AFRICAN LANGUAGES AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

by

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Abstract

Environmental management debates have focused much on finding solutions to the ecological challenges facing the planet without regard for the language that can be used in fostering the dialogue. The use of African languages has often been ignored under the guise that they do not adequately represent the environmental phenomenon. This paper argues that the appropriate use of an African language such as Chichewa in environmental management discourse can enhance participation of local communities in the conservation exercise. Therefore, the paper reports that the appropriateness of the Chichewa language used in environmental messages is not considered as literally translated technical terms are used which are not in sync with the everyday language use of local communities. The paper therefore concludes that much as the African language is used in the information dissemination, the appropriate form is crucial if local communities are to actively participate in the environmental management.

Key words: African languages, environmental management, local communities, language appropriateness

Introduction

In recent years the debate about environmental conservation has necessitated the need for synergising efforts among different stakeholders. This corresponds with what Thakadu, Irani and Telg (2011) have pointed out that the complexities of ever-increasing global environmental problems, coupled with the growing outcry for environmental stewardship, underscore the need for all sectors and citizenry to demonstrate environmental responsibility. This entails that participation between and among those working towards preservation and conservation of the environment, and those living in that environment must be fostered. Thus citizen (local communities) participation is considered to be crucial in conservation exercise. To this effect policies and

treaties have been signed recognising the need to enhance citizen participation in the environmental conservation process. Lassen, Horsbol, Bonnen and Pedersen, (2011) give example of the Aarhus Convention, a legal framework that guarantees the public (or local communities) the right to public information, participation in environmental conservation matters and right to environmental justice. In Malawi, this call has been incorporated into the Malawi National Environmental Policy (Malawi Government, 2004: 4) which provides for enhancement of "public education and awareness of various environmental issues and public participation in addressing them." However, these provisions do not practically translate into local communities participating in the activities. In Malawi, the involvement of citizens is still limited.

Citizen participation in Malawi has partly been attributed to the use of language that is not intelligible to the target communities. Scholars (e.g. Chiotha & Kishindo, 1995; Khryapchekova, 2013; Okech, 2006; Stibbe, 2009) have conducted research on how language must be used in environmental communication so that the message reaches its target. Most scholars have advocated for the use of local languages that enable people to easily understand the message and be able to participate in the discourse. Stibbe (2009) has argued that such kinds of language use promote active participation in the discourse and motivate people to act in a sustainable way towards conservation of the environment. In most cases, the messages have come in foreign languages under the guise that local languages cannot adequately convey the messages regarding environment since they have inadequate vocabulary. However, much as there has been an outcry for the use of local languages away from the traditional use of foreign languages, more needs to be considered other than just the use of local languages. The question that we must all ask ourselves is that: have we thought of how such languages should be used in order to engage the local communities in the discourse? This is coming from the background that in Malawi, Chichewa has in some cases been used. Nevertheless, there have been disagreements and misunderstandings. Why is that so? The aim of this paper is to discuss the status of language use in environmental communication and its impact on community participation in environmental management. This paper attempts to answer these questions, by first analysing the texts that were culled from the communication documents used in Mulanje district and see how such documents deter or enhance citizen participation. It must be stated that this paper is a result of a research project that was carried out in Mulanje district, which at examining and assessing the linguistic and communicative practices in environmental conservation for the Mulanje Mountain Forest Reserve (MMFR). The linguistic analysis will be done using the systemic functional grammar theory.

Citizen Engagement and Dialogue

To promote responsible environmental behaviour, Thakadu, Irani and Telg (2011) suggest that there is need to explore effective environmental communication strategies that will contribute to the sustainable adoption of environmental conservation innovations. Communication strategies must acknowledge the complexities that come with the people's experiences in interpreting the world. In her study of media's role in shaping citizen's understanding of climate change, Olausson (2011: 294), concluded that "we need to acknowledge to a greater extent the power of people's experiences in the process of making sense of the world". She further argues that citizen's meaning-making about climate change is a complex blend of their own experiences, mass communication in which the news media have a pivotal role, and various forms of communication.

What this suggests is that when engaging in environmental discourse, we should be aware of people's experiences with the world which consequently shape their worldview. Most importantly, it should be known that these experiences are mirrored in the language that the citizens use. Therefore, engaging citizens would provide opportunity for the environmental communicators to understand people's experiences and how those experiences help to construct environmental reality and how language is being used as a tool of expressing those experiences.

Brulle (2010) has observed that to mobilise broad-based support for social change, citizens cannot be treated as objects for manipulation. He points that citizens must be treated as those involved in a mutual dialogue. Citizens must be part of the process of communication not just as the recipients of the message. It is through this realisation that local communities' language must also be considered as it carries their everyday experiences and understanding of the world. It is therefore, imperative for environmental messages to be carried in a language that responds to local communities' everyday discourses.

Systemic Functional Grammar

In order to exhaustively analyse the language used in environmental discourse in Mulanje district, the paper applies the Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) theory (Halliday, 1994). This theory is ideal to the study because it concentrates on the analysis of authentic products of social interaction (texts), considered in the social and cultural context in which they take place (Lilora, 2005), making it ideal for the analysis of the metafunctions coming out of the interactions between different stakeholders in conservation management. The theory concerns itself with the relationship between language and other elements of social life. The analysis of the theory focuses on social character

of the text and why the text means what it does, and why it is valued as it is (Halliday, 1994). This renders the theory relevant to the study as it intends to indulge in linguistic analysis of functional use of language and its implications to the conservation of the MMFR in the study area.

The central claim for SFG is that language use must be seen as taking place in social context. Language is not good or bad, it is appropriate or inappropriate to the context of use. Language and social context is seen as being inextricably linked (Thompson, 2004). Therefore, SFG operates on the premise that language structure is integrally related to social function and context. It analyses linguistic resources by looking at discourses we produce (whether spoken or written), and the contexts of the production of these texts.

Research Methodology

The study drew its sample from Mulanje district where the conservation projects are being carried out. The study was done at Mulanje Mountain Conservation Trust (MMCT) and the Forestry department of the Malawi government, Mulanje district office. These organisations were chosen on the basis that they are directly involved in the conservation of the Mulanje Cedar, as part of the ecosystem of Mulanje mountain biodiversity. These are information-rich institutions that helped the study yield insight and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

The Mulanje Mountain Conservation Trust (MMCT) is an environmental endowment trust based in Mulanje with the mission of facilitating responsible management of the mountain's resources by involving communities around the Reserve (MMCT, 2012/13). It works in collaboration with the Department of Forestry in the district and other stakeholders in facilitating people's awareness, involvement and understanding of the importance of the conservation and responsible management of Mount Mulanje's natural resources and biodiversity. The Department of Forestry is mandated by law to manage forests and trees in Malawi and the Mulanje Mountain Forest Reserve (MMFR) is under the direct supervision and management of Forestry Department in Mulanje. The two organisations work hand in hand to help in the management of MMFR. However, MMCT's role is mostly the provision of technical and financial support to the Department of Forestry, which implements the strategic plans for conservation and management of MMFR. Therefore, the choice of these organisations as research institutions was appropriate because they are directly involved in the management of MMFR, hence information-rich institutions.

The researcher used information dissemination documents that are used by the two institutions. These were meant to be analysed in terms of the lexical

resources they use in communicating to communities to see if they meet their everyday literacies. This study got direction on language use in the conservation discourse of Mulanje Cedar from document analysis that were obtained from the communication and extension departments of the MMCT and DoF respectively. Documents, in this case refers to a wide range of written, physical, and visual materials (Ary, Jacobs & Sorensen, 2010). However, this paper focused on the written materials because it is concerned with the language use in relation to the context of situation. The researcher intended to understand a wide array of citizen engagement and how they are constructed in conservation practice through the analysis of documents that are used in the information dissemination of conservation. Interestingly, access to the documents was granted without any restrictions, as such, in contrast with Hall's (1997 cited in Oketch, 2006) claim that documentation on project failure is hard to find, the researcher had access to annual reports which outlined the project's success and challenges.

Results and Discussions

In order to examine the appropriateness of the language being used, texts from the posters, newsletter and fliers were analysed in order to assess the contextual appropriateness of the lexical resources in line with the everyday usage of language by the local communities. Below are some of the extracts:

Kololani nkhuni zanu mosamala (*Harvest* your firewood carefully).

In using *kukolola* (harvesting) whatever is in the mountain, people get the impression that one must get enough of the harvest. This is what some people in the area said: "*ifeyo kukolola chilichonse ndekuti ukuyenela upeze zambili zoti zikukwane popanda choletsa chilichonse chifukwa wagwilapo ntchito, kaya ndi zam'nkhalango kaya zakumunda* (For us harvesting means getting enough for you without any limitations because you have put your effort, be it forest resources or garden crops)." The usage of this lexical item stems from the literal translation of the term as it is used in agriculture. This transfer of concepts from other disciplines may result in confusing the local people whose usage of the word is restricted to the agriculture discipline. With what was said by some people from the area above, it shows that the local communities have their own everyday language that they use to describe or talk about the concept of 'kukolola.'

Dulani mitengo yanu kupititsa patsogolo mphukila (Cut your trees to allow the tree to sprout).

The expression above is syntactically ambiguous because it does not specify the type of trees that people need to log. This therefore gives leeway for wanton

logging of trees since people would want to 'allow trees sprout.' What the expression misses is the fact that not every tree sprouts. There are some trees like pine that once cut, they die out. The use of the above expression is also a result of translation challenges which results in the ambiguity of the expression. An alternative expression could be "dulani mitengo moyenera kuti ithe kuphukira." However, even with the alternative, it also lacks the specification of the type of trees. The expression also does not specify how many trees that the local communities can log.

Much as the lexical resource used for logging of trees is "harvesting", its use is usually qualified. This is exemplified by the following excerpt:

> Ngakhale pali kusintha kwakukulu pothana ndi *kukolola zachilengedwe mosaloledwa, kagwiritsidwe ntchito ka za chilengedwe* kakunka kakukulirakulirabe (Although significant impact had been registered in the reduction of *illegal resource harvesting, resource extraction* from MMFR reached unprecedented proportions).

In this excerpt, 'illegal harvesting' is considered as the act of logging trees from the mountain reserve without permission. If this usage is compared with the everyday usage and understanding by local communities of the word 'harvesting', the differences in the understanding of the concept becomes apparent. In Mulanje people talk of 'kuba mitengo/zachilengedwe' (stealing trees/biodiversity) when one logs trees without permission. This gives a clear picture of what the activity is. In this instance, it epitomises how the consideration for context of situation as propagated by Halliday is disregarded.

> Ngakhale kafukufuku waonetsa kuti pakutha pa zaka khumi zoteteza chilengedwe ntchito yaikulu yagwirika *pothana ndi zomera zachilendo monga pine zomwe zimatha kuononga zomera zinzake,* ntchito yaikulu yothana ndi zomerazi idakalipo yochuluka pa Chambe komanso pa Sombani (Although it was recorded that great achievement was made in the *eradication of the invasive Pinus patula* on the Chambe and Sombani basins at the end of ten years of conservation activity; still, there remains more work to be done on yet more difficult *invasive plants*).

> *Kuchotsa zomera za chilendo* zomwe zimalepheletsa zomera za chilengedwe kuti zimere (*Clearing of invasive alien plant species*)

> Kulimira mmalo momwe mu mamera cedar (Clearing weeds in areas where cedar is growing)

The term "kuthana (eradication)", as used in the extract above, connotes complete removal of any such type of "unwanted" plant (unwanted being any plant other than Cedar). However, as it is used in relation to Cedar, Pine and any other plants, it eludes the essence of promoting biodiversity. This is

probably the reason there have been conflicts between the environmental organisations on one hand, and the local communities surrounding the mountain reserve, on the other, because the local communities were claiming that to them everything in the mountain is important, especially Pine. They said Pine grows faster than Cedar and it was being used as a way of conserving Cedar because many people used to cut Pine more than Cedar. Again to the people, Pine help with the weather conditions such as rain and preserving the general ecosystem. This shows that the use of these lexical resources gives a different connotation to the people. For example, Pine to the people can never be regarded as "weed" as it is important to them. Such terms as "invasive" and "alien" alienate people, therefore creating a negative relationship between those controlling the discourse and those it is intended for. The term "invasive" to the environmentalists means anything that is encroaching and/or growing where they believe it is not supposed to grow in relation to the tree species they want to preserve and, therefore, causing uneasiness in the growth of the needed plant. However, to the communities, the word carries a different connotation as it implies other plants, including Pine and M'bawa which they value as important species of plants.

In addition to the above terms, the documents have some expression such as "*Kutentha tchire moteteza* kunachitika mu mwezi wa July chaka chino (*Controlled burning* was carried out in July), which functionally means setting fire in the prescribed areas in order to get rid of unwanted plants. "Burning" (kutentha) in itself carries negative connotation regardless of what has been set on fire. The addition of the modifier "controlled" is meant to give a positive connotation of prescription. Mühlhäusler (2001) has argued that sometimes the "controlled or prescribed" fire gets out of control and disturbs the ecosystem. Even if the burning remains controlled, the process of burning and its by-products may be destructive to the adjacent environment.

However, Halliday (1994) has pointed out that the appropriateness of language use is determined by the field (all aspects of physical communication, including setting, topic, purpose and the speaker's intention) and tenor (i.e. people involved in the communication and their relationship, including roles and social positions that participants have). Halliday adds that language is never context-free. According to Halliday's SFG theory, language is not good or bad, it is appropriate or inappropriate to the context of use. In view of the language used by the environmentalists in Mulanje, the language is appropriate to them but it is contextually inappropriate to the local communities. It does not consider the participants and their social roles. Thompson (2004) adds that roles and relationships between participants carry with them social interests. The extracts above reveal that the language used does not factor in the socio-cultural context of the local participants whose

understanding of the technical language is limited. This creates misunderstandings and misinterpretation of the messages because the language used has not responded to and is inappropriate to the context of the addressee.

Conclusion

The analysis and discussion above has shown that the materials used for raising awareness to local communities come in the local language of Chichewa. However, the challenge with the expressions used is that they are contextually inappropriate. They do not take into consideration the communities' everyday discourses that may help inform their language usage, and possibly their discourses so as to encourage community participation in the debates as well as sustainable action towards conservation of the environment. This could echo what SFG advocates for, that the appropriateness of the linguistic options is conditioned by the current context of situation, that is, the situation in which language event unfolds (Thompson, 2004). It should therefore be argued that it is not just about the use of local language that we must aspire in environmental conservation messages but also how it is used and its appropriateness to context. The appropriate form is crucial if local communities are to actively participate in the environmental management. It is therefore recommended that the language being used needs to be reprocessed to meet everyday usage and needs of local communities.

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