Ethnocentric Hate Speech as an Impediment to National Development in Nigeria: Implications for Peaceful Communication

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ABSTRACT
Nigeria is a heterolingual, multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multicultural country. The constitution of the country allows freedom of expression. Despite having English as a lingua franca, Nigerians use their respective indigenous languages. The inability of the citizens to manage this diversity has led to the use of ethnocentric hate speech by members of different linguistic groups against one another. This is inimical to national development. This intervention aimed to establish the effect of ethnocentric hate speech on national development in Nigeria and how applied peace linguists can serve as advocates of peaceful communication. Applied peace linguistics plays the role of facilitating dialogue and conflict resolution in Nigeria. It assists in ensuring peaceful communication and counter speech. Thus, ensuring early warming on speeches that can escalate violence. A questionnaire was administered to 900 respondents in the townships from January to July 2024. The researchers also conducted focus group discussion sessions with 19 groups of eight (8) participants in 19 townships in Nigeria. The major finding of the study indicates that an overwhelming majority of the respondents detest ethnocentric hate speech. They agree that ethnocentric hate speech engenders suspicions and phantom tolerance in society, thus an impediment to national development. Phantom tolerance is characterised by the pretence that one is tolerating another while, in reality, one hates the other. This study concludes that peaceful communication should be encouraged in the school curriculum and made a norm for general interaction in the country to build trust and foster national development.

Keywords: ethnocentric, hate speech, peace linguistics, peaceful communication

INTRODUCTION

Diversity is a core characteristic of the human experience (Reagan, 2021). The divergence is in the kinds of society we come from and our different orientations, even from the same society structure, our ideological, cultural, political, and economic dispositions and how we socialise with our fellow interlocutors in offline and online discourse. These apparent differences are not without consequences. For this reason, Russell (2024) asserts that one of the recurring activities of human beings is 'languaging.' However, people spend an insignificant amount of time cogitating about their actions, let alone the 'enlanguagements' they produce. The utterances we make because of our differences could drive and trigger conflict. This is because human beings live in a violent world and , therefore, see violence as an inherent part of our lives (Molina, 2019). People experienced several kinds of violence

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through discrimination, harassment, hate and hate speech (Banaji & Bhat, 2022; Agha, 2022). They may pass over them with silence or react in a way that is characterised by peaceful communication and sociability or hate speech, dehumanisation, derogatoriness, vulgarity, rudeness, indecency, obscenity, aggressiveness, offensiveness, and incitement – toxic speech acts (Mattiello, 2022; Sheldon et al., 2019). To mitigate the toxicity of language use and enhance peaceful communication, there is a need for counter-speech based on the principles of politeness. Counter-speech debunks negative speech acts by offering alternative views or reprimanding toxic linguistic behaviour (Smith, 2023). Politeness is germane in counter-speech because it enables the use of language to fit in with the social norms of the receiver, enables interlocutors to negotiate their position within the social group and displays their awareness of that positioning based on mutual respect (Mills, 2017). Thus, language users should align their politeness styles with cultural contexts to avoid threatening the face of their audience.

In line with the above, Parcon and Adriano (2024) conducted a study titled "Peace linguistics in the academic community through the lens of English language teachers: A multiple case study." They thematically analysed data based on five critical themes around violent and nonviolent phraseologies and terminologies expressed by students. It was found that expressions that do not promote peaceful communication, teamwork and the use of courteous language impede progress. They underscored that even within a classroom, effort should be made toward incorporating peace linguistics, especially promoting inclusive and peaceful language devoid of hate and hate speech. This proves that words do hurt (Beebe et al., 2004; Camp & Satterwhite, 2002).

Nigeria has a population of over 200 million people. They come from different ethnolinguistic backgrounds. Nigeria has witnessed a lot of violent conflicts that have served as impediments to its development. Most of the conflicts in Nigeria are linked to identity or ethnicity, of which the strong index is language (Bello et al., 2008) manifested through hate speech (Gbeyonron, 2014; Gbeyonron, 2024a; Gbeyonron, 2024b). Hate speech is prevalent in so many countries, including Nigeria, Ethiopia, Italy and Poland (Umar, Sarkinkaji, & Maibasira, 2020; Agha, 2022; Areri, 2024; Inobemhe et al., 2021; Onah et al., 2021; Yola, 2017). Works on the prevalence of hate speech expose its danger and negative use of freedom of speech and expression. Hate speeches do have ethnic, political or religious coloration and, in some cases, are racist in nature. They are expressed via social media, public lectures, informal dialogues, sermons, etc. (Paleta & Dyda, 2024). Ethnocentric hate speech-propelled conflicts have stunted Nigeria's quest of being a model in terms of peaceful coexistence that is capable of enshrining sustainable development in a dynamic world. Therefore, this study aims to explore the effect of ethnocentric hate speech on national development in Nigeria and how peaceful communication can accelerate national development in Nigeria.

METHOD

A survey research design was used to collect data for the study. A ten-item questionnaire adapted from the seven-item interview schedule used by Gbeyonron (2014) was administered to 900 respondents. In addition, focus group discussion sessions on four thematic areas related to ethnocentric hate speech and national development were conducted for 19 groups made up of eight (8) participants in each group from January 2024 to July 2024. The sampled towns were Lafia (Nasarawa State), Lokoja (Kogi State) and Jos (Plateau State, Kaduna (Kaduna State), Gusau (Zamfara State), Kano (Kano State), Damaturu(Yobe State), Bauchi (Bauchi State), Jalingo (Taraba State), Ibadan (Oyo State), Badagry (Lagos State), Owo (Ondo State), Uromi (Edo State), Agbor (Delta State), Port Harcourt (Rivers State), Awka (Anambra State), Nsukka (Enugu State), Aba (Abia State) and Kubwa (Federal Capital Territory). All the respondents provided their content before they responded to the questionnaire and participated in the focus group discussion.

The focus group discussion sessions were conducted systematically in English, Pidgin English, and Hausa, depending on the language of wider communication of participants in each of the focus group discussion sessions. The respondents to the questionnaire and the focus group discussion sessions were drawn from over 80 different Nigerian ethnolinguistic backgrounds.

Qualitative and quantitative methods were used for data analysis. For the quantitative data analysis, a simple percentage was used to describe the frequency of the participants who agreed or disagreed with each item presented to them in the questionnaire. For the qualitative data analysis, the impact of ethnocentric hate speech on four thematic areas was analysed and discussed. The thematic areas are how ethnocentric hate speech 1) breeds exclusion and marginalisation in society, 2) causes anxiety and low self-esteem for members hate speech is used against, 3) escalates and sustains disunity and strife among members of the society, and 4) adversely affects national development.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Responses to the questionnaire on the use of ethnocentric hate speech in Nigeria

S/No.	Item	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
1	You have ethnocentric hate speech in your language/culture	832 (92)	68 (8)
2	You use ethnocentric hate speech to label other languages/culture	469 (52)	431 (48)
3	You know ethnocentric hate speech is used against your language/culture	767 (85)	133 (15)
4	The use of ethnocentric hate speech against you could provoke you	869 (97)	31 (3)
5	The use of ethnocentric hate speech against you could make you develop a phobia towards the language of the user of the hate speech	788 (88)	112 (12)
6	The existence of ethnocentric hate speech against a language/culture has made the recipients assimilate with the superior language/culture	462 (51)	438 (49)
7	You would like to be labelled with ethnocentric hate speech	0 (0)	900 (100)
8	The use of ethnocentric hate speech is an impediment to national unity	888 (99)	12 (1)
9	Learners should be taught peaceful communication across all school subjects	900 (100)	0 (0)
10	The government should enforce extant laws on ethnocentric hate speech to engender peaceful communication	876 (97)	24 (3)

The data presented in respect of item 1 in Table 1 indicate that 92% of the respondents agreed that their respective linguistic groups have ethnocentric terms used against members of other ethnolinguistic groups. Conversely, 8% of the respondents did not agree that they have such terms in their languages/cultures. Responses to item 2 in Table 1 show that 52% of the respondents agreed that they use ethnocentric hate speech to label people from other linguistic/cultural groups. However, 48% of the respondents stated that they do not use ethnocentric hate speech against others. From the data presented in Table 1 in respect of item 3, one can realise that 85% of the respondents agreed that they are aware of some

ethnocentric hate speeches used against their languages/cultures. Contrastively, 15% of the respondents indicated that they did not know ethnocentric terms used against their languages/cultures.

Ninety-seven percent (97%) of the respondents that responded to item 4, as presented in Table 1, revealed that the use of ethnocentric hate speech against them could provoke anger. However, 3% of the respondents stated that the use of ethnocentric terms against them would not have any significant emotional impact on them. Table 1 also shows that 88% of the respondents who responded to item 5 agreed that the use of ethnocentric hate speech against them could make them develop a phobia towards the languages of the users of the ethnocentric hate speech. In contrast, 12% of the respondents stated that the use of ethnocentric hate speech against them would not make them develop a phobia against the languages/cultures of the users of such terms. While 51% of the respondents agreed that the existence of ethnocentric hate speech against one's language/culture could make one assimilate into the 'superior' language/culture, 49% of the respondents disagreed with the sixth item presented in Table 1.

All the respondents to the seventh item in Table 1 disagreed that they would like to be labelled with ethnocentric terms. Table 1 shows that 99% of the respondents who responded to item 8 agreed that the use of ethnocentric hate speech impedes national unity. However, 1% of the respondents disagreed. In their response to item number 9 in Table 1, all the respondents agreed that peaceful communication should be taught across the curriculum. While 97% of the respondents agreed that the government should enforce extant laws on ethnocentric hate speech, 3% of the respondents disagreed with the tenth item presented in Table 1.

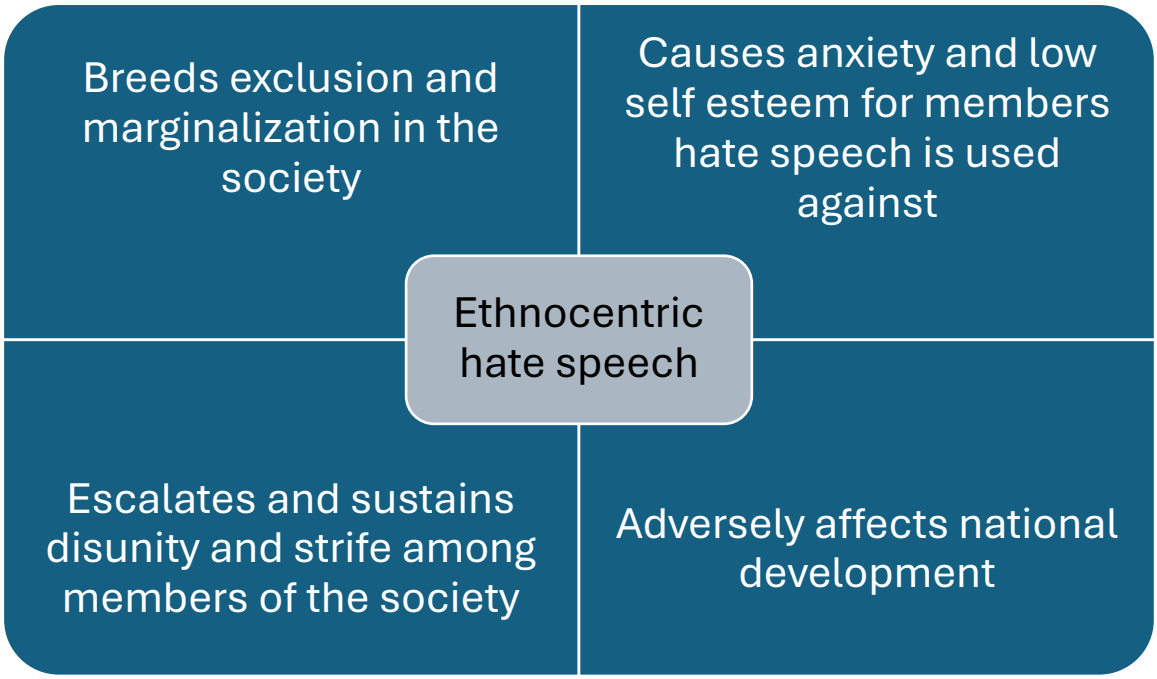


Figure 1: Matrix showing the summary of the findings of focus group discussions

The findings from the focus group discussions reveal that ethnocentric hate speech is inimical to national development because it breeds exclusion and marginalisation of people that hate speech is used against. In addition, it causes anxiety and makes the members of the speech community ethnocentric, thus escalating and sustaining tension, disunity and strife among members of the society, which will in turn affect national development negatively.

The findings of this study reveal that an overwhelming majority of the respondents agreed that they have some ethnocentric hate speech that is used against members of other

ethnolinguistic groups in their respective languages/cultures. These include the use of words like *arne* (Hausa for infidel), *kirdi* (Kanuri for unbeliever), *oruke* (Tiv for non-Tiv person), *aboki* (a derogatory term used by Southern Nigerians to describe a Hausa), etc. Cofresi and Gorman (2004) assert that ethnocentrism depicts the propensity of a group to perceive their culture as superior to that of others. Ethnocentric hate speech is used to discriminate against some categories of people because of their faith, belief, ancestry or linguistic identity. While participants in the focus group discussion session gave examples of ethnocentric hate terms, it is not the aim of this intervention to present them in this paper.

There is no significant difference between respondents to the questionnaire who agreed that they use ethnocentric hate speech to label others and those who said they do not use such terms against others. An overwhelming majority of the respondents to the focus group discussions did not agree that they use ethnocentric hate speech. However, even in the United States of America, for instance, Gamble and Gamble (2005) stress that stereotypical chants, dances and music offensive to Native American culture and tradition are also used. In such use, the users tend to project their languages\cultures as more significant than those of the other people referred to. In Nigeria, utterances made by some politicians and religious leaders are replete with ethnocentric hate speech.

A cursory look at Table 1 would reveal that an overwhelming 97% of the respondents agreed that being targeted with ethnocentric hate speech evokes negative emotions in them. Furthermore, linguistic ecology in a dynamic world provides that members of speech communities tend to protect their respective languages and struggle to use them as sources of pride. Therefore, any attempt to relegate the potential and endowments of their languages would sound offensive to them. Gamble and Gamble (2005) further state that such language stresses the differences between people of different groups, downplays any similarities, and claims that the persons who are different do not try to adapt. This is provocative, and the effect of this could lead to conflict, which is a major barrier to national integration and national development.

Similarly, respondents in the focus group discussion underscore that the use of ethnocentric hate speech can trigger anxiety and low self-esteem in the recipient. Anxiety is a feeling of unease, characterised by fear or worry, which can be accompanied by physical symptoms (Collins & Baker, 2023). This can affect productivity. A non-productive citizen cannot contribute to national development. They added that the use of hate speech can lead to polarisation, marginalisation, and exclusion. This agrees with the position of Smith (2023).

Most of the respondents agreed that they could develop a phobia against the languages/cultures that label them with ethnocentric hate speech. Beebe et al. (2004) caution that the terms we use about ethnic groups have a direct reflection on the perception of culture and identity. If you use the wrong word, you may be labelled ‘politically incorrect’ or, at worse, a ‘bigot’. Thus, a language that encourages the extreme use of ethnocentric terms could be regarded as prejudiced. This will generate resistance and aggressive responses from the members of the linguistic groups termed ethnocentrically.

According to Cofresi and Gorman (2004), each language, with its associated culture and value system, may place unique constraints on the bilingual person’s sense of identity. This becomes more complex when one of the languages used by the bilingual is regarded as inferior by the other language, which occupies a dominant position in the society. This could lead to a language shift. This study found that 51% of the respondents agreed that the use of ethnocentric terms against a language or culture has made the recipients assimilate with the ‘superior’ language/culture. Personal observation by the researchers also reveals that the feeling of ethnolinguistic inferiority complex by speakers of some Nigerian languages in some sociolinguistic environments has led to a gradual language shift.

All the respondents disagreed that they would like to be labelled with ethnocentric terms. According to Schaefer (2006), ethnocentrism is the tendency to assume that one’s own

culture and way of life represent the norm or are superior to all others. This negates the provision of Article 1 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights,* which stipulates that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). They are all endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. It would be of interest to underscore the fact that the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and relevant laws dealing with social and criminal justice in Nigeria frown at any sort of imputation that could incite hatred or contempt against an individual, class of persons or ethnolinguistic groups. What may be lacking is enforcement of the laws. For this reason, a significant majority of the respondents agreed that the extant laws on ethnocentric hate speech in Nigeria should be enforced to encourage peaceful communication.

The findings of this study imply that even though some members of Nigerian society may benefit from propagating ethnocentric hate speech to be relevant by the means of using the terms to degrade and intimidate others, ethnocentric language use engenders distrust and promotes phantom unity in the polity. The continuous use of ethnocentric terms would delimit people's chances of aspiring to excellence in the spirit of collective national interest. Furthermore, it would undermine Nigeria's quest of instilling respect for the worth and dignity of fellow human beings in addition to thwarting cross-ethnolinguistic phatic communion. This may lead to social ills like anarchy, crime, and poverty. As a result, the aspiration of Nigeria to be a model in a dynamic world from the perspective of being monolithic via the process of individualisation that is projected towards collective national interest would be jeopardised. Thus, Nigeria's indigenous scientific, technological, artistic and aesthetic potentialities and endowments would be left unexplored, unexploited and undiffused.

Language serves as an instrument that enhances and cements communicative unity among people of distinct ethnolinguistic backgrounds. It also breeds linguistic and social identity. The world has witnessed an unprecedented change in all spheres of life since the start of the 21st century. Despite the dynamic nature of the world, communities all around the world are becoming closely knitted. This can be observed in the areas of cross-linguistic and cultural studies and learning. This has, in a sense, given language the key position of serving as a turbine engine for sustaining the creation of a positive dynamic world.

It is pertinent to state that the strategy that can make peaceful communication to mitigate the impact of ethnocentric is hinged on empathising with fellow interlocutors, dignifying the tenets of dialogue and prioritising politeness. Thus, there is a need to pay attention to the choice of words, negotiation of meaning and concession, and respect for the worth and dignity of fellow interlocutors no matter where they come from. This would enhance the building of trust and, by extension, national development.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria is the most populous black nation in the world. In consequence, the whole world has a keen interest in the issues, events and people that pertain to Nigeria. Thus, Nigeria has a role to play in a dynamic world that is knowledge-based. However, Nigeria's positive impact in a dynamic world cannot be significant until the different nationalities in the country work towards cumulating their respective contributions towards achieving common national interests. This cannot be achieved until there is mutual trust and respect across ethnolinguistic entities. Of immense concern is the role of language in nation-building and national development. Conversely, wrong language use, deliberate or because of insensitivity to its consequences, could render this goal vulnerable. As a result, this work investigated the use of ethnocentric hate speech in Nigeria and the implication on development through peaceful communication. It was found that people still use ethnocentric hate speech in this dynamic world that has been reoriented to foster respect for human dignity. But then, all the

respondents to this study vehemently expressed their distaste for ethnocentric hate speech. In consequence, this study concludes that even though every individual has the right to freedom of language use, not all such rights are right in a dynamic world that realises that no one ethnolinguistic group is superior to others, and neither is there any ethnolinguistic group that is an island. As a result, there is a need for all ethnolinguistic groups to have their worth and dignity respected in a dynamic world.

The following are recommended in light of the findings of this study:

1. Nigerian language policy should address the issue of ethnocentric hate speech. It should make the media, judiciary, parliament, education, religion, commerce, industry, banking, entertainment, sports, diplomacy and political participation not be platforms for ethnocentric hate speech.
2. The Nigerian education sector should explicitly incorporate language arts items that project the ills of ethnocentric language use in the respective language education curriculums, thus making teaching peaceful communication across the curriculum obligatory.
3. All the laws in Nigeria that pertain to ethnocentrism should be invoked and enforced to serve as a deterrent.
4. Reorientation and sensitisation should be intensified to inculcate the spirit of brotherhood and collective national interest in the minds of Nigerians.

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