

Peace, Culture and Communication: “Languaging” Post-conflict Disputes

Natukunda-Togboa Edith Ruth¹

¹ Makerere University, School of Languages, Literature and Communication, Kampala, Uganda

Correspondence: Natukunda-Togboa Edith Ruth, Makerere University, School of Languages, Literature and Communication, Kampala, Uganda

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Abstract

Language, which is rarely neutral, shapes perception and behavior. Consequently, it plays an important role in relation to conflict and peace. The language of conflict usually functions on the basis of using differences to promote violence. Interviews conducted on land disputes in the post-conflict context of Northern Uganda, showed that language can be used to reduce these differences and affirm dignity thus diffusing tensions. Our preceding studies of conflict discourse within returnee communities have endeavored to show how language use, by imposing certain misrepresentations as legitimate, undermines efforts of social reintegration, perpetuates conditions of negative peace and can pose a threat of returning to conflict.

In this study of Gulu elders dealing with post-conflict disputes, language is perceived as a tool of positive peace. Borrowing from the sociocultural theory of mind and its application to concepts of language, the paper shows how language can foster open and inclusive communication and support the pursuit of peaceful cohabitation within returnee communities. It goes on to demonstrate how language, within the cultural institutions of returnee communities, constitutes power that can be used in “languaging” conflict resolution. According to the study, language has embedded within it actual relations of power, so much so that those who control it exercise an enormous influence on how the communities perceive conflict and peace-building and what behaviors they accept in relation to resolving post-conflict disputes.

Consequently, the quick revitalization of traditional arrangements of dispute settlement has been possible in the area of Gulu because language is a strong social institution which has enhanced the efforts of peace maintenance in the Acholi post conflict context. Languaging or talking through disputes as an alternative discourse to conflict should be embraced as a strategy of empowering the voiceless. It is an effective and sustainable cost effective strategy for dealing with cyclic disputes especially when applied as complementary to other dispute settlement approaches.

Keywords: Post-conflict disputes, Returnee communities, “Languaging”, Conflict resolution

1. Introduction

The role of language in escalating conflict, or in enhancing trust and strengthening peace building has been underscored by many scholars. Language, which is rarely neutral, shapes perception and influences behavior. It can be used to demean and inflict violence or to affirm and accord dignity: thus fostering harmony (Gay, 1999). In my preceding studies of peace and conflict discourse (Natukunda, 2005; 2014) I have endeavored to demonstrate that lexicon and grammatical structures have embedded in them terms that express not only arbitrary systems of classification but actual instruments of power relations. As custodian of institutional structures of power relations therefore, language itself is a social institution. In this study, we shall see how elders and community leaders in Gulu, Northern Uganda, who are vested with the power to control this social institution, actually exercise influence on how citizens perceive disputes and on what behaviors they accept towards conflict resolution.

1.1 The Social Context of the Study

Before the colonial administrative system was introduced, the people of Gulu, the Acholi, in Northern Uganda where the study was conducted, were originally ethnically organized under chiefdoms, each headed by a hereditary ruler known as “*Rwot*”. The *Rwot* was “a central figure and he had executive, judicial and legislative powers”. As lineage head, the *Rwot* was assisted by lineage “elders” who organized both the production (based on village – lineage

cooperatives) and the reproduction roles (through the ideological rules and material control mechanisms). The elders were the main advisors to the *Rwot* and “were responsible for most of the social controls exercised among the Acholi”. (World Culture Encyclopedia [WCE], 2016).

In pre-independence Acholi one of the social mechanisms that assisted the development of chiefdoms seems to have been the “ability of the *Rwodi* (plural of *Rwot*) to help settle disputes that involved more than one lineage”. This points to the critical role language has traditionally played among the Acholi in dispute settlement. (WCE, 2016). Through language and linguistic practices, power relations are expressed using discourse systems of power that impose framings of what is true and false, good or bad or acceptable and unacceptable. According to the conflict analyst Foucault (1982), “knowledge rests within the political field”, which is also the field of power, while “power” implies the hegemony of meanings; eventually becoming knowledge. Knowledge is prone to political influence and it serves the purposes of justifying and legitimizing meanings and norms that are used by power. In this way, power shapes knowledge so as to more effectively control individuals. The power/knowledge connectivity thus becomes a tool to maintain the system of dominance and meanings by constructing its own norms and regimes of truth, morality....etc.

The Acholi observed an elaborate system of social norms, customs, traditions and beliefs. Their religious beliefs focused on several types of spirits (*Jogi*) of known relatives/ancestors, the beneficent and maleficent divine-like figures. Appeals to the *Jogi* ensured the maintenance of “consciousness, cohesiveness, [and] the continuation of their respective groups as functioning corporate entities. (WCE, 2016).

The introduction of Christianity, the state administrative hierarchy of clerks, policemen and District Commissioners affected the powers of the lineage heads and elders negatively. In essence, these new administrative, religious and political mechanisms had a draining impact on the traditional powers of social control.

When the armed conflict broke out in the Acholi region in 1986, it further weakened the social structures and the authority of the elders who were trying to enforce adherence to the traditional standards within the socio-political context of the modern Republic of Uganda. As one Acholi scholar has put it: “social teachings around traditional concepts [have] been severely disrupted”. (Ojera, 2008).

1.2 Problem Statement

Following more than 20 years of armed conflict, communities implementing the Recovery Programme in Northern Uganda were persistently reporting disruptive post-conflict disputes. During the in-depth interviews conducted in 2011 by the author in areas around Gulu, elders and community leaders stated that the normal course of events would have been to subject the individuals involved to legal procedures but these disputes were cyclic and the legal structures, just like the educational, health, administrative and political ones had been weakened by the prolonged civil war. (Natukunda, 2014). What was found to be operating in the communities at the time (in 2011) was the relatively expedited revitalization of the traditional dispute resolution measures. These relied heavily on the elders and leaders’ capacity to reprimand, rebuke and counsel the individuals involved. This triggered off our interest to analyze the designation of interlocutory power to the elders and community leaders and how language is used to diffuse disputes and advance the community interests of post conflict peace building.

1.3 General and Specific Objectives of the Study

The general objective goal of the study was to analyze how interlocutory power is designated to elders for post conflict peace-building.

This overall objective was supported by the following specific objectives:

- To understand how the social cultural theory accords a critical role to language in influencing human perception and behavior.
- To demonstrate how “linguaging” as a means of social communication mediates acts of thinking, making meaning, shaping knowledge and creating new attitudes.
- To apply the principles of the sociocultural theory and “linguaging” to sample disputes that were handled by the elders and community leaders in Gulu.

2. Study Design & Methodology

This was mostly a qualitative socio-linguistic study using documentary sources to collect secondary data on the sociocultural practice of the people of Gulu who are part of the Acholi ethnic group. Documentary sources were also used to delve into the tenets of the sociocultural theory which is relevant in linking language to human perception

and behavior. It was also necessary to use existing literature to foreground the principles of “linguaging” as a process of language use for mediating purposes.

The primary data which has been presented as text boxes in the study constitute the sample or selected corpus for the application of the theoretical principles of the social cultural theory and “linguaging” to settlement of post conflict disputes in the communities around Gulu town in Northern Uganda. These are findings transcribed from in-depth interviews conducted in the area around Gulu in 2011. The in-depth interviews from 20 purposively selected informants were conducted with returnee elders and leaders trying to settle back in their communities of origin after the prolonged armed conflict.

The interviews were conducted in Lwo, the local language, with the help of a research assistant (Note 1) and then transcribed and translated into English for analysis. Content analysis was the main method used for data analysis. The corpus was thus subjected to content analysis using the scientific framework of the socio-cultural theory and the principles of “linguaging”.

The data collected or findings were presented descriptively with the analysis and discussion being effected concurrently. Data interpretation was mainly effected through deductive and discursive observations. These formed the basis for inferring conclusions and formulating recommendations.

2.1 Relevance of the Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of human learning describes learning as the origination of human intelligence in the society or culture. Central to his work on cognitive development is the realization that it occurs in social interaction.

Vygotsky points out that:

“Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first on the social level, and later on the individual level; first between people (inter psychological) and then inside the child (intra-psychological) ... This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory and to the formation of concepts.” (Vygotsky, 1978, 57).

The crucial role of social interaction in the learning process is noted in association with the Acholi traditional society. The application to the individuals’ attention, logical memory and the formation of concepts of peace building or reverting back to conflict is also noted. Under this theme of learning, Vygotsky notes as well that those cultural norms and other people influence children’s opportunities for learning. Similarly, the principle of the “other’s” influence can be linked to the community where this study was conducted; among the Acholi, cultural norms and the “other’s” influence is of paramount importance. This process of “sociocultural learning” as it is argued by Vygotsky requires particular cognitive abilities. Of particular importance to the study as well, is Vygotsky’s observation that psychological functioning is mediated by language and other psychological tools. This interconnectivity can be extended to observations by other scholars on language and thought. Lee Whorf for instance commented that:-

“We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way - an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language” (Whorf cited in Chandler, 1994).

This description of thought as an agreement in our speech community and that agreement as codified in language patterns is very relevant to how language use is at the heart of dispute resolution in this study. Language in this case is used for regulating behavior, planning, remembering and solving problems. This last function of language as a tool for problem solving includes the focus of this study, dispute resolution.(McLeod, 2014).

Some of the particular cognitive abilities that Vygotsky stresses as prerequisites for learning include:-

- The shared understanding between people that emerges through the process of mutual attention and communication.
- Contingent interaction or reciprocal actions and reactions that resemble the mutual give and take of conversation.
- Joint attention or the sharing of a common focus on particular objects or events. (Sandra, 2016)

As such, these psychological tools will be symbolic facts that are culturally constructed. Because these are facts which “are created by humans under specific cultural and historic conditions, they carry with them the characteristics of the culture in question” (Turuk, 2008). Language is singled out as a crucial psychological tool for solving problems. In short, from the above aspects that were stressed as particular cognitive abilities, we can summarize that sociocultural theorists, including Vygotsky, saw the outside environment as the one shaping the learner’s

development. This expresses the same emphasis that the Acholi people put on the “outside” in shaping the individuals’ social development.

Vygotsky goes on further to underline the importance of “social scaffolding” in the child’s process of learning and how it can be effective when it is done in interaction with adults. The adults supporting the child’s task performance extend their range of activities to a level the children would have never reached unaided, unaccompanied. The principle of social scaffolding seems to project well the role of the elders accompanying of dispute perpetrators during the period of conflict transformation.

Applying this to his advancement of the activity theory, Vygotsky argues that “human behavior results from the integration of socially and culturally constructed forms of mediation into human activity”. (Lantolf, 2016). Another socio-culturalist scholar (Turuk, 2008) goes on to explain that the convergence of the individual’s thinking with culturally created mediational artifacts, especially those which are linguistically organized like narratives, occurs in the process of internalizing the “socially mediated external forms of goal-directed activities and the individual planes of human psychological activity”. This is why Turuk goes on to conclude that “sociocultural theory considers learning as a semiotic process where participation in socially mediated activities is essential”(Turuk, 2008, 247). The foregoing arguments demonstrate how the interwoven nature of the individual and socially mediated activities will be of great significance in the dispute resolution strategies analyzed in this study.

2.2 Linking the Social Cultural Theory to “Languaging”

Several scholars have analyzed the relationship between language and thought. Merrill Swain is one of those scholars who have devoted a lot of time to single out language as an active agent in cognitive development by analyzing the work of Vygotsky on the sociocultural theory. She stresses the critical importance of language “in the development of higher mental functions including memory and attention”. She points out that the source of an individual’s cognitive processes such as voluntary memory and attention “is in the interaction between the individual and the social world of people and its artifacts” (Swain, 2011).

In support of the arguments made by Vygotsky, she asserts that mental processes that are first controlled by objects in the external world are finally regulated through language in due course. In this analysis, she is echoing scholars like Smagorinsky, as well as Barnes (1992) and Wells (1992) who observed that “speaking is an agent in the production of meaning and not merely a conveyor of thought”.

Swain goes on to confirm Vygotsky’s analysis of the critical role played by language in creating, transforming and augmenting mental processes. Vygotsky had earlier argued that language is a tool of our mind which permits our mind to engage in a variety of new cognitive operations and manipulations. It is in relation to this that Swain argues that language is an agent in the creation, regulation and mediation of cognition (Swain, 2013).

She further states that “languaging”, a term she coined from her work on scholars like Vygotsky and others propounding the sociocultural theory in relation to learning, “is the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language” (Swain, 2006).

To extend Vygotsky’s recognition of the construct of language in special communication and cognitive development, Swain adds the idea that “new knowledge is created in the process of effortful language use (Swain, 2013). The findings on the role of language in cognitive development on one hand and in social communication on the other, are relevant to this study which is tracing the relationship between the power of language and the resolution of post conflict disputes.

Citing Vygotsky (1978) Barnes (1992) and Wells (1992), Swain observes that “speech and writing can serve as a vehicle through which thinking is articulated and transformed into an artifactual form” (Swain, 2011) Similarly, when Smagorinsky was writing about speaking, he argued that “the process of rendering thinking into speech is not simply a matter of memory retrieval, but [rather] a process through which thinking reached a new level of articulation” (Smagorinsky, 1998, 172-173). It is precisely that articulate and transformative function of language that Swain is inferring when she refers to languaging as “an attempt to understand, to problem solve [and] to make meaning” (Swain 2011). It is during the process of using language to mediate solutions that languaging occurs.

Swain further advances that through languaging, “ideas became available as an object about which questions can be raised and answers can be explored with others” (Swain, 2011). In other words, languaging thus “creates a visible or audible product about which one can further language” (Swain 2011). In the process of “talking-it-through” to another person as Swain writes or even considering a new understanding of an issue, one develops a new insight to solving a problem. This possibility of finding new insights through languaging is of particular importance in situations of dispute resolution as we shall see later.

Swain's focus on the language as agency has leanings towards the socio-cultural perspective on the learner as agent in the process of learning. Sociocultural proponents like Wertsch assume that:-

“The environment provides opportunities for learning: but it is the learner with his or her history, in his or her immediate environment who has options and makes choices. This is the learner as agent and as an individual who perceives analyses, rejects or accepts solutions offered, makes decisions and so on. This is the learner-as- agent operating with mediational means” (Wertsch, 1998, 26).

One can make a parallel between the learner-as-agent and the language-at-the-centre of the process of mediation when talking through a dispute. In her review of Wertsch's work, Swain confirms that as a tool of the mind, language does more than conveying the message it “mediates the cognition and re-cognition of experience and knowledge.” This extra value of mediating experience and knowledge is what was targeted for study from the in-depth interviews on the use of language in dispute resolution.

2.3 Applying the Sociocultural Theory and “Languaging” to Dispute Resolution in Gulu Area

At the time of the in depth interviews therefore, (in 2011), 2 years into the Recovery Programme, returnees were calling for the revitalization of their home grown traditional practices as opposed to the mainstream system of justice that was financially strenuous and whose rulings were difficult to implement in post-conflict conditions.

Land related disputes, as the sub-county chief of Awach testified land issues were causing the highest number of post-conflict disputes as shown in the text box below:

Text Box I

“When people started going back to their homes, land disputes were very common. First, we tried using the legal system: It starts normally in the Local Council II (Parish Level). They have their members who sit and try to agree on who is the rightful owner. When one party is not contended, they appeal to the Sub-county Council Court (Local Council III).

Nowadays, there is a team of five, selected and approved by the Local Council III Committee (sub-county level), comprising of 2 women and 3 men who try to settle the land disputes as presented. If they cannot settle it at this level, then the aggrieved party can go to the Magistrate Court of Gulu. But there are alternative dispute settlement arrangements (ADSA). This is different from arbitration, mediation and reconciliation.

In our ADSA system we make use of the traditional chiefs who normally summon the aggrieved parties and try to listen to their complaints. They mediate the issues presented while mediating, they counsel the persons involved. They emphasize the mending of mutual relationship for the good of community. (Okene Paul, Sub-county Chief, Awach, 10/16/2011).

In Text Book I, the Sub-county Chief who is a public servant, presents the two systems for settling post conflict disputes. He indicates that even the formal legal system has been modified to suit the local context. One notes the importance of having both genders on the current Local Council Team. This will encourage women especially, to come forward and “language” their issues.

In both the formal legal system and the local one used by traditional chiefs we see the issues presented orally in a face-to-face setting. Here the litigant gets a hearing with either those “selected or approved” by the local leadership or the traditional chief who is the head of the lineage. These are the people holding positions with authority and are thus empowered to give the last word or even pronounce a verdict under the traditional system of dispute resolution. The issues under dispute have to be therefore to be talked through and if the parties do not agree the case is sent further to the higher level of authority. Note is taken of this alternative dispute settlement arrangement (ADSA) as cited in the text box which not only arbitrates and mediates but also counsels the aggrieved parties in an effort to reconcile them. The effect of “languaging” the whole process, as the chief says, is to strengthen “mutual relationship for the good of the community”.

Two families were involved in the second case. It went from LC 2(at parish level) to LC 3(at county level) and even the traditional Chiefs at clan level tried it. One of the parties proved to be really uncooperative, not listening and responding to all the languaging that was being offered as elaborated in the following text box:

Text Box 2

The case involved an old woman who returned from the Internally Displaced People's Camp (IDP) to her birth place where she was living before. When she returned, the people from her village who were even her relatives chased her and her dependents away. She was not even allowed to dig in that area. They threaten to kill her. They destroyed the hut which she had constructed. Then the matter became of concern to the community as especially us in the administration

What helped was the use of the example of our cultural practices of accommodating our relative especially women who return home. That woman was their "Auntie" who should not be taken for a ride in our tradition. In our tradition, if you annoy your Auntie and she curses you, you will most likely encounter misfortune.

We told them: we are not telling her to curse you but you may not live happily if you annoy her. If she curses you, you may become impotent as a male or barren as a female. You may have miscarriages or fail to get a good husband. You may get still births or continued infant mortality on that very piece of land she has cursed.

Did your counseling help?

Yes, when we explained these things that she is not going to "grab" your land. That she was getting back to where she used to stay, with the help of the elders, they understood. They were able to go back and demarcate the plot for that woman. The elders ensured that the two parties live peacefully together.

The ADSAs, we realized, add value. They are the ones that should be encouraged because they include the element of culture which has an inherent unifying factor. In the court system people tell lies, they compete with money but in the local space where everyone knows everybody, the parties tell the truth. (Mzee Okumu Justin, Member of Elders Council, Awach, 10/16/2011)

The above example is a typical post conflict scenario where the aggrieved party has to appeal to the powers of social communication, like the blessings or curses in order to "mediate" attention and finally regulate the relationship she has with the community around her. The culturally created meditational artifact, in this case the narrative of the curse, as attributed traditionally to women, is linguistically organized to mediate the good will of the second party. In the process of internalizing that linguistic construct, the relatives of the aggrieved woman were mobilized to accept the socially accepted position. The social construct and the fear of the curse mobilized "motivation, conditions and action" (Lantolf). This is a process of languaging that enabled the elders and the community leaders to make peace prevail in a manner that is sensitive to gender imbalances.

Text Box 3

In sorting issues of fighting between brothers or between spouses, we do not ask the other people to tell us why these people are fighting, we invite the involved persons. We bring them together and confront them with evidence from the community.

My brother for instance, beat his wife and chased her away. This was done several times. The wife has found another man and she wants to move on. Now the conflict has increased to such a level we had to intervene. My brother was very angry. He had threatened to beat the other man to death. On the fateful night, when he met him, he beat him and broke his hand. So as elders, we invited all the three parties. We asked them, why are you fighting? This took a whole day of listening and talking.

Afterwards, we told my brother that according to Acholi culture, you have to pay *Culu Kwoi* (a fine), in this case a cow. My brother pleaded that he had no cow and we all understood because of the conditions of the war. So we allowed him to pay the equivalent in goats and never to beat his wife again. I pass by every now and then to talk to him and encourage them to work hard for the family. (Obore. S., Awer Village Elder, 11/06/2011)

Domestic violence for a long time has been tolerated among the Acholi as a means of "punishing" an obstinate wife. Here we see the elders taking a whole day of languaging through it, using their experiences to get it recognized as a social ill, and creating new knowledge of discouraging it. During the process of the whole day of languaging with the

three parties the elders were mediating and sensitizing the parties towards a transformed perspective of change of perception and behavior. (Wertsch)

Text Book 4

In our village there was this brother fighting other brothers over land use. The three brothers used to cultivate the same communal land on the areas to be used by each family. But after the war when this one brother came back, he changed the place he used to dig. When the dispute started, we encouraged brothers to consult the *Rwot Kweri*. Because he knows all the land boundaries in his village, he knows the land very well that is why he is the first call for land issues.

What was particular about the case?

This case had become cyclic you see. The brothers would come and consult the *Rwot Kweri*. Then after a season of poor harvest, one brother would start the dispute all over, saying that they, that the others “talk” is causing his crops to fail.

At one time even the *Rwot Okore*, the female equivalent of the *Rwot Kweri* had to come in and work in collaboration with the former. This was very useful for a cyclic land problem because the women continue to calm the hot temper of the husbands at home.

Eventually, this land problem has cooled down. The *Rwot Kweri* is very useful, He is really respected. He works for the community when you call him you do not pay costs. But you can thank him with a “fanta”. (Mzee Onen, Paibona, 12/06/2011)

This narrative brings out elements of the effectiveness of social communication in a context of a complex cyclic dispute that is multi-phased. The social institution of the *Rwot Kweri* is “really respected” and trusted because the *Rwot* “knows the land very well”. The elders build onto that existing wisdom and confidence in the *Rwot*’s word in order to bring into play its power relations with the members of the community.

The success of the process of explaining to the individuals the consequences of the continued wrangles was only achieved when they were psychologically ready to “accept the socially mediated activities” (Donato). Just like the social cultural theory observes in terms of the learning process, the activity of dispute settlement in this case is a collaborative achievement.

The ideas negotiated by the elders and spouses of the aggrieved brothers crystallize as Swain says into “the audible products” about which they can language further. In this case it lead to several sessions of languaging. The constant talking though in this case helps to create a spiral of languaging processes that are crucial for the eventual settlement of a cyclic land use dispute.

Land was not the only cause of the post-armed conflict disputes. Thefts were also reported to be highly prevalent in post-conflict transitional periods as can be demonstrated in the text box below:

Text Box 5

Thefts disputes were also very frequent as we were returning to our village. The chicken and goats which were staying in the kitchen outside were frequently stolen. When we get someone stealing, the *Rwot Kweri* is called. He has a team of 9 people, a Secretary, Treasurer etc. He is like the traditional parallel of the Local Council 1 (at village level). If the team has traced the thief with the help of the aggrieved members, the former is brought before the *Rwot Kweri*. He will tell him how he has not respected the traditional norms. He will remind him of what the Acholi tradition has established as a process of dealing with theft.

The *Rwot Kweri* then goes on to warn him with saying: “*Iron Dano*” (“we are tired of you”). The first time of warning not disclosed to the community. But if he does it twice, then the community is alerted and after that if he repeats the bad practice, he is reported to the police for imprisonment. The *Rwot Kweri* is the one who takes it further, until the culprit is jailed. (Okello, Elder in Paibona, 12/06/2016).

In this instance, the *Rwot Kweri* was called to intervene with the knowledge that he has powers of taking decisions and convicting the offender based on the traditional office he is holding. He explains the malpractice, rebukes the offender and administers a traditional punishment on behalf of the community. We note that the hearing and the passing of a sentence are all done orally. The traditional saying that administers the punishment to the thief is very well known and is

heavily coded. It carries the weight of the traditional system of judgment. The verbal sanction actually conveys this weight of the community, the exposure to shame and the threat of “banishment” to a public prison.

In the last part of the purposively sampled interviews, the researcher was interested in seeing the perspective of women in this traditional alternative system of settling disputes.

Text Box 6

As a woman in the Acholi tradition, the problem of the other woman is also mine. A woman who has no millet, you get some from yours and you give her. Especially during armed conflict if her hut was burnt down you would collect something among yourselves and give her something for surviving.

For example, I know of a woman who was suffering from domestic violence, I told the elders and warned them that this should not be spread in the village. This woman was from Awer Camp. That his husband who used to beat her unfortunately died and the family (brothers to the late husband) refused to give her land. So since I had known her challenges, I intervened and negotiated for her a piece of land for digging.

I told them that this is your sister why are you treating her like this? And they listened, because I am an elderly woman. I used the symbol of motherhood in my talking with them. There were three boys and she was the only girl, a mother with children who they were abusing. Her eldest child had reached Senior Secondary 3. The young ones were in Primary 5 and 4 respectively. All of them are now seated at home. They are not going to school because there is no land to farm for cash crops.

Her brother in law kept on saying “Go away” but this is the brother of her late husband. That land they were chasing her from is customary land. So the grandfather of her children had also some shares. Her appeals to the clan however have been in vain up to now.

Today when they meet those children in a gathering they start shouting at them, shaming them publically, but at least their mother has a plot to live in.

(Sabina Akello, Woman Elder in Awach, 10/06/2011.)

The female elder shows right from the beginning of her interview that her perspective as a female elder somewhat differed from the one of men. She underscores the female solidarity when faced with problems, especially in times of conflict. Her ability of taking into consideration the “others” during the “linguaging” concurs with what happens in the adult’s aided-learning process under the sociocultural cognitive theory. She supported or offered a form of “scaffolding” to the woman from Awer until she was established on her subsistence piece of land.

In the Text Box 7 below this female interviewee was seeking the same social artifactual support since she was aggrieved by what people were saying about her and her own children in connection to some disputed land access. Despite the several years that had elapsed since the social ill was done, the woman involved still hoped to lodge an appeal for the clan to “language” her case.

Text Box 7

I have personal experience that has pained me for a long time now. My mother died earlier on, in life when we were still young. We were living at her father’s place, our grandfather, but were chased away. They said “Go away” this is not your home. So I left, grew up with other relatives and got married.

When I lost my husband during the war, he was killed by cattle rustlers; I tried to go back to my mother’s place. The said “No, you do not belong here. My elder brother who had now grown up took me to our father’s home in Paibona. But there, the family said “Why have you come back? You thought those people (mother’s home) were more important than us? We do not want to give you land”

I have appealed to the Local Council and even reported to the *Rwot* but my father’s brothers do not want to listen to the elders. They have called them for discussing this matter in vain. They have refused to listen to the elders.

Now I live in fear in the little space I claimed for our small hut. My father’s brothers always talk ill of us. My children are not well received. It is a situation that gives me a lot of frustration in my old age. (Margaret Lawil, Elderly lady, Paibona, 12/06/2011)

In this narrative the lady recognized the need for talking through her problem, but the other party, the father's brothers has refused to be cooperative in the badly needed social communication. In other words although the environment provides an opportunity for learning as argued by proponents of the socio cultural theory, the learners (in this case the father's brothers) have to make a choice. As agents, the father's brothers have perceived, they have analyzed and have rejected the solutions that could be offered by the elders and the community leaders.

In this particular incident, the brothers are not cooperative enough to join the dialogical and meditative function of languaging. (Wertsch). They hence block the social construct of positive peace. Our narrator reports that she is "living in fear" and with her children, they continue "not to be well received". The brothers still "talk ill of them". This is a scenario where the rejection of languaging the dispute may lead to escalating the degree of conflict and the fear of the spoken evil word passes from one generation(the lady elder) to the other (her children).

3. Conclusion

The in-depth interviews with elders from Gulu have provided an opportunity to analyze the process of languaging post-conflict disputes. The findings have showed that the disputes involved cases of land disputes, theft, violent assault, domestic violence and gender based violence. Each case was analyzed based on the application of the social cultural theory and "languaging" because these are the two socio-linguistic theoretical frameworks propounding the critical role of language that were selected as analytical tools in this study. The interviews collected and the discussion of the findings suggest the following lessons:-

- The quick revitalization of traditional arrangements of dispute settlement has been possible in the area of Gulu because language is a strong social institution in the Acholi tradition. Working through language as a social institution has strengthened efforts of peace maintenance in a post conflict context.
- Languaging or talking through disputes as an alternative discourse to conflict, even when it is negative languaging, gives space to the voices of the most affected by violence and hence, it should be embraced as a strategy of empowering the voiceless.
- The use of languaging as a strategy for dispute settlement is effective for dealing with cyclic disputes as each audible or visible product can be used as a platform for further languaging at minimum financial cost.
- Sociocultural constructs like languaging, when used as mechanisms for problem solving, are effective and sustainable because they develop thinking, create new knowledge and change perceptions and behavior.
- Such home grown mechanisms of dispute settlement because of their risk of creating negative peace or escalating conflict when rejected, should be applied as complementary to other dispute settlement approaches.

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Notes

Note 1. It is important to recognize the role played by Ms. Stella Layola, the Research Assistant, who was lecturing in the Peace and Conflict Centre of Gulu University at that time.