

## Verbal Aggression: A Precursor to Communal Conflict

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**Abstract:** This paper examines verbal aggression as a precursor to communal conflict in Umueze-Avuru and Umukpoke communities of Ovoko in Igbo-Eze South Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria. The objectives of the paper are to investigate the reason(s) for the use of verbal aggression by the people of Umukpoke and Umueze-Avuru, and ascertain the effect(s) of verbal aggression on the communities under study. Using purposive sampling technique, data (speech acts) were elicited from participants through oral interview and participant observations. The paper uses a qualitative research design and adopts the descriptive approach in its analysis. Employing verbal aggression theory as the analytical framework, the findings reveal that verbal aggression indeed instigates dissension, enmity and ultimately, physical conflict. The paper also sees frustration, psychopathology, jealousy and disdain as major drives for the use of verbally aggressive speech acts by the people of Umukpoke while Umueze-Avuru was mostly driven by frustration and disdain. Among the effects of verbal aggressive behaviour observed in the area under study are increased level of hostility, distrust and suspicion that have been passed on from generation to generation. The paper concludes by recommending that attempt should be made to understand the source of verbal aggressive speech act, check whether it is just a perceived situation or transfer of aggression, then look for solutions that can palliate it before it escalates.

**Keywords:** verbal aggression, conflict, communal conflict, land.

### INTRODUCTION

There is an Igbo adage that says, “áwò á<sup>+</sup>nághí àgbá ós<sup>+</sup>ò èhíhìè n’èfù” which translates as there is no effect without cause. Some scholars, (Okwueze, *et al*, 167) blame the incessant and recurring conflicts in Nigeria on the ‘mistake of 1914’. They believe that the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern Protectorates of the Niger areas have thrust or coerced together strange elements from different ancestral backgrounds, beliefs, ideologies, religion and language based on the colonial government’s need to facilitate smooth administration and accelerate the exploitative harnessing of human and material resources rather than a political unification of the people for harmonious co-existence. However, many cases of conflicts that abound in Nigeria from pre-colonial period till date were not necessitated by external forces or the colonial masters, but were largely brewed and nurtured by the indigenous people. Some of the prominent scenario among many include, the Ife-Modakeke political and religious crises (from pre-colonial times till recent times), the Aba women riot (1929), Aguleri-Umuleri conflicts (since 1933), National census controversy (1962), the Federal election crises which was politically and socially motivated (1964), Western Nigerian election crises (1965), the Nigerian-Biafran war (1967-1970), Zango Kataf crisis (1992), Kano ‘Maitatsine’ crisis (2000), the ‘Sharia’ Kaduna riot (2000), the protracted Niger-Delta crises in Ogoni, Ijaw and Warri, the ‘Boko Haram’ crisis in north-eastern Nigeria (2009), Jos crises (2008, 2009, 2010) and others

(Uzuegbunam, 210; Ibenwa and Ngele, 122-143 and Awowole, 11).

From the above, it is obvious that Nigeria has seen centuries of communal violence between and within its ethnic groups before and after colonisation which has in no small measure affected its development because the development of a society is partly dependent on the peace it enjoys. In recent times, the situation of conflicts in Nigeria has reached an unprecedented height such that no week passes without hearing heart-rending details of the destruction that follows mismanaged conflicts. The term ‘conflict’ connotes fear and violence; little wonder why so many efforts have been geared into its resolution and management giving birth to terms like conflict prevention, third party intervention, preventive diplomacy, and peace-keeping. Be that as it may, it is worthy to note here that a mismanaged conflict is like a nuclear war-head which once detonated, can spread fast and remain for generations. Conflicts at any level arise from divergences of interests, desires, goals, values and aspirations in the competition for resources to meet imposing demands on social life in a defined socio-physical environment (Albert, 122-134; Otite, 1990).

Communal conflicts are products of social relations; in other words, communal conflict hinges on interaction between people or groups of people who share common interests and live within close geographical areas. Communal conflicts start with threats or actions by one party directed at the territory-rights, interests or

privileges of another party, because of differences over economic issues, power or authority, cultural values and beliefs (Yakohene, 41-57). Land is also often at the heart of communal conflicts that centre on groups' main livelihood. Some scholars believe that most communal conflicts in Nigeria are mainly economic issues of which land constitutes about 90% (Nolte, 171-192; Albert, 91-117; Otite and Albert, 115; Uchendu, 98).

Land is an indispensable means of production and it also holds cultural significance for the people in most African communities. Studies on communal land conflict have not devoted much space on the significance of land and the role of cultural attachment to land in the prevalence of dispute over it. According to Uchendu, land means many things to the Igbo. It is the domain of the earth-goddess, a burial place for the ancestors, a place to live on and make a living. Land is therefore the most important asset to the people (98). It is a source of security which is emotionally protected from alienation. It is believed that a people cannot have too much land and that no opportunity to acquire rights in land should be lost. There is no concept of "abandonment of land" or "no man's land" among the Igbo. Whether land is cultivated or not, it belongs to somebody. Land ultimately belongs to the lineage which cannot be alienated from it. Uchendu's explanation on the significance of land holds very true for the Igbo people. It gives a little insight into the basis of conflict over land between Ụmụeze-Avuru and Ụmụ-Mkpoke communities. Therefore, part of our understanding of communal land conflict in this paper lies in the recognition and appreciation of the cultural dimension to land disputes.

Ụmụeze-Avuru and Ụmụ-Mkpoke are sister communities of Ovoko town in Igbo-Eze South Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria. The relationship between Ụmụeze-Avuru and Ụmụ-Mkpoke communities is traced back to the origin of Ovoko as a town. According to a participant, Oko Egara was the first man to migrate from Nrueto Amara Enugwu-Ezike to the present day Ovoko. He was said to have travelled with two protective charms named 'Akpuruokwe' (male deity) and 'Idenyi' (female goddess) which protected him against all the dangers he passed on his way. When he finally reached Ụmụeze-Avuru, he worshipped those charms which represented deities, placing 'Akpuruokwe' in the right hand and 'Idenyi' in the left hand and establishing them as gods of protection for the land. As time went on, he welcomed other settlers until they became

twelve in number and was referred to as the twelve 'sons of the soil' of Ovoko. Their ardent desire to increase in order to better defend their territory made them invest their fortune in getting people through conquests and slave trade. Among the villages bequeathed in such manner, Ụmụ-Mkpoke happened to be the last of them all.

Ụmụeze-Avuru and Ụmụ-Mkpoke communities lived in harmony until Ụmụ-Mkpoke decided to go against the culture of masquerade display. According to our participant, Ụmụ-Mkpoke were prohibited from displaying beautiful masquerade which was part of a way of showing distinction between the owners of the land and the slaves. However, the people of Ụmụ-Mkpoke were said to have committed a sacrilege by going against the customs meant for slaves. This gave rise to a crisis situation to such a point that the entire Ovoko community decided to eliminate them on the grounds that they were the least of all the villages and were supposed to behave as servants, yet they deliberately went against tradition. This decision to eliminate them did not see the light of the day because each time, informants from Ụmụeze-Avuru would always warn the people of Ụmụ-Mkpoke ahead of time to ensure their safety. Therefore, the people of Ụmụeze-Avuru acted as indirect conflict diffusers in a crisis that would have led to a genocide of the people of Ụmụ-Mkpoke. In order to fully secure their safety, the people of Ụmụeze-Avuru handed over the priesthood of "Idenyi Ụmụeze-Avuru (a respected deity in Ovoko)" to them which automatically guaranteed their total security. From that time till 2017, the eldest man in Ụmụ-Mkpoke had been the chief priest of the deity. Why Ụmụeze-Avuru re-assumed the position of the deity's chief priest is because despite this history, Ụmụeze-Avuru and Ụmụ-Mkpoke communities were engulfed in a spate of conflicts in forms of verbal aggression, legal tussles and even physical attacks which arose from the fact that Ụmụeze-Avuru demanded that the land allotted to the deity be shared between the two communities. Ụmụ-Mkpoke community maintains that the land belong to them while Ụmụeze-Avuru posits that the land and the deity are rightfully theirs.

Conflict is an inevitable occurrence in human relationship. It can be constructive or destructive in nature. Unfortunately in our world today, there are crises everywhere as a result of grievances caused mostly by the use of provocative words – in families, in the communities, and worst of all in countries especially in our country Nigeria. Being

antagonistic in the use of language is becoming a norm in our society today and this tends to destroy beyond repay the peaceful coexistence of different groups of people living together. As a result of this, it is a worthwhile academic undertaking to look into verbal aggression as a precursor to communal conflict.

Considering what we observe today in our society, crisis is at an alarming rate. Hence there is the need to look into the causes of this problem in order to look for ways to curb them. This study is significant in that it will bring to light some reasons for the use of verbal aggressive speeches by the aggrieved parties. It will also highlight the effects of verbal aggressive language. Besides adding to the empirical work on verbal aggressive theory, the study will serve as a referent material for other researchers in the field.

Many researches have been geared toward the study of management and resolution of conflicts. Apart from a cursory mention of the causes of these conflicts, not many studies have invested much into studying the nature of the causes of these conflicts and how they build up to become full fledged conflicts. More so, no study to the best knowledge of the researchers have been carried out on the Umueze-Avuru and Umu-Mkpoke communal conflict and that is the gap that this study tends to bridge. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the reason(s) why verbal aggression is used more by the people of Umu-Mkpoke and ascertain what effect(s) verbal aggression has on the communities under study.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Some theories that are related to the topic and also empirical works done in the area under study are reviewed here.

## THEORETICAL CONSIDERATION

### Verbal Aggression

Infante and Wigley define verbal aggressiveness as a personality trait that predisposes persons to attack the self-concept of other persons instead of, or in addition to, their positions on topics of communication (61). Verbal aggressiveness from Infante and Wigley's definition seems to be mainly a destructive form of communication, although it has been said to produce positive outcomes. As earlier pointed out, verbal aggressiveness consists of offset constructive types which can produce satisfaction in relationships and destructive types that have a negative impact on relationships. It is associated with name-calling, the use of threats,

and ultimatums, negativity, resentment and suspicion. Verbal aggression is generally considered a negative or destructive form of communication because it attacks an opponent rather than the problem.

In the words of Infante, verbal aggression differs from argumentativeness in that, rather than attacking a point, one attacks the self-concept of the other person. An argumentative individual attacks the other person's position, statement or argument instead (125). Participants involved in aggressive communication are usually more active than passive and they often adopt 'attack' and 'defend' modes of thinking and action. Persons with verbal aggressiveness lack argument skill and such find it difficult to settle issues peaceably. Unfortunately, they are unmindful of the interpersonal damage they do, and believe that their behaviours are positive and acceptable (Infante and Rancer, 319). Infante, *et al.*, do not see verbal aggressiveness as a direct cause of violence, but as a triggering element and a closely inevitable stage in the series leading to violence (165). The consequences of the use of verbal aggressive language has been found to result in negative outcomes in interpersonal communication as Rancer, (163) avers. Therefore, verbal aggressive communication can be said to be a 'psychological and emotional war' since it seeks to hurt a person mentally.

There are various messages or speech acts that are regarded as verbally aggressive. Some include, character attacks, background attacks, competence attacks, insults, maledictions, teasing, profanity, non-verbal emblems, commands, threats, blame, personality attacks, rejection, disconfirmation, negative comparison, sexual harassment and so on (Infante & Wigley, 68; Infante, 51; and Eden and Roberto, 7).

Infante, *et al.*, Give four primary causes of verbal aggression which are summarised below as;

1. Frustration: This involves having to deal with an individual deemed "unworthy" of one's time
2. Social learning: This is an aggressive behavior that is learned from observing other individuals
3. Psychopathology: In this case, an individual attacks another person because of unresolved issues
4. Argumentative skill deficiency: This is when an individual lacks verbal skills to deal with an issue, and therefore resorts to verbal aggressiveness (72).

More recently, Shaw, *et al.*, (2012) demonstrate that verbal aggression may be caused by variation in prenatal testosterone exposure. They conducted two studies in which they measured the length of the second and fourth digits (2D:4D) on each hand of participants, an indicator of amount of prenatal androgen exposure, and conducted a study using questionnaires to determine the verbal aggressiveness of participants (785). A negative correlation between 2D:4D and verbal aggressiveness was determined. Also, another cause of verbal aggressiveness is disdain which involves expressing hate through verbal aggression.

The Holy Bible says that the tongue is the smallest part of the human body which makes grand speeches but is likened to a tiny spark which can set a great forest on fire (James 3:5). This clearly portrays our point about verbal aggression. Verbal aggression leaves a lot of effects on the recipient of the aggression. One of the most basic effects is self-concept damage which can cause more harmful and long lasting results than the temporal effects. The temporal and short term effects include; hurtful feelings, anger, irritation, embarrassment, discouragement, humiliation, despair, and depression. Verbal aggressiveness that harms an individual's self-concept can follow an individual throughout their life. Infante and Wigley buttress this using the example of a child (65). They state that the self-concept damage done by teasing a child about an aspect of physical appearance 'can endure for a lifetime and exert an enormous impact on the amount of unhappiness experience.' Infact, Infante, *et al.*, say that a person can easily recover from a punch on the nose but recovery from some forms of verbal aggression never happens. Verbal aggressiveness is one major cause of violence (239). When it is allowed to escalate, it often turns into physical violence.

### Empirical Studies

Some studies have been carried out on verbal aggression as it relates to different contexts and the adoption of different linguistic approaches.

In Agbedo's, (2007) study of "the pragmatic of 'garrison demoncrazy'", he adopts a pragmatic approach on the Nigerian media political discourse focusing on the reflection of 'garrison demoncrazy' in the impeachment saga of Chief Ladoja as Governor of Oyo state on the 12th of January, 2006. He agrees that speakers/writers make profuse use of interpersonal and declaratory acts in performing speech acts. He further says that

the varied political discourse evident in newspapers and magazines speak volumes of the limitless opportunities which the print media offer speakers/writers for expression of opinions on issues of social relevance and politics.

Also, in Agbedo's, (2015) work entitled *Aggressive Communication in Nigeria*, a sample of verbal aggressive speech acts of some notable political actors in Nigeria was drawn from online version of Nigeria newspapers. Notable among the ones analysed were those of the President of Nigeria (then Major General) Muhammadu Buhari, Former President Goodluck Jonathan, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, Former Vice President Atiku Abubakar, Chukwuemeka Ezeife, Mallam Nasir El-Rufai, Kingsley Kuku, Dr. Junaid Mohammed, Alhaji Muktar Nyako, and Bisi Akande. Agbedo, (2015) stresses the fact that these political actors have at different occasions and places expressed their opinions and feelings using various verbal aggressive speech acts with the primary objective to embarrass, humiliate, threaten and even hurt their opponents. For instance, Dr. Junaid Mohammed says that there will be bloodshed if Jonathan insists on running because those who feel short-changed may take the war path and the country may not be the same again. Agbedo, (2015) also quotes Bisi Akande's aggressive communication that says; Jonathan is a kindergarten president. What the country needs is a thinking leader not a kindergarten president with no solution to the myriad of problems plaguing the nation. Agbedo, (2015) concludes from the above instances that it is clear that the interlocutors' aggressive speech acts were deliberately calculated at injuring the self-concept of the other party. Also, there were clear expressions of threats to injure their opponent physically.

Ahamefula and Eze carry out a pragmatic study on the verbal indiscretion of former President Olusegun Obasanjo (13). Using Austin Felicity conditions (Austin 17) and the Gricean cooperative principle (Grice 41-58), they observe that from the selected speech of Obasanjo, he is consistent with what they term "his indiscrete use of language and has a penchant for using acts that do not conform to the basic facts and knowledge that interlocutors share in a conversation for it to flow smoothly." Therefore, they conclude that Obasanjo's speech acts violate the basic tenets of Austin's Felicity conditions and the Gricean co-operative principle.

From the above review of related literature, we observe that a good number of works have been

carried out on verbal aggression as it pertains to politics, the media, interpersonal relationships, the family, workplaces and other aspects of life but very little has been done on how verbal aggressive communication instigates communal conflicts to the best of the researchers' knowledge. This work is significant in this regard.

## METHODOLOGY

This article uses qualitative research design and as a descriptive study, it relies basically on primary sources of data collection. Therefore, oral interviews were used to elicit data from seven participants who were purposively selected- three each from Umueze-Avuru and Umukpoke and one from Ibeku which is a neighbouring community. The interviews were conducted in the houses of the participants and the result is presented for analysis. The participants selected from Umueze-Avuru are two males and a female – one of the males is ninety-five years, married, a retired civil servant and a member of the village council. The second one is forty two, married, self-employed and a leader of the village youth. The female is sixty-eight years, married, self-employed and is one of the leaders of “Umukoku” of the village. Those from Umukpoke are also two males and a female – one of the males is seventy five years, married, a diviner and a member of the village council. The other is forty-four years, married, self-employed and a member of the village youth executives. The female is sixty years, married and also a member of the “Umukoku” Umukpoke village. The one from Ibeku is seventy-five years, a married man and lives at the boundary of Umukpoke and Ibeku and also a one-time witness for Umukpoke in the court. These people were selected based on the fact that they have raw information on the matter on the ground. Two field assistants who are members the communities and were participants in most of the recent crises were also recruited to help in the process of eliciting data from participants. These participants were selected because they are active participants in the conflict as they know the history of the relationship that existed between the two villages and how the conflict started. The researchers spent about six weeks in the field. Secondary sources were also consulted from the court proceedings. Using a framework method of data analysis whereby aggressive speech theory was employed as the framework to analyse the qualitative data gathered, inferences were made.

## A Brief Account of the Remote Cause of the Dispute

According to some participants, the cordial relationship between Umueze-Avuru and Umukpoke communities dates back in time immemorial. After the crisis which the Umukpoke people had with the Ovoko, in those days, that involved the culture of masquerade display, Umueze-Avuru was seen as the ‘saviour’ of Umukpoke people. In a bid to keep the people of Umukpoke permanently safe from extermination as agreed upon by the entire Ovoko town, the chief priest of ‘Idenyi’ – Anuma Odu Enyi appointed Mkpoke Atama from Umukpoke to become the deity’s messenger. He was the one who took care of the deity while Anuma Odu Enyi was bedridden for years. Before Anuma Odu Enyi died, he insisted that the service of the deity should not be denied Mkpoke Atama. This was how every head of Umukpoke came to be the deity’s messenger till today. One of the participants further explained that the deity owned a large forest, but during the Nigerian civil war, a command was given to clear the forest. After the war, Umukpoke people decided to use the land for cultivation since they were serving the deity of the forest, but they were warned against such actions by Umueze-Avuru community with the reason that the land belonged to the deity which rightfully belongs to Umueze-Avuru as the head of the entire community. It was in the midst of these discussions that Umukpoke people started using aggressive communication to pass across their built-up feelings of years of suppression. The past leaders of Umueze-Avuru on their own part had always believed that a deity could fight her own cause. Hence, they overlooked some of the disparaging remarks, threats and taunts thrown at them. It was in the regime of Gilbert Ugwu (alias, Eke nwa Ugwu; the village head of Umueze-Avuru as at the time of this writing) that actions were taken to share the land as a result of several provocative statements, but the people of Umukpoke sued them to court on the grounds that the land rightfully belongs to them. This has led to series of legal battles and even physical attacks.

## DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

### Verbal Aggressive Speech Acts

In this section, we present samples of statements which suggest the use of verbal aggressiveness which has characterised the daily conversational style of Umukpoke people and those of Umueze-Avuru people. These speech acts are

drawn from the participants we interviewed in the course of this study. According to one of the participants, Umueze-Avuru people met in 2007 with Umukpoke community to settle the land dispute that had been raging for a long time suggesting that the land be shared equitably. But Umukpoke community refused on the grounds that the land belongs to them, so it could not be shared.

Some of the verbally aggressive statements made by some members of Umukpoke to buttress their point were:

#### Speech Act 1

“Á gbára á<sup>+</sup>ká ná-àzò àlà ónyé jí<sup>+</sup> jí à ná-àkònyé”. This translates as “when a man is fighting for land with nothing in his hands, the one with yam seedlings begins to plant on the land.” This implies that action speaks louder than words. This is a way to ridicule the people of Umueze-Avuru community as a poor community who do not have the financial means to fight for the land in question. In fact, our respondent confirms that the speech actor is known to use this statement; ‘á gbára á<sup>+</sup>ká ná-àzò àlà’ most times he meets people from Umueze-Avuru.

#### Speech Act 2

“Ndí Ú<sup>+</sup>múezè-Àvurú, hà òwèré é<sup>+</sup>gò há jí ázò àlà?” This means “do the people of Umueze-Avuru have the money with which to go into land dispute?” A participant confirms that this speech was made by a person from Umukpoke during one of the meetings of arbitration that was called by the Ovoko council of elders. It was said that Umukpoke people had ‘oiled the palms’ of some of the elders-in-council and so were boasting that Umueze-Avuru could never win a case against them because they do not possess the financial wherewithal to pursue a land case or get people who can stand up to defend them. This is also another form of ridicule.

#### Speech Act 3

“Há ná-àzò é<sup>+</sup>lú”. This literally means that Umueze-Avuru people are scrambling for the skies. A participant reports that the above statement was made by another person from Umukpoke. The implication of this statement is that Umueze-Avuru people are merely chasing the wind. They are reaching out to things that should never be within their reach (the impossible). That is why their efforts are always fruitless. This is another form of ridicule to inflict mental pain and

inferiority complexity in the minds of Umueze-Avuru people.

#### Speech Act 4

“Ó-<sup>+</sup>ó! ndí<sup>+</sup> bé<sup>+</sup> há, ndí<sup>+</sup> nwéré é<sup>+</sup>gò àhápùlá há!” The interpretation reads “their rich brothers or fellows have abandoned them.” Our respondent says that this particular statement triggered a lot of concern within Umueze-Avuru community because at that time, the people that were referred to as “the big politicians of Umueze-Avuru community” refused to show any interest in the land dispute. This catalysed a series of events that led into legal battles as it pressurised the big politicians of Umueze-Avuru to get involved in the case to redeem their names and their people.

#### Speech Act 5

“Há ná-àwá á<sup>+</sup>nyá ná há bù ézè, kà anyí húgódú ètù há gà-èsí búgídé ézè áhụ”. This translates as “they have been bragging that they are the king of the whole town, let us see how they will continue to be its leader.” Umueze-Avuru community has always been seen and respected as the leader in Ovoko town so most town meetings are held in their village hall. Our respondent says that some Umukpoke people bribed some of the leaders to stop having meetings in Umueze-Avuru village hall. This was to find a way to reduce or put an end to the respect and place the whole Ovoko community has been giving to Umueze-Avuru. This is more like an attack on their competence, implying that they lack what it takes to be the leaders of the land.

#### Speech Act 6

“Á gà òn étinyéré há òkpa kà há ríé gáá nwú<sup>+</sup>fúó” (I will put poison in ‘òkpa’ and give them so that they can eat and die). Our participants say that the speaker was a popular ‘òkpa’ vendor (a locally made delicacy) in Umueze-Avuru who married a man from Umukpoke. Though no factual confirmation was made if she made good her threat or if anyone fell victim to this but it fueled suspicions and ill feelings between the two communities. This is purely a form of threat and malediction; a desire/wish for someone’s ill-being to the point of even being the cause of it.

#### Speech Act 7

“Holy ghost fire!” Also, the women folk of Umukpoke were said to be heard shouting “Holy ghost fire to come against Umueze-Avuru people” anytime they had their meetings. This is a prayer that is used to call on God in the Christian folk to

show vengeance on people who are perceived as enemies.

### Speech Act 8

“Ndị Ụmụeze-Avuru ga-anwu n’aka Abegbo” (Ụmụeze-Avuru people will die in the hands of Abegbo). One of the participants confirms that during the coronation of the new king, another speaker from Ụmụ-Mkpoke was quoted to say, “Ụmụeze-Avuru people will die in the hands of their then newly elected community Chief Abegbo”. He said this in a mocking manner because Chief Abegbo was rejected by the majority of the community on the grounds that he lacked good financial status in comparison to his opponent who was nicknamed “Eze ego” (King of money) but Ụmụeze-Avuru supported and coronated him. Incidentally, this Chief Abegbo later turned against Ụmụeze-Avuru people who elected him in support of Ụmụ-Mkpoke people in the land feud. What Ụmụeze-Avuru inferred from the act is that he has been bribed by Ụmụ-Mkpoke.

**Some of the verbally aggressive statements made by some members of Ụmụeze-Avuru in response to the remarks made by the Ụmụ-Mkpoke people.**

### Speech act 9

“Ụmụ-Mkpoke b́jara ab́ja n’Ovoko.” This implies that Ụmụ-Mkpoke are not ‘bonafide’ members of Ovoko town.” One of the participants reported to have heard this from an elder in Ụmụeze-Avuru: “The people of Ụmụ-Mkpoke are not ‘bonafide’ members of Ovoko town and were supposed to have been eliminated from the surface of Ovoko land based of the sacrilege they committed back in history”. He said this in one of the court proceedings and he was referring to a time in history when Ụmụ-Mkpoke were prohibited from displaying beautiful masquerades in Ovoko because they were seen as second class citizens and as people of low status (see section 4.), as such, nothing good was expected to come from them. This attracted a lot of concern and as a way to punish such act, the whole Ovoko community decided to eliminate them if not for the timely intervention of Ụmụeze-Avuru people whom they were serving in those days.

### Speech act 10

“Mmádù à nà-àb́j́áwá í nònyéré mmádù nà bé +yá búru àlà b́j́áwá?” This literally means “Does one come to stay with someone in their house carrying land?” This implies that Ụmụ-Mkpoke people are not bonafide members of Ovoko town. They are seen as servants who were brought to serve the

Ụmụeze-avuru village being that Ụmụeze-Avuru is the head and the leader of the town. So it is a taunt to remind them of their ‘low class status’ even though that was in the past.

### Speech act 11

“Lèé j́idé, ò bú lèé wèré?” This literally translates as “does keep for me mean take as your own?” implying that one is not supposed to covet or seize something that was kept in their possession since it does not belong to them or was not given to them. This speech act indicates that the land in question was given to the Ụmụ-Mkpoke village as a lease or rent by the Ụmụeze-Avuru village hence, they had no right to claim it as theirs, because one is not supposed to claim what he borrowed as their possession. This paints the Ụmụ-Mkpoke people as ingrates and people who take what does not belong to them.

### Speech act 12

“Mmádù á+gágh́í è m̀rú á+nyá òké àtáá íhé ó nwè.” This translates thus: “One cannot be awake and allow rat to eat up what they have”. This speech act metaphorically portrays the Ụmụ-Mkpoke people as rats; unwanted guests in a house that sneaks in to eat up and destroy things that are meant for human beings, which in itself, is derogatory. It also indicates that the Ụmụeze-Avuru people are ready to go to any length to fight for the ownership of their land.

According to some of our participants, the speech acts in 10, 11 and 12 above are comments made by members of Ụmụeze-Avuru community on different occasions of the arbitrary hearing convened by the Ovoko Elders-in-Council before the case was taken to the court. These three speech acts were made to convince the Ovoko Elders-in-Council to see the case from their own perspective, but indirectly reminding the Ụmụ-Mkpoke people of their low place in the town.

### Speech act 13

“Lèé nwátàkírí ùnyááhú nà-àb́j́á èt́nyé ányì ákà n’ányá.” This literally reads “see a child of yesterday that dares to put his hands in our eyes.” This speech act looks down on the people of Ụmụ-Mkpoke implying that they are too small to challenge them (Ụmụeze-Avuru). They are referred to as children and ‘children’ should not be seen daring ‘elders’. This is also provocative and could incite physical conflict.

### Speech act 14

“Há é+j́ígh́í nwáyòò Ụmụeze-Avuru èkpóchàpù +há.” The reading here is “if they (Ụmụ-Mkpoke

people) are not careful, Ụmueze-Avuru people may eliminate them.” This is a direct threat of annihilation. It goes beyond malediction, to imply that they can go as far as killing every one of them. This physical conflict is confrontational and suggestive of a full-blown war if not handled properly.

### Speech act 15

“Ọ gà-èmé há n’ányá vàm.” This translates that what they plan to do to them will be a thing of surprise. This is also a threat that spells ill. This speech act shows how far Ụmueze-Avuru are willing to go in this land dispute. They are fully determined to exterminate Ụmụ-Mkpoke people if the conflict gets to that point in that land dispute. This kind of verbal threat naturally instills fear in the mind of the hearer.

Participants explained that speech acts 13, 14 and 15 are casual statements that are always used by the people of Ụmueze-Avuru, especially the youths, any time they had verbal confrontation with the Ụmụ-Mkpoke people.

## DISCUSSION

### Reasons for the Use of Verbal Aggressive Speech Acts

Scholars have suggested several reasons for the use of verbally aggressive speech acts. In this article, we shall examine frustration, psychopathology, jealousy and disdain in relation to the verbally aggressive speech acts sampled above.

#### Frustration:

People usually become verbally aggressive in frustrating situations they perceive being beyond their control. Their anger becomes displaced in these situations and moves on to the nearest target. Explosive outbursts or belligerent behaviour become the best way of gaining control. Most times, this could be linked to psychopathology. Verbal aggression becomes the only way of expressing pent-up frustrations. From the comments of a participant, it is obvious that the people of Ụmụ-Mkpoke have lived in frustration and helplessness over decades of being looked down upon and treated by their fellow kinsmen as second class citizens. There is an adage that says when one is pushed to the wall and one does not have any more space, one can react in surprising ways. Speech act 6 “A gà m’ètínýéré há òkpà kà há ríé gáá nwú<sup>+</sup>fúó” (I will put poison in ‘òkpà’ and give them so that they can eat and die), speech act 7 “Holy ghost fire!” and speech act 8

“Ụmueze-Avuru people will die in the hands of Abegbo” exemplify their state of frustration where some, especially their women folk resort to abuses and threat to poison the people of Ụmueze-Avuru through a food vendor and also commanding holy ghost fire to consume the people of Ụmueze-Avuru.

We see this also in speech acts 14 and 15 respectively, “Há é<sup>+</sup>jíghí nwáyòò Ụmueze-Avuru èkpóchàpú<sup>+</sup>há.” (if they (Ụmụ-Mkpoke people) are not careful, Ụmueze-Avuru people may eliminate them). “Ọ gà-èmé há n’ányá vàm.” which translates that what they plan to do to them will be a thing of surprise. These verbally aggressive speech acts were made by Ụmueze-Avuru when they felt that Ụmụ-Mkpoke people are pressing too hard in the land case. According to some of the participants, there was a time that Ụmueze-Avuru became somehow intimidated by the way they were losing their supporters and as a result of frustration resorted to threats as in speech act 14 and 15.

#### Psychopathology:

Psychopathology refers to a situation where an individual expresses hostility that was previously repressed, maybe because previous hurts were not resolved well or there was never an opportunity to resolve the hurt. The victim may use verbally aggressive speech acts to attack the other person anytime he feels reminded of the past pain. It is also said to be an inherent trait of certain individuals to attack other people because of unresolved issues. Looking at the sampled speech act 5- “Há nà-àwá á<sup>+</sup>nyá nà há bù ézè, kà ànyí húgódú ètù há gà-èsí búgídé ézè áhụ” which is interpreted as they have been bragging that they are leaders of the whole town, let us see how they will continue to be its leader. It points out that Ụmueze-Avuru people have been bragging about the fact that they were the leaders of the whole community thereby making Ụmụ-Mkpoke people feel like nobodies. Also, speech act 9 “Ụmụ-Mkpoke are not ‘bonafide’ members of Ovoko town.” which was made during one of the court proceedings shows that references are usually made to the fact that Ụmụ-Mkpoke people are not true sons of the soil which gives us a little insight on how they were treated in the past. This may likely have been a repressed pain over a long period of time in the hearts of Ụmụ-Mkpoke people and may be responsible for some of their aggressive speech acts.



**Jealousy:**

This is an unhappy or angry feeling of wanting to have what someone else has. This can lead a person to verbally or physically attacking the object of jealousy. For instance, speech act 5 - “Há nà-àwá á<sup>+</sup>nyá nà há bù ézè, kà ànyí húgódú ètù há gà-èsí búgídé ézè áhù” (They have been bragging that they are leaders of the whole town, let us see how they will continue to be its leader) portrays this. Again, if we look at speech act 7 - that “Ụmụze-Avuru people will die in the hands of the then newly elected community Chief Abegbo”, it suggests that they are unhappy with the appointment of chief by Ụmụze-Avuru and may have wanted their own choice to be chief if not for the fact that they were not qualified to coronate a chief. So, verbal aggression becomes their only option of expressing their unhappiness and jealousy.

**Disdain:**

This is a feeling of contempt, dislike or disapproval of someone or something you think does not deserve respect. It is obvious from the array of aggressive speech acts above that Ụmụ-Mkpoke people do not regard Ụmụze-Avuru people as their leader or people to be respected. This must have been one of their major reasons for their use of verbal aggressive statements whenever they are referring to Ụmụze-Avuru people. See speech act 1, “Á gbára á<sup>+</sup>ká ná-àzò àlà ónyé jí<sup>+</sup> jí à ná-àkònyé” (Action speaks louder than words). This means that when a man is fighting for land with nothing in his hands, the one with yam seedlings begins to plant on the land. The Ụmụ-Mkpoke people through this speech implies that Ụmụze-Avuru people do not have enough resources to fight for land. In other words the Ụmụze-Avuru people are poor. Also in speech acts 2, 3 and 4, tone of disdain is employed, all suggesting that Ụmụze-Avuru is too poor to succeed in the land dispute. Ụmụze-Avuru on the other hand still sees the people of Ụmụ-Mkpoke as that old servants of theirs, no wonder contempt and disdain characterises all their speeches. For example in speech act 12 (“Mmádù á<sup>+</sup>gághí è mürú á<sup>+</sup>nyá òké àtáá íhé ó nwè.” This translates thus: “One cannot be awake and allow rat to eat up what they have”) the people of Ụmụ-Mkpoke are regarded as ‘rats’ which refers to their low state in the town. Likewise speech act 13 “Lèé nwátàkírí ùnyááhù nà-àbjá ètínyé ànyí áká n’ányá.” (See a child of yesterday that dares to put his fingers in our eyes), which shows that the people of Ụmụze-Avuru see Ụmụ-Mkpoke as too small and

insignificant to challenge them. Speech acts 9, 10 and 11 as made by Ụmụze-Avuru, present Ụmụ-Mkpoke people as second class citizens who do not have any right to ownership. These aggressive statements show deep feelings of contempt between Ụmụ-Mkpoke and Ụmụze-Avuru and prove that the two parties do not see each other as deserving respect.

**The Effects of Verbal Aggressive Speech Acts on Ụmụ-Mkpoke and Ụmụze-Avuru Communities**

The nature of verbal aggression is sometimes subtle; therefore, its effects are often underestimated and misunderstood. This creates a serious problem for people who are the victims of it because it may be difficult for people to estimate the extent of the mental damage that is caused before it crystallises into a conflict. The effects of verbal aggression can potentially last a lifetime.

Looking at these two communities under study, there have been some effects that these “battles of words” have left on both the people and the community as a whole. Before now, Ụmụze-Avuru and Ụmụ Mkpoke communities lived like brothers and neighbours such that they borrow each other’s land for farming. But with the land disputes and the verbal aggressive speeches, Ụmụ Mkpoke community banned any of its people from leasing their lands to Ụmụze-Avuru people. This has grossly affected the economy of these communities because crops that should have been cultivated, produced and sold at cheap rates in the village markets are now being bought from other communities at higher prices. Also, as a result of legal battles, a lot has been put into lobbying and court hearings which has its own financial implications. There is an increased level of hostility, distrust and suspicion that has been passed on from generation to generation such that at some point, the two communities stopped receiving handshakes or even edible things from each other; based on several threats and even physical conflicts that have erupted as a result of several aggressive speech acts. Verbal aggressive communication has created enmity and dissension between Ụmụze-Avuru and Ụmụ Mkpoke communities because recently, Ụmụ Mkpoke people stopped attending the same zonal meetings particularly, in the church with Ụmụze-Avuru and insisted on being a separate zone thereby bringing division amongst them.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The psychological and emotional effects of verbal aggression are severe and can negatively affect many areas of an individual's life, from their sense of self-worth to relationships (both interpersonal and communal) and ultimately to physical conflicts. We have explained earlier that a mismanaged verbal aggressive situation can lead to physical violence. This study believes that before verbal aggression escalates, some certain steps could be taken to nip it in its bud stage. These steps include:

1. Attempt should be made to understand the source of the verbally aggressive speech act, check whether it is just a perceived situation or transfer of aggression, then look for a solution that can palliate it before it escalates.
2. One party must make efforts to listen to and understand the standpoint of the aggrieved or angry person(s). A language of understanding should be used to show that you empathise with them.
3. The interlocutors should let karma do its work. That is to say, one of the parties should choose not to react or respond in kind.
4. The listening party can decide to ask the aggrieved party what they suggest as a solution to fix the problem when identified. A neutral party intervention can be offered too.
5. Efforts should be made by the listener(s) to lighten the environment through humour (Sometimes, at their own expense) when it is observed to be tense.

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