which partners reveal their relationship status publicly. Language of communication will be more cordial, loving, reassuring with a lot of positive use of language to express affection in a romantic relationship because of the close relationship. In a marital relationship, words that express trust and integrity are used to prove loyalty and commitment to the relationship. At this stage, words like "My love for you will never fail" and "I will never leave you" are common. However, communication at this stage may be filled with words of anxiety and need for further reassurance or renewal of commitment to the relationship.

Deterioration Stage: This is a stage at which the bonding of the relationship may begin to weaken due to interpersonal dissatisfaction. Language of communication at this stage employs fewer words and partners are silent most times they are together. In a romantic relationship, partners will talk less when they are together and most words are full of suspicion, while in marital relationship partners communication dwells more on each other's cases of infidelity. Hence, abusive and negative use of language can be prominent at this stage. At this stage language used in romantic or marital relationships are like "You are the worst thing that ever happened to me", "I regret marrying you" and "I don't ever want to see you for the rest of my life".

Repair Stage: This stage involves intrapersonal repair and analysis of what went wrong and consideration for ways of solving it. Partners exhibit a lot of nonverbal and intrapersonal communication at this stage of the relationship. Partners might talk about problems and the changes they want to see and further negotiate a new relationship. Language of communication will be used with caution at this stage to encourage confidence in the continuity of the relationship. This usually involves using positive language to motivate the other partner for commitment to the relationship. Words like "I'm Sorry", "Please forgive me", "I still love you", "Give me another chance" are prominent in both romantic and marital relationships.

Dissolution Stage: This is a stage of separation that might involve social and public separation. The bonding at this stage is broken. First, it involves interpersonal separation and later social and public separation. Partners no longer communicate at this stage and any communication at all might involve negative use of language which might lead to a conflict situation. At this stage you will hear words like "What did you want from me again?", "I'm through with you"!

Language of communication in Relationship Deterioration

Relationship deterioration is a process of gradual or sudden weakening of the bonds that hold two people together. Deterioration in relationship can occur when a partner develops a new relationship while still in the old one. The rules that hold the relationship are broken, a partner no longer finds the other partner attractive in personality; both partners no longer experience closeness as they used to do at the beginning of the relationship; their differences become more important than similarities; the costs of sustaining the relationship begin to exceed the rewards that each partner is gaining from it; one partner believes he or she could do better with someone else and a partner believes he or she is putting

more than benefiting from it (Devito, 2009). All these scenarios will present a different form of communication among partners. The problem of deterioration of relationship among partners might be as a result of poor or inadequate communication. This is a situation where there is no regular communication between partners or the burden of communication falls on one partner than the other. The issue of communicating with a third party in times of crisis also constitutes a great risk and can lead to relationship deterioration. Poor sexual communication due to lack of understanding of partner's nonverbal sexual signals can also affect their relationships. Inadequate communication between partners can lead also to refusal to listen to the other partner during conversation. Partners might begin to stop discussing their personal issues but will rather give false information to avoid close communication. Partners might start to communicate by using negative language rather than positive one. Hence, effective communication is important in maintaining relationship between partners.

Challenges of Language of Communication in Interpersonal Relationships

Lack of Effective Communication

Lack of effective communication is a principal factor that contributes to relationship deterioration. There are possible reasons for the lack of effective communication between partners. One of such reasons could be misunderstanding. For instance, when one partner expected the message to say something that it didn't say, then the receiver's understanding of the message may be more in line with his or her own expectations of the actual message. This scenario shows that majority of people (receivers) often hear or read what they expect rather than what was actually said or written. Hence, people's expectations or their failure to get the point often, leads to misunderstanding. Effective communication involves sharing meanings by both partners through verbal and nonverbal symbols.

Lack of effective Listening

Lack of effective listening skill is a precursor to relationship deterioration. Many people generally believe they are better listeners than those around them. They believe that they don't have listening problem hence they assumed what their partner will say rather than listen to the conversation. Nevertheless, possessing good hearing skills does not make one a good listener. Studies have shown that people who have perfectly good hearing are not good listeners. Good listeners don't simply hear words, they focus on the meaning of the words. Poor listening habit results into thinking about what the other partner is going to say rather than listening to him or her or hearing what we expect to hear rather than what is actually said. In addition, when one partner is preoccupied with other activities during conversation pretending to be listening to his or her partner could affect listening to vital information. These habits could mar communication in interpersonal relationships. Good listening demands that we avoid other preoccupations when someone is speaking to us.

Misjudging the use of words

Misjudging the use of language during communication between partners could pose a great challenge to interpersonal relationship. In a situation when the subject of conversation favours one partner than the other or the issue reveals the weaknesses of one partner more than the other, this could lead to misunderstanding the purpose of the speaker. Hence, the use of language could be termed derogatory or abusive by one of the partner when it is not.

Message misinterpretation

Message misinterpretation is another hindrance to interpersonal relationship. This arises from a situation where we hear what we expect to hear rather than what is actually said. This habit seems to become an increasingly greater problem as we grow older. In a marital situation when the wife laboured

to cook the food and the husband came home and say he is not hungry. This message to the wife may mean the food is not sweet or he has eaten somewhere and this will not go down well with the wife. In reality the husband might not be hungry. The misrepresentation of language of communication in this situation is a problem in interpersonal relationship.

Strategies for improving Language of Communication in Relationships

The following strategies are helpful in improving language of communication in interpersonal relationships.

Listening to Understand: Effective communication begins with understanding the message. But a message may have been sent and received, and the receiver may have attended to the message yet, there has been no effective communication. Effective communication depends on understanding; that is, effective communication does not take place until the receiver understands the message as intended by the sender. Understanding must take place for communication to be effective. Hence, there is need for partners to learn to use the appropriate language of communication to understand each other during communication.

Listening to Respond: The listening process may end with understanding but a response may be needed or at least helpful. Response is a form of feedback that completes the communication transaction. This will allow the sender to know that the message was received, attended to, and understood. This process enhances interpersonal communication which eventually contributes to interpersonal relationship between partners. Sometimes partners may respond verbally to seek clarification or non-verbally. For instance, the nodding of the head or a smile may communicate that the message is understood.

Relationship Listening: The purpose of relationship listening is either to help an individual or to improve the relationship between people. Therapeutic listening is a special type of relationship listening. Therapeutic listening brings to mind situations where counselors, medical personnel, or other professionals allow a troubled person to talk through a problem. But it can also be used when you listen to friends or acquaintances and allow them to “get things off their chests.” Although relationship listening requires you to listen for information, the emphasis is on understanding the other person. Three behaviours are important to effective relationship listening: attending to the other partner, supporting the other partner and empathizing with the other partner rather than pre judging him or her during conversation. In attending to the other partner your use of language should be pleasant, gentle and encouraging. In other to support your partner you should not dominate the conversation but learn when to talk and when to just listen with willingness to give the other partner the time he or she needs to express him or herself adequately. When empathizing with your partner you put yourself in their situation before you can understand their plight. This will encourage being patient during conversation (Kline, 1989).

Active Listening: The act of for partners listening actively to each other will help to sustain their relationship. Active listening involves encouraging the other partner to keep talking while you listen. This also involves the need for one partner showing assurance of following the conversation, being attentive and interested in the issue. The use of active listening skill shows that when one partner is speaking the other should pay attention, show that he or she is listening, provide feedback when necessary, respond appropriately, defer judgment, show positive body language, give room to tell his or her story in their own way and give opportunity to reflect back on feelings and content during conversation.

Constant Dialoguing: Partners in interpersonal relationship must engage in constant dialogue and share common goals and objectives. They should share similar interests and backgrounds, respect each

other's views and opinions, have a sense of trust, be honest and transparent to each other. These qualities will allow each partner to trust the words of the other partner during conversation.

Be careful in use of language: The fact that communication is irreversible reminds us that what we say has impact on other people who listen. Once we say something to another person, our words become part of the relationship. This principle keeps partners aware of the importance of choosing when to speak and what to say or not to say. Because interpersonal communication is irreversible and affects others, it always has ethical implications. What we say and do affect others: how they feel, how they perceive themselves, how they think about themselves, and how they think about others. Thus, responsible people think carefully about ethical guidelines for communication. Because interpersonal communication affects us and others, ethical considerations are always part of our interactions. Hence, the choice of language is an important element in sustaining interpersonal relationship.

Use of Simple Language: The use of simple but comprehensive language will help a partner to effortlessly understand what the other partner is saying. Sometimes in a marital relationship some partners use coded language on the phone to cover up the message they do not want their partners to understand. This could lead to misunderstanding between partners (Sethi and Seth, 2009).

Conclusion

Language of Communication is very important in interpersonal relationship due to the fact that 'we cannot not communicate' as human beings. Hence, communication is vital to human existence and interaction. However, how we communicate especially in the language we use is much more important if we must continue in good interpersonal relationship in contexts such as romantic, marital, family, friendship and office environment relationships.

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