THE DISCOURSE OF CONFLICT IN MANAGING DISTANCE EDUCATION PROJECTS

Prof. S. Tichapondwa Modesto (DLitt et Phil)
&
Jisha Seby

ABSTRACT

Distance education institutions are characterised by the conduct of projects, effected through project teams. Conflicts often arise as teams strive to solve problems collaboratively, using language as medium through which disagreements either escalate or are repaired. The investigation sought to:
   a. establish the discourse associated with conflict; and
   b. analyse discourse to determine the impact of conflict on relations and task performance.

Discourse was measured using a conversational framework and views and attitudes solicited through a questionnaire. Episodes of conflict were audio-recorded then analysed to establish patterns of communication. This was supported with responses to questionnaires, leading to several conclusions including that there is limited awareness about the link between language and work-related conflicts; and that conflicts impact negatively on productivity. It was then recommended that organisations should expose project team members to maxims of communication that have the effect of lessening conflicts.

Keywords: Conflict, discourse, conversation, politeness.

INTRODUCTION

Hopkins (2009) makes an important observation that there is an intimate link between how we communicate and the conflicts we create and become party to. This is particularly true in situations where people work as a team, and teams that manage projects in distance education (DE) institutions serve as good examples. In such contexts, management, learner support, and programmes development issues arise and have to be solved. Resolutions have to be arrived at, and this is accomplished through discussion using language as the proper medium of communication. The potential for conflict in this kind of set-up is a reality, yet unless team members engage in discussion, the organization will have neither products nor services to offer. Unless participants communicate, misunderstanding of ideas or intent will persist because as Akin (2009) observes, there will not be ways to clarify positions or intentions.

Conflict entails discord that occurs when goals, interests or values of the different team members are incompatible, and those individuals or groups frustrate each other's attempt to achieve objectives (Adomi and Anie, 2006; Ongori, 2009). Scholars (Ongori, 2009; Jonathan and Katz, 2007) have identified relationship conflict as having negative effects on the group performance in three ways. Firstly, it limits the information processing ability of the group because members spend their time and energy on each other rather than on problem solving. Secondly, it limits group members' cognitive functioning by increasing their stress and anxiety levels (Laslo and Goldberg, 2007). Lastly, it encourages antagonistic or accusatory attributions for other group members' behaviour, which can create a self-fulfilling prophecy of mutual hostility and conflict escalation.

In a number of instances, people feel provoked and conflict can escalate even though there was no reason for a fight. What happens might not be failure to communicate, but a failure to understand communication. Fortunately, breakdowns in communication are usually repairable, misunderstandings can be explained, and relationships restored. Nevertheless, a clear understanding of semantics is crucial to preventing misunderstandings. Arguments frequently occur when two people think they are talking about the same thing, but really are just using the same word for two different ideas. According to Halliday (1978), it is the range of the meaning potential of the register chosen by individual speakers, which constitutes and reproduces the situation in the social system which is the origin of those very meanings.

On the basis of the above, the aim of the study is to investigate workplace conflicts relative to the discourse (language) used by participants. Attempt will, therefore, be made to answer these questions:
   a. What type of discourse is associated with conflict during the management of academic projects?
   b. What is the impact of such discourse on relations and performance of tasks by team members?
   c. How can the discourse of conflicts be measured in an objective manner?

Problem Statement

A gap exists in the knowledge about the link between language used to conduct business in educational institutions, and conflicts or differences that arise in the management of projects. There is often a lot of guesswork about the nature of conflicts and the language through which such conflicts are conveyed. It is hypothesized that creating awareness about the significance of language has the potential of minimizing conflicts, thereby enhancing teamwork and attainment of project objectives. The investigation seeks to achieve two objectives, namely to:
   a. establish the type of discourse that is associated with conflict; and
   b. analyse such discourse to determine its impact on relationships and performance of tasks in a given educational project

Research Context

This is an in-depth case study of how a DE institution went about the project of establishing a new academic programme. This was in collaboration with a more established open and distance learning (ODL) organisation in another country. The institution established a team to drive the project. Additionally, the project team was tasked to work in consultation with other in house departments, as well as with the partnering organization. The investigation focuses on four levels of conflict, identified through research (e.g. Duke, 1995; Adomi and Anie, 2006). These are conflicts: among members of the project team (intra-group), the project team and other departments in the institution (inter-group), between individuals (inter-personal), and between the particular institution and one with which it was entering a collaborative partnership (inter-organisational). The study seeks, *inter alia,* to establish patterns, regularities and commonalities, which could be applied to comparable situations in order to improve praxis.

METHODOLOGY

The research is designed around data collected from written and oral interactions, at the four levels described above, over a period of twelve months. A questionnaire was also circulated to the 12 members of the project team and six other stakeholders who were regular participants in meetings and related activities. Thus altogether a population of eighteen participants contributed to the data. The period for the study spans the time when negotiations between the two collaborating institutions started, to the time when the course was being delivered for the first time (Semester 1). During that period many planning and implementation meetings were held. These covered a whole range of project management issues, including designing the curriculum for a new degree programme, determining the learner profiles, deciding the more appropriate learner support model, identifying part-time writers and tutors, training the part-timers in DE approaches, and conducting induction for both tutors and learners. The team comprised representatives from different departments: finance, learner support, programmes development, procurement, editorial, and graphic design. All worked under a project manager.

This was a clear situation in which people from different departments, and with different expertise were obliged to come together to address an issue, while continuing with their core departmental tasks. As Tichapondwa and Tichapondwa (2009:69) observe regarding situations like this, "communication is necessitated by the need to solve a given problem, and to complete tasks". The potential for conflict in the situation cannot be at all in doubt.

Data were collected in four specific ways. First, conversations in project team meetings were audio-recorded and transcribed. Second, non-verbal behaviour signals of conflict events were observed and noted. Third, a record of e-mail messages exchanged by conflicting parties was kept. Fourth, responses from the questionnaire were recorded quantitatively, and in accordance with the themes from the structured questionnaire. The data were then evaluated, using the model for conversation analysis proposed by Grice (1975). This framework was supported with categories of communication, developed by the researcher, that could be used to interpret discourse in linguistic terms in the contextual characterisation of conflict. To ensure reliability, a non-participating professional was requested to critique the questionnaire instrument, and on the basis of that, the necessary modifications were made. Also, to ensure objectivity, the same professional was asked to do an independent transcription of the audio-recorded interaction that went on in meetings. The two versions were then compared, and final transcripts created.

Theoretical grounding

Distance Education is, by its very nature, project oriented. A range of activities do require systematic management, and these include the development of new courses, introduction of institutionally compliant technologies, supporting learners within a given context, management of risk, management of institutional resources, to name but a few (cf. Tchapondwa and Tichapondwa, 2009). The essence of this scenario overtly implies management of people, and where such management occurs, conflicts and misunderstandings inevitably arise. This is largely because where interaction occurs over issues, individual perceptions differ in the process of communication. When perceptions differ, there is bound to be conflict. Hopkins (2009:1) defines workplace conflict as, "an expressed struggle between at least two people, both of whom perceive interference from the other towards achieving their goals." Conflicts are differences evidenced in language as outward

manifestation of thought. Harolds and Wood (2006) are of the opinion that the origins of conflict are related to behaviour, emotion, or perception. The scholars argue that perceptual differences reflect different individual needs, values, and interests. In a book-long discussion on successful project management, Tichapondwa and Tichapondwa (2009:79) argue that :

> "most conflicts involve differences in information, opinion, beliefs, and ideas held by individual members of the team. Conflicts arise during problem-solving, when team members try to define a given problem and arrive at a solution".

Tensions will then rise, pulling the team apart. Emotional reactions to a situation indicate the initial personal response to a disagreement, and conflict behaviour is often the action by which we express our feelings (Slabbert, 2004). In short a conflict can only exist when both parties are aware of a disagreement while communicating.

For the present study, communication is succinctly defined as "a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed" (Carey, 1992:23). That means in the context of managing academic issues, communication is a purposeful activity involving the creation and exchange of meaning. Attainment of project goals is jeopardized when productive exchange of meaning is stalled through conflicts. The investigation is based on the conceptual understanding that communication is manifested through words and actions, and that where the interlocutors misinterpret these, there is escalation of conflict (Akin, 2003). An awareness of how inappropriate communication can result in strained relationships that are prejudicial to the offering of good services is, therefore, necessary in an organisation.

It is noteworthy that clarity about how language works is essential if workplace conflicts are to be understood and avoided whenever possible. The term we use for language that is aimed at carrying out specific functions, for example, the language used in running academic projects and the concomitant conflicts that arise, is referred to, in applied linguistic terms, as *discourse* (Cook, 1990). The management of projects takes place in a social context, and different scholars have studied conversation as a linguistic phenomenon from different perspectives.

In the present investigation, where focus is on the situational study of language, inspiration is drawn from theories involved with language in context, promulgated by several scholars (e.g. Gumperz, 1982; Dell Hymes, 1972; Mercer, 2004), who refer to this applied linguistic preoccupation as *ethnography of communication*. This concept regards participants in a particular discourse as a speech community, that is, they are supposed to have a shared understanding of the activity they will be engaged in, and what language should be used to achieve specified goals. In the present case, the project team would be regarded as the speech community engaged in discourse aimed at creating or preparing to deliver a service. A theory, known as *pragmatics*, which was developed in the 1970s (Searle, 1975; Grice, 1975) is closely linked with ethnography of communication, which is an important element of the present study. Matthews (1997: 290) explains that "the field of pragmatics is concerned with relations between signs and their denotata, and between signs and their interpretants." Denotata refers to that which the signs or words denote, and interpretants refers to the interlocutors involved in the conversation.

According to Grice (cited in Downes, 1998) pragmatics or theory of contextual implication can be divided into two interrelated parts, namely, speaker meaning and the cooperative principle. Speaker meaning is the basis of intentional communication in which the speaker

intends the hearer to recognise a message because the speaker also recognises that this message be recognised. Where intentions are misinterpreted, then there is conflict. The cooperative principle, on the other hand specifies that the interactants should make their "conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged". In our case, the theory provides guidance that any deviation from the principle eventuates in conflict. In order to achieve conversational goals in a given situation (ethnography of communication), participants must assume of each other that they are obeying certain maxims. These are described below, and will be used as the framework for adjudicating instances of transcripts forming the database for the study. Grice (1975:45-46) identified four maxims to which social conversation can be subjected for objective evaluation.

Quantity: Do not provide more or less information than is required for the
                current purposes of the exchange.
Quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true:
        1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
        2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
Relation: Be relevant.
Manner: Be clear
        1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
        2. Avoid ambiguity.
        3. Avoid unnecessary prolixity.
        4. Be orderly.

This instructive paradigm shows, for example, that in academic project management, misunderstandings can readily arise when attention is not paid to the quality or quantity of what is said. Also irrelevance and being out of order in the choice of words can provoke differences. So when we engage in a conversation with someone, we can assume that they are cooperating to follow these maxims, more specifically that they are trying to sustain our joint activity.

The writer created the following categories, applicable in the analysis of data, either through verbal or non-verbal means, in order to support the framework by Grice.

Category	Explanation
Bias	Involves the use of language targeting ethnocentric ideas or notions about others.
Emotionality	The language used, shows that the interlocutor is anxious, inflamed, angry or disgusted.
Escalation	The language and actions are used to add more pressure to make the other side concede defeat.
Yielding	The one party, to see to it that the fighting party attains its outcomes, uses language of surrender.
Avoidance	One party shows inaction, withdrawal, passivity or retreat. Verbally or non-verbally, the avoiding party shows no concern to attain its own outcome.
Confrontation	One party chooses language consciously or deliberately to provoke and incite conflict.
Conciliatory	One part realizes the deliberate intention to provoke, and consciously selects language to ensure there is progress.

Gricean (1975) theory, cited above, is also closely linked with ideas about politeness as propounded by Downes (1998). The notion of politeness pervades the interpretation of every discourse act. Downes (1998:292-293) specifies that the idea of politeness derives from the notion of *face* as used in the analysis of face-to-face interaction. A discourse participant's face is his/her image of the self in a communicative situation. In a typical verbal encounter, a participant claims a face, which is lodged in mutual appraisal. "All the participants are responsible for maintaining their own and each other's faces cooperatively in the course of the interaction" (Downes,1998:292). This responsibility leads to a pair of related rules, which Downes refers to as *the rule of self-respect,* where those engaged in the conversation must stand guard over their own face, and *the rule of considerateness,* wherein they must go to certain lengths to respect the face of others. Interlocutors cooperate to try to make sure that neither themselves nor others are defaced, out of face, or in the wrong face. They must constantly do so by conscious repairs, which occur when there is some source of trouble in a conversation.

Conscious avoidance of defacing others or being put out of face, helps to prevent escalation of conflicts. In the words of Akin (2003:1), " a wrong word or misconceived message during conflict is like gasoline on fire. Inflammatory language is one of the most common causes of conflict escalation." Arguably, therefore, avoiding the escalation of arguments at the workplace requires awareness of the potential of language, and the need for self-control, thus saving the discourse participants an immense amount of embarrassment and pain when there is mutual defacement. The following situation illustrates the nature of conflict, and the data come from interactions in the institution on which the present study is based.

Episode 1
***Situation:** During a project team meeting, the divisional supervisor comments after the project manager had made an observation.*

> *Sp.1: If the President of a country has made a decision about something, who are you from your little corner to say you do not agree with his decision?*
>
> *(Project team members look at each other. Some laugh, while others shake their heads.)*
>
> *Sp2: The President can make a decision, but that doesn't mean I am not entitled to my opinion.*
>
> (Members look at each other.)

In this instance, Sp 1 seems to deliberately use confrontational discourse, and violates the notion of politeness. Clearly, both rules of self-respect and considerateness are not observed, which results in defacement. The respondent (Sp2) picks up the fight by using discourse that escalates the conflict when he asserts that he is entitled to his opinion. There is evidence of tension as team members express embarrassment by looking at each other or shaking their heads. These non-verbal features of communication define beyond any doubt the conflict situation. The interaction also violates the Gricean maxims of manner and relation. Sp1 is, obviously, out of order and the discourse used is not relevant to the objectives of the discussion.

In the foregoing review of relevant theory, an attempt has been made to shed light on key issues, namely, what conflict is and how it is interconnected with communication through discourse that is specific to a given context. This has been characterized as ethnography of communication, best exemplified in the theory of pragmatics. Gricean (1975) maxims of social conversation were explained, and it was observed that the model will be used in the adjudication of transcripts identified from the workplace as evidence of potential conflict situations. The link between the maxims and the politeness phenomenon was discussed thereby giving a sense of direction in the exploration of conflict situations.

Limitations

The main limitation of the study was that it concentrated on episodes within a given institution, using a small group, a fact that would be prejudicial to generalisability. Additionally, there could also be the danger of bias and compromised objectivity on the part of the researcher who was also a participant. However, there are a number of mitigating factors, and these include the fact that in practitioner research there is no way the person who investigates a work related phenomenon can stand on the sidelines. In fact, direct involvement is more meritorious than mere observation. In the second instance, the intensity of conflicts and the lessons learnt, do not have to necessarily emanate from an investigation of several institutions. Conflicts are dynamic phenomena to the extent that insights from a single episode can lead to numerous linguistic interpretations from which cross cultural applications can be made. Last but not least, there are no known systematic studies on the issue discussed in the study, especially in DE as experienced in the sub-region of Southern Africa. So instead of the present effort being mired in limitations, it actually enkindles debate that should be taken up on a larger scale. In that respect, the delimitation to a case study is actually an advantage simply because data are explored in some depth for the benefit of subsequent studies.

Findings

All the 18 project participants responded to the questionnaire. In response to the first question, all confirmed that they had experienced misunderstandings from the time the project started to the time the degree programme was delivered. Regarding the four levels of conflict, all the 18 respondents identified interpersonal conflict as being the most prevalent during the period. As far as their awareness about the link between language and work related conflicts was concerned, only two respondents were very much aware; while four were not fully aware. Twelve participants indicated that they were not aware.

From the data, it can be concluded that there is 100% acknowledgement that conflict characterised the operations of the project, and that interpersonal conflict was the most dominant of the four. The majority of participants were either not fully aware (six), or not aware (twelve) about the language issue in conflict situations. The two figures translate to 89% of the participants, hence these findings resonate Kaushal's and Kwantes's (2006) finding that conflict appears to be an integral component of human functioning.

The findings will now be presented in accordance with the four levels, starting with the commonest, namely, inter-personal differences. It should be noted that only representative episodes were selected for analysis.

Inter-personal conflicts

As defined earlier, interpersonal conflicts are those differences identifiable between individuals as illustrated in this episode.

Episode 2
Situation: During a project team meeting, one of the members asks a question to which the project manager responds.

> *Sp 1: I would like to know what we are expected to do when part-time writers fail to submit work on target.*
>
> *Sp 2: But that is what we have been discussing in previous meetings. Anyone who listened carefully will be aware that a position has already been taken on the matter. One wonders at the level of seriousness among team members.*
>
> *Sp 1: I take exception to that. Are you saying that I do not pay attention? No…No…*
>
> (Members remain silent.)
>
> *Sp 2: My apologies. I did not mean that.*
>
> (Member walks out.)
>
> After the meeting, Sp 2 asks one of the members to go and apologise on her behalf.

There is discord between the two interlocutors, judging by the choice of discourse. Sp1 states his case precisely, and his contribution is true, orderly and to the point, thus fulfilling the four maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner. Though the response by Sp 2 is not overtly confrontational, there is veiled sarcasm implicitly accusing the other of failure to keep track of obvious decisions made in his presence. Sp2 goes beyond the purpose of the discussion, and expresses wonder at the level of seriousness by members. In terms of quantity, this adjunct is not called for, hence it is a violation of the maxim of quantity. Equally, Sp2 violates the maxim of quality by choosing discourse that accuses, not only Sp1, but by implication, the entire team. The aspersion is irrelevant and out of order mainly because it frustrates Sp1's attempt to achieve project objectives.

Sp 1 has interpreted the meaning potential of the register used to be accusatory, that is why he takes exception. He obviously feels defaced, and escalates the conflict through inflamed and disgusted language. The interlocutors violate all the four maxims proposed by Grice (1975). Through non-verbal means, the emotionally charged Sp1 chooses avoidance by walking out of the meeting. There is a tense atmosphere as evidenced by the silence of other participants. In this pragmatic situation, Sp2 has failed to observe politeness, notably because he failed to be considerate by putting others out of face. Probably by walking out, Sp 1 demonstrates self-respect by standing guard over his own face.

The overall impact of this episode leads to the inevitable conclusion that the information processing ability of the group is curtailed because two individuals expend their energy on each other rather than on the business of the meeting. Secondly, the choice of discourse to accuse members is likely to encourage antagonism that can remain bottled up, resulting in

unproductive discussions in the future. Thirdly, by drawing inferences from both verbal and non-verbal communication, there is a high probability that team members become stressed, and have their anxiety levels heightened. Kriesberg (1998) observes that workplace conflicts can lead to destruction and decay of relations, as well as to individuals developing survival artistry. Unfortunately, although Sp 2 sends an apology through an intermediator, it is too late in terms of repairing the damage caused by the inappropriate discourse. The two individuals are out of face.

The following situation is comparable to the foregoing one.

Episode 3
Situation: At a project team meeting where individual members give reports.

> *Sp1: Sir, you are in-charge of this course. In the past four weekly meetings, you have been reporting the same story that you are making no progress with your course writer. What steps are you taking as you, no doubt, realize that we are falling behind schedule?*
>
> *Sp2: You tell me what I should do. Do I take a stick and beat up the writer?*
>
> (There is silence as project team members look at each other.)
>
> *Sp1: Let's not be out of order. You are the accountable officer. Surely, it is only logical that we seek guidance from you. You must come up with a plan. Otherwise how do we justify our existence in the organization if we do not have alternative plans?*
>
> *Sp2: So you think I am lazy? Take my job if you think you can do two jobs.*
>
> (The Project Manager shakes his head and goes on with the meeting on a new topic.)

Sp1's speech acts reflect veiled frustration at the team member's failure to conform. Pragmatically, Sp1 deliberately chooses the language of politeness while at the same time expressing dissatisfaction. Effort is made to take care of the speaker's emotions as well as those of the addressee. The message is precisely communicated in terms of the maxim of quantity. In terms of its quality, it carries contextual truth and is both orderly and relevant. It is when the interlocutor gives his response that the deliberate speaker's intention to provoke is manifest. The language is deliberately both sarcastic and confrontational, and the metaphor: *do I take a stick and beat up the writer* is inflammatory. For that reason, the silence, non-verbal communication, by project team members signifies tension whose impact on continuance with project business is put in jeopardy.

When Sp1 next takes up speakership, he chooses conciliatory discourse, but the frustration is rather difficult to hide. The appeal for logic and orderliness to prevail is a fulfillment of the maxim of manner as well as that of relevance. In retrospect, Sp2's response is emotionally charged, and the choice of words is deliberately confrontational. Clearly, there is neither self-respect nor considerateness. The maxims of manner and quality are irreparably violated mainly because there is prolixity of utterances and irrelevance. Sp1 feels defaced, and the non-verbal act of shaking one's head and attempting to continue with the meeting is a kind of avoidance to ensure some semblance of progress is realized. Reading in between the lines,

however, the impact of the verbal exchange can only be negative rather than positive. It is unlikely that discussion can continue after such devastating language has been used to dent emotions.

Intra-group conflicts
Episode 4
Situation: A divisional meeting comprising the Supervisor, four middle managers, and staff members under the middle managers.

> *Sp1: There is a big problem in this division. When you have issues you just keep quiet. Why? Tell me why? The managers are not helping me in any way. Managers, do you want me to do your job for you?*
>
> (Everyone looks down, and the managers exchange glances with each other. Then the meeting goes on. There is absolute silence throughout.)
>
> *Sp1: If no one wants to take part in this meeting then I will close it.*
>
> (Outside the meeting, two managers are heard talking to each other.)
>
> *Sp2: What do you think about this? Somebody condemning us in front of our subordinates!*
>
> *Sp3: He should no longer count on my co-operation. This is unprofessional.*
>
> *Sp2: Why don't we make an appointment and discuss this?*
>
> *Sp3: What is there to discuss? It's over. Fullstop.*

Sp1's utterances are accusatory and the use of repeated interrogatives followed by direct verbal attack on managers is provocative. There does not seem to be any sensitivity to choose words that encourage dialogue. In particular, the language is used to make the other side concede defeat, thus inciting conflict. This confirms one of the findings by Leung (2008) that an overbearing and demanding leader can be a cause for intra and inter-group conflict. The discourse reflects obscurity of expression, while it adds little value to the current purposes of the exchange. To aggravate matters, the speaker's utterances are out of order because he does not present any evidence in support of his allegations. In that respect, the maxims of quantity, quality and manner are totally compromised. The non-verbal reaction of silence by the entire meeting shows a polarised group, which prefers withdrawal rather than confrontation. There is evidence of this when Sp1 realises that he ends up holding a meeting with himself, a kind of monologue, while participants prefer silence. Unfortunately, withdrawal is a difficult way of handling emotions, and in this particular case once people are outside, they openly express their emotions to each other.

As an example, the speech act by Sp2 interrogates the right of Sp1 to deface them in public. There is emotionality, manifesting itself as anger and disgust. The impact of Sp1's discourse is articulated by Sp3, who vows never to cooperate, and through accusatory language: *This is unprofessional,* makes it clear that there can be no productive future to look forward to in terms of carrying through the project. Although Sp3 appeals through conciliatory language: *Why don't we make an appointment...* it is rather too late. Everyone has been defaced,

including Sp1, the originator of the vituperation and members of the team who are not managers. The conflict has escalated outside the boardroom. The discourse: *It is over. Full-stop,* has ominous finality in it, purporting finality of position and hardened feelings. This clash can give rise to certain maladjusted behaviours in individuals as they try to cope with it (cf. Bhushan, 2004). Like a very large fire that causes a lot of damage, a conflagration, we conclude that in some conflicts, discourse ignites emotions that polarise project participants whose mission is to drive academic projects to some point of convergence. Thus discourse conflagration can have deleterious consequences.

Episode 5
Inter-organisational conflict
Situation: In a collaboration arrangement, the receiving partner has written three e-mails to the other partner, but the addressee has not responded. The addresser then decides to send a reminder.

> *Wr1: Sir, this is a follow-up to the three e-mails I have written in connection with the joint project between our two institutions. I note that you have not cared to respond. May I remind you that when I write, I am doing so in pursuit of institutional work not my personal work.*
>
> *Wr2: Sorry. I am a very busy person, and sometimes have very little time to read e-mail messages.*
>
> (After receiving this response, the officer requests her immediate supervisor to take up any correspondence with the senior person in the other organization.)

The fact of one party writing three e-mail messages without getting any response, in a project that is mutually considered important and beneficial to both parties, is a cause for anxiety and incomprehension. There is meaning potential in the failure to reply, and this is borne out in Wr1's reminder. Although the first clause is polite and fulfills the maxim of quantity, the speech acts that follow betray emotionality, which is manifested as veiled anger. The words: *I note that you have not cared to respond* confirm this. The subsequent utterance escalates the potential for conflict by being direct and accusing the addressee of not being considerate. While this utterance might have justification, it nevertheless violates the maxim of quantity and can be properly interpreted as an insult to the recipient.

In equally confrontational language, the addressee responds with sarcastic language: *I am a very busy person… and have little time to read e-mail messages.* The semantics here is that the originator of the exchange is being rudely told that he is not as busy. The interlocutors seem to be caught up in a game of words where denotations are perceived differently, or there is a deliberate intention to frustrate each other's attempts to address the problem of collaboration. In fact, the originator of the dialogue backs down through the non-verbal tact of yielding and avoidance. Wr1 prefers that her supervisor takes over the inter-organisational communication, thereby avoiding further escalation of the conflict. From this situation, it can be concluded that conflict limits information processing especially when interactants play games with words. This has an impact on personal relations and success of the academic project, all because two individuals representing their organisations have perceptual differences or want to assert their individual sense of importance.

Episode 6
Inter-group conflict
Situation: In a review meeting aimed at updating each other on progress made in running the project, the group responsible for developing study materials, and the group responsible for editing the same materials, has a disagreement.

> *Sp1: What are you saying about editors? (Voice raised). Come again. What are you saying?*
> *Sp 2:I am saying tell us what you are doing in your department. You delay the work and you simply sit folding your arms and relax while we toil with developing the modules.*
> *Sp3: My God! Listen to this provocation (Voice raised). Sitting and relaxing! Do you know what you are saying. Can somebody tell her to choose better words?*
>
> (Members laugh.)
>
> *Sp1: This is no laughing matter. What would the materials you write amount to if they are not edited? Besides your section delays sending modules for editing. What do you spend time doing? Sitting and chatting away college time!*
>
> *Sp4: Now this displays total ignorance. This is cruel and unfair allegation. If you do not know the responsibility of writers, shut up!*
>
> (There is noise and talking between individuals until the project manager steps in.)
>
> *Sp5: Please let's focus on the business of the day. It does not help to trade accusations. Work has to be done. Remember we have objectives to meet.*

This is the type of conflict, which, according to Katz (2007) can lead to hostility and physical confrontation. In this situation, two groups serving on the same project committee are at cross-purposes. The episode reflects the language of bias. Either group holds certain notions about the other. The information furnished by either side bears no relevance to the purpose of the project meeting, and speech acts of trading accusations are not premised on any evidence of truth. There is prolixity of expression and lack of orderliness. Paralanguage, evident in the raising of voices, betrays the escalation. The discourse conflagration rages on, with either side making no effort to be conciliatory. Either side applies pressure to ensure the other side accepts defeat. Unfortunately, the substance of the exchange is off task, as energies are spent on fighting to win, though it is not at all clear what it is that has to be won. Members who belong to neither side, laugh at some point, and this aggravates the conflict. Sp1, in particular, chastises those who laugh in the choicest deprecatory language that puts everyone out of face. Both groups seem prepared to continue with the direct confrontation, until Sp5 intervenes and implores the feuding sides to focus on the business of the day.

The impact of this onslaught, one can surmise, is that the team gets polarised. The presumption made that the project team is a speech community (cf. Hymes, 1972), does not seem to hold ground. Perceptual differences as reflected in the discordant discourse, point to the probability of delays in accomplishing the objectives of the academic project in future.

Findings from the questionnaire

One open-ended question requested respondents to suggest why disagreements arose during the life span of the project. There were **nine common causes of conflict** that were repeated by the participants, and these are:

- negative attitude towards the project;
- lack of interest and commitment in the project;
- Lack of specific knowledge to perform the assigned tasks;
- inflexibility by members because they were used to doing things their own way;
- resisting the project manager;
- inability to manage time by some of the members;
- members being overcommitted to equally important tasks;
- the lack of confidence to do the assigned tasks; and
- the meetings were too frequent, too long and boring.

Findings about the causes of conflicts are also expressed in Ayoko's (2007) observation that diverse perceptions pose several challenges when people work in a team. It can be concluded from these findings that when there are deficiencies of this nature among project team members, there is potential for the discourse of conflict primarily because the perceptions of participants are asymmetrical.

The other question requested participants to specify **ways in which conflicts were expressed.** These are some of the ways commonly raised by the participants:

- oral exchange during meetings;
- oral exchanges during telephone conversations;
- exchanges through e-mail;
- non-verbal signals during meetings such as shaking one's head, non-participation in meeting procedures by adopting a posture of silence, looking the other side when somebody is talking, avoiding somebody outside the meeting, etc. ; and
- discussing issues outside the meeting with non-members.

The conclusion that can be arrived at is that there are recognized channels of communication through which conflicts are expressed in the process of managing academic projects.

Members raised the following in response to the question about **how conflicts negatively affected operations.**

- The team members get divided.
- The team loses focus by concentrating energies on managing emotions.
- Production is slowed down.
- Conflicts encourage burnout.
- Social relationships, outside the meetings, are soured.
- Conflicts can lead to hatred and mistrust.

The negative effects identified by the participants can result in the impairment of one's performance and efficiency (Choudrie, 2006). People will continue to come to work simply because they need a job, and not out of interest. This leads to forbearance and the suppression

of personal goals in pursuit of a superficial harmonious, yet conflicting relationship. The observations made about the manner in which conflicts negatively affect project operations, led to the inevitable conclusion that conflicts, manifested through discourse types affect the management of a given academic project in specific negative ways.

Participants were also requested to state **ways in which conflicts benefited them.** These were some of the commonest responses.

- Conflicts help you to understand the way people feel or think about certain issues.
- Conflicts teach you to be tolerant and to control your temper.
- People who remain quiet and withdrawn during discussions do not grow because they do not know how to interact with others.
- The choice of language is an important aspect, which is best learnt when someone engages in disagreements.
- Nothing can be achieved without accommodating diverse opinions expressed in unexpected ways.
- Engaging in conflicting views enables you to respect other people's views no matter how inappropriate they might be.
- Conflicting ideas and views eventually lead to solutions to problems.
- Conflicts stimulate one's intellectual skills because one will be compelled to exercise reasoning powers instead of depending on emotions.

These responses confirm the research findings by Higashide and Birley (2002) that improvement of task performance is a direct result of participating in diverse viewpoints. After the confirmation, it was established that conflicts can be beneficial. The logical conclusion arrived at was that participants derive some benefit from experiencing and taking part in conflict situations through dialogue.

DISCUSSION

The episodes, supported with 100% acknowledgement of the prevalence of conflict, established the type of discourse associated with conflict. In the same breadth, the question of impact on relations and task performance was addressed. This was premised on the application of maxims of conversation proposed by Grice (1975), ideas about politeness (Downes, 1998), and the applied linguistic model on the discourse of conflict proposed by the researcher.

Findings from the questionnaire reinforced results obtained from the episodes in two ways. Firstly, results specified the major causes of conflicts, and the means of communication through which conflicts are manifested. Secondly, responses reinforced research findings that conflicts can have a negative impact on performance of tasks, but at the same time, they can be beneficial to both the individual and the institution. On the basis of the findings, therefore, the study makes some contributions.

One such contribution is that when conflicts occur, the role played by language is either taken for granted or not appreciated. Focusing on the discourse of conflict and its impact on relations is perceived to be a major contribution. Participants whose awareness of discourse is consciously developed are likely to handle conflict situations better. It is, therefore, recommended that team members in comparable projects in educational institutions be

sensitized in whatever manner possible of the potential of language to control, repair, and prevent damaging conflicts.

The theoretical ideas, discussed earlier in the study pointed to several crucial aspects, namely, the levels of conflicts; how conflicts can be made to escalate; how conflicts impact negatively on both the social and cognitive processing of information; and how verbal and non-verbal signals may result in stress and anxiety. The experiment has confirmed the veracity of these postulations, thus feeding back into theory. The fact of confirming issues through research leads to a position where we can do away with assumptions and guesswork, a paradigm that characterised perceptions prior to the study.

Conflict is often discussed as a construct that is not linked to language, hence defying measurement. Approaching conflict in a systematic manner using a framework and a language model, is an important contribution that researchers can improve on further. In actual fact, the creation of a model is an important contribution to theory.

The selected episodes used to illustrate conflict are, in their own right, an important contribution to the reality of workplace conflicts. The motivated researcher, will now be enabled to introspect, reflect on episodes in his/her objective situation and revise communication strategies and discourse associated with conflict.

Finally, the study charts a new course in distance education, where the majority of studies have been confirmed to be dealing mainly with learner support issues (cf. Tichapondwa's, 2009 discussion on trends in DE research in Southern Africa). Researchers in the field, it is recommended, should be encouraged to diversify research focus by including other equally important issues towards the cultivation of DE as a discipline.

REFERENCES

Adomi, E.E. and Anie, S.O. 2006. "Conflict management in Nigerian university libraries," *Journal of Library Management,* Vol.27 (8), pp 520-530.

Akin, J. 2003. "Escalation- Limiting language" htt:p//conflict1911.com/cgi-bin/links/jump.cgl?ID-11553.(Retrieved18/01/10).

Akin, J. 2009. "Interpersonal/Small-scale communication." htt:p//conflict1911.com/cgi-bin/links/jump.cgl?ID-11553.(Retrieved18/01/10).

Ayoko, O.L. 2007. "Cross cultural management". *An International Journal,* Vol.14 (2) pp105-124.

Carey, J. 1992. *Communication as culture: Essays on media and society*. Boston: Unwin.

Bhushan, A. 2004. "Conflict behaviour in organisations". http://conflict 911.com/guestconflict/conflictingorgs.htm (retrieved 03/02/16).

Cook, G. 1990. *Discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Downes, W. 1998. *Language and society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Duke, C.R. 1995."Organisational conflicts affecting technology commercialization from nonprofit laboratories', *Journal of Product and Brand Management,* Vol. 4 (5), pp 5-13.

Grice, H.P. 1975. *Logic and conversation: Syntax and Semantics*. London: Academic Press.

Gumperz, J. 1982. *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Halliday, M.A.K. 1978. *Language and social semiotic*. London: Edward Arnold.

Harolds, J., and Wood, B.P. 2006. "Conflict Management and Resolution." American College of Radiology.

Higashide, H. and Birley, S. 2002. "The consequences of conflict between the venture capitalist and entrepreneurial team in the United Kingdom from the perspective of the venture capitalist", *Journal of Business Venturing,* Vol.17 (1) pp 59-81.

Hopkins, L. 2009. "Minimising conflict with effective communication". htt:p//conflict1911.com/cgi-bin/links/jump.cgl?ID11553.(Retrieved18/01/16).

Hymes, D. 1972. "Introduction: Towards ethnographics of communication". *The Ethnography of Communication.* Vol.66, pp1-34.

Jonathan, D. and Katz, M.D. 2007. "Conflict and its resolution in the operating room." *Journal of Clinical Anaesthesia.* Vol 19, pp152-158.

Katz, J.D. 2007. "Conflict and its resolution in the operating room", *Journal of Clinical Anaesthesia,* Vol.19, pp 152-158.

Laslo, Z. and Goldberg, A.I. 2007. "Resource allocation under uncertainty in a multi-project matrix environment: Is organisational conflict inevitable?" *International Journal of Project Management,* (www.elsevier.com/locate/ijproman).

Leung, A.S.M. 2008. "Interpersonal conflict and resolution strategies: An examination of Hong Kong employees". *Team Management,* Vol. 14 (3) pp 165-178.

Ongori, H. 2009. "Organisational conflict and its effects on organizational performance." *Research Journal of Business Management.* Vol.2 (1), pp16-24.

Matthews, P.H. 1997. *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Linguistics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mercer, N. 2004. "Sociocultural discourse analysis: analysing classroom talk as a social mode of thinking". *Journal of Applied Linguistics* 1 (2), 137-168.

Searle,J. 1975."Indirect speech acts". In *Syntax and Semantics.* Vol.3 New York:Academic Press.

Slabbert, A.D. 2004. "Conflict management styles in traditional organisations." *The Social Science journal.* Vol. 41, pp83-92.

Tichapondwa, S. M. and Tichapondwa, S. P. 2009. *Successful Project Management: Insights from distance education practices*. Vancouver: Virtual University of the Small States of the Commonwealth.

Tichapondwa, S.M. 2009. "Trends *in* distance education research in Southern Africa". *International Journal of Open and Distance Learning.*Vol.3