

LANGUAGE AND POLITICS: A CASE OF LANGUAGE ABUSE IN NIGERIAN DEMOCRACY

Chinenye Loyce Okoye
Linguistics Department
clo.okoye@unizik.edu.ng
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Abstract

Language is an important instrument in politics; it is used both as an instrument for mobilization and means of governance. In Nigeria, over the years, it has been noted that language has often been abused by political leaders to mislead and manipulate the citizens. This paper examines language and politics: A case study of language abuse in Nigerian democracy. With the use of Critical Discourse Analysis, the paper investigates how political language is abused during public discourse and governance to achieve selfish political ambition rather than national development. It examines the use of propaganda and empty promises as forms of linguistic manipulation in Nigerian politics since the inception of democracy. Using content analysis of media report, political speeches, media posts, the paper reveals that language abuse has contributed to ethnic tension, political violence, lack of trust in the democratic institutions. In addition, the multilingual and multicultural nature of the nation make it vulnerable to linguistic abuse for political gains. The paper concludes that for Nigerian democracy to thrive, there is need for language policy reforms, political education, media literacy and enforcement of laws against language abuse. The responsible use of language is essential for consolidating democracy and promotion of unity

Keywords: language, politics, language abuse, Democracy, Nigeria, political discourse.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary "Language is the system of communication in speech and writing that is used by people of a particular country or area. A politician is a person whose job is concerned with politics especially an elected member of parliament. The study we carry out in this paper is purely socio linguistic in nature as it covers 'studies of language in its social context – language as spoken by ordinary people in their everyday lives (Trudgell 1975). In the political arena, corruption has taken its toll on the sustenance of Nigeria's political system that Mbanefo (1999) laments:

"How was it possible for our value system to become almost completely destroyed within a space of twenty years..." It is against this background that the paper looks at the language (ab)use and political system in Nigeria. We will specify at this stage, how the rest of the paper is organized. After this introductory section. We will consider the following: the political system of Nigeria, politics in Nigeria, corruption in Nigeria, human rights in Nigerian, aspect of abuse of language in Nigerian democracy and concluding remark.

THE POLITICAL SYSTEM OF NIGERIA

The political system of Nigeria take place in a framework of a federal Presidential representative democratic republic, whereby the president of Nigeria is both the head of state and head of government and a multi-party system. Executive power is exercised by the government. Legislature power is vested in both the government and the two chambers of the legislative, the House of representatives and the Senate. Together the two chambers make up the law-making body in Nigeria called the National Assembly. The highest judiciary arm of government in Nigeria is the Supreme Court of Nigeria. Nigeria also practices 'Baron de Montesquieu's theory of the separation of power, the National assembly serves as a watchdog to the excesses of the executive arm of government (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/politicsofnigeria>).

Executive Branch

The president is elected by the people, He is both the chief of State and Head of government and head of the federal executive council. Nigeria has a rotating presidency so that the three major regions of Nigeria (the North, the East, and the West) share political control of the country.

Legislative Branch

The national Assembly of Nigeria has two chambers. The House of Representatives is presided upon by the speaker of the House of Representatives. It has 360 members, elected for a four year term in a single-seat constituencies. The senate is presided upon by the president of Senate. It has 109 members, elected for a four year term in 36 three-seat constituencies (corresponding to the country's 36 states and one seat in a single-seat constituency (the Federal Capital, Abuja).

Judicial Branch

The judicial branch consists mainly of the Supreme Court of Nigeria, which is the highest court in the land. It is presided upon by the Chief Justice of Nigeria and thirteen associate justices, appointed by the

President of Nigeria on the recommendation of the national Judicial Council and subject to confirmation by the senate.

LEGAL SYSTEM

There are four distinct systems of law in Nigeria. English Law which is derived from its colonial past with Britain, common law, constitutional law (both a development of its past colonial independence) and Sharia law, used only in the predominantly Hausa and Muslim North of the country. Like the U.S.A., there is a judicial branch with a Supreme Court which is regarded as the highest court of the land.

Administrative decision: the federation is divided into 36 states and one territory: federal capital Territory (Abuja) Abia, Adamawa, Akwa Ibom, Anambra, Bauchi, Bayelsa, Benue, Borno, Cross river, Delta, Ebonyi, Edo, Kebbi, Kogi, kwara, Lagos, Nasarawa, Niger, Ogun, Osun, Oyo, Plateau, Rivers, Sokoto, Taraba, Yobe Zamfara etc

Each state is further divided into Local Government Areas (LGAs). There are 774 LGAs in Nigeria for each state they are listed in the article of that state. Kano State has the largest number of LGAs at 44, and Bayelsa state has the fewest at 9. The federal Capital Territory of Abuja has 6 LGAs. The Local Government Areas replaced the districts that were the third tier administrative unit under the British Government.

POLITICS IN NIGERIA

Post-colonial Nigeria politics was dominated by years of brutal military rule until finally in 1999 international pressure led to the election of a president, Olusegun Obasanjo with appropriate power relinquished to a new government. Hopes that the political structure was maturing were dashed by the 2007 presidential, parliamentary and state governor elections which brought Yar'Adua to power. The administration of the election was characterized by interference from the Independent National Electoral Commission and the use of hired thugs to intimidate voters and polling station workers. Yar'Adua was elected with 70% vote and 29 out of 36 state governors are drawn from the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Amongst condemnation by official election observers, the International Crisis Group described the election as "the most poorly organized and massively rigged in the country's history"

Appraising Nigeria at 44, the Guardian Editorial comment of October 1, 2004 said "is however, a depressing exercise, a catalogue of woes, of lost opportunities, of wasted resources, of failed leadership and of the lamentation of a people desperately seeking relief from the suffocating tyranny of poverty, political oppression and underdevelopment". We have concluded that Nigeria's political dispensation as we have it at present is a hybrid. It is a dictatorship, an autocracy, a theocracy, a feudal state, a monarchy etc all rolled into one. A mere look at the language and tactics employed by our politicians would inform anyone in doubt that democracy is a smokescreen.

On the rule of law in Nigeria, Olu Onagoruwa (SAN) had this to say: "The incursion of the military into government, naturally created an awareness in the members of the bar and Bench that the Government of the Military is a Government of men not laws..." (Rule of law, the Bar and the Bench, Guardian, September 26, 2004). The learned gentlemen had no explanation for the flagrant violation of the rule of law under Shagari or the present civilian administration, Or where or when the rule of law has ever existed in Nigeria politics. Crowded police stations, arbitrary arrests and detentions, vigilante groups and jungle justice at checking points and motor parks are the rule not the exception, even under the so-called civilian democratic state.

CORRUPTION IN NIGERIA

From petty police bribes to abuse of public funds, Nigeria has become synonymous with bad governance in Africa. The government set up to tackle financial crime, the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) estimates that "over \$400 billion of oil revenues has been stolen since 1960". (One World Guide, 2001). Efforts of the commission have focused on former state governors, many of whom control budgets larger than individual countries, but who are immune from prosecution while in office.

Over 5 years the EFCC has achieved 250 convictions recovering about \$5billion, however charges against the former governor of Delta State, James Onanefe Ibori, proved to be to the detriment of the highest levels of authority and the head of the EFCC, Mr. Nuhu Ribadu, was sent to a 12month training course during 2008. Yar'Adua has nevertheless conveyed a determination to permit the proper role of the elected National Assembly to encourage a culture of respect for the law backed by improved standards and rewards for the judiciary, he sacked two ministers on suspicion of graft and introduced a new public procurement law in 2007 which enforces greater transparency in government contracts.

Such are the rewards of corruption in the wealthy oil producing Niger Delta region that acquisition of positions is conducted through violence. Groups are recruited and armed to enforce the life cycle of political power from vote rigging to protection. Some of these groups acquire ambition of their own, the best known being the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), which has claimed responsibility for a spate of kidnapping and damage to installations. MEND portrays an image of fighting for social and

environmental justice. Crackdown by security forces, show trials of rebel leaders, targeted development programmes have all failed to bring peace to the region. The president has shown increasing interest in seeking a political solution but his attempts to engage all parties in negotiations have so far come to nothing.

HUMAN RIGHTS IN NIGERIA

The police and security forces have maintained poor human right record dating back to the long years of military dictatorship. The use of torture by the police has been labeled as systemic by the world Rapporteur for Torture. Concerns about extra-judicial killing were validated by the claim of the police that "800 armed robbers had been shot in just 3months" during 2007 (Nigerian World Guide 2001).

Complex internal conflicts also occur in Nigeria which often involve ethnic and religious groups. Violence has caused as many as "14,000 deaths since 1991", the government lacking the means and motive to investigate criminal acts. The three main ethnic groups are the Yoruba in the West, Igbo in the East and Hausa in the North, with their own languages and religion, at a deeper level, there are over 450 ethnic groups, many suffering poverty and exclusion from land and other rights with grievances against their neighbours and other authorities. For example, the introduction of Sharia law in the Northern states is the source of great friction with Christian communities who live there. Inter-ethnic sensitivities were recognized in the decision to 'Omit questions about ethnicity or religion' in the Population Census taken in early 2006, the first in over 15 years.

Cultural traditions at household level are also slow to evolve, in a patriarchal society, the extent of domestic violence against women and the trafficking of children is unknown. The country's 68 million women are currently represented by only 9 of the elected senators in parliament. Attempts to introduce affirmative legislation to correct the imbalance together with other improvements in women's rights, have not yet been successful.

ASPECTS OF (AB) USE OF LANGUAGE IN POLITICS IN NIGERIA

Language is the 'system of communication in speech and writing that is used by people of the particular country or area. Politics on the other hand is the 'activities involved in getting and using power in public life and being able to influence decisions that affect a country or a society; matters concerned with getting or using power within a 'particular group or organization' (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary: 22).

A politician is a person whose job is concerned with politics, especially as an elected member of parliament etc. political correctness is the principle of avoiding language and behaviour that may offend or mislead groups of people. Accordingly, if an aspirant intended to contest a public position, it should be accompanied with the notion of sincerity and humility to serve the citizens rather than the hidden intention to use the electorate opportunity to abuse office via satisfying his greed for fantastic wealth just like what has dominated our political scenario from time immemorial to the modern-day world. 'The kind of language we use' is almost influenced by 'the way we see the world', this is so because it is a two-way process. Any influence is ascribed not to 'language' as such or to one language compared with another, but to the use within a language of one variety rather than another. (typically a sociolect – the language used primarily by members of a particular social group). Emphasis is given to the social context of language use rather than to purely linguistic consideration, such as the social pressure in particular contexts to use language in one way rather than another (Chandler, 1994: 28). According to Noam Chomsky "it is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies". Wole Soyinka, the Nobel Laureate of literature and few others in the academia have played this role so prominently by speaking the truth and exposing the lies of our bureaucrats and politicians.

It is against the background that we will discuss language use or abuse by our politicians with regards to Nigerian's present world-view, this has not only affected our national life which has become breeding sites for corruption it has now 'practically isolated the country from the progressive world' Eso (1999).

A crucial starting point is the word Democracy and Dividend of democracy employed half a dozen times by our politicians in their political speech. One wonders where or when the rule of law ever existed in Nigerian politics even under the present civilian democratic state! Anyway, let us go back to language and politics. Acting either out of their own ignorance or exploiting the confusion of the masses, the ruling elite are trying to equate the enrichment of the people's lives expected from democracy to the dividend of democracy. So, for the dividend of democracy, they reel out statistics and T.V. footage of their administrative successes in infrastructural development and provision of social amenities. The question then is, is the construction and maintenance of roads, building of additional classrooms and maternity wards, laying the foundation stones for a new university or polytechnic, provision of pipe-borne water etc. the dividend of democracy? In the early 1970s, the head of state then, Yakubu Gowon, was a soldier, the oil proceeds were better managed, Government policies were more generous and directed at providing for the needs of the people and raising the standard of living. To a greater degree, we have everything the present government is now trying to offer us as the dividend of democracy. Were these the dividends of democracy under a military dictatorship?

According to Max Weber, the 18th century German Sociologist – The dividend of democracy is power 'the ability to get others to act in accordance to your will' politics is all about power. Unlike tyrannical,

dictatorship or oligarchical politics, democratic politics strives for less domination of power by an elite few and the greater participation of the people in governing themselves. An equitable distribution of power recognizes that the people are the ultimate repository of power, and the elected and government officials of every organ of government are delegated to operate solely and totally in conformity with the will of the people.

Nigerians will have the dividend of democracy when this reality becomes the governing principle of Nigerian politics. There is no dividend of democracy as expressed in the language of the politicians in Nigeria because government officials remain scornful of the will of the people, through INEC, they have refused to allow electoral results to reflect the electoral choices of Nigerian citizens as expressed through the ballot box.

Bribery has reached such an alarming rate that the phrase 'Ghana-must-go' (which originally means that Ghanaians must go) now means bags containing Millions of naira' reportedly dragged to the floor of the parliament as bribes when decisions on the impeachment of parliament officials or any other crucial state decisions were to be taken. Apart from this, other actions such as the organization and execution of solidarity/political rallies, exercise of civic rights in local, state and national polls, have been characterized by the allocation and distribution of money to participate. The April 2007 general election in Nigeria, apart from being marred by violence, also suffered grave setbacks owing to reported large-scale electoral malpractices that thrived on bribing the electorate and the officials of the electoral body.

The security system of the country is equally not spared. Men and women of the police no longer enjoy the confidence of the people in view of the bribery that thrive in the system. Policemen mount illegal check points not to enforce any law but to extort naira notes from road users known with the code language "Roger" thereby giving defaulting road users and criminals the license to operate at will. The lapses in the Nigerian police brought about the emergence of vigilante groups as a means of law enforcement in Nigeria.

Another worrisome issue is the Nigeria scans language called '419' i.e. the advance free fraud, which has given the country, a negative image abroad. There is now a Nigerian 419 coalition Website <http://home.rica.Net/aphae/419coal/> on the Internet to alert the whole world of the 'Nigerian's way of doing business'. The Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) of 2000 ranked Nigeria the most corrupt country in the world; the 2nd most corrupt in 2001, 2002 and 2003, the third most corrupt in 2004 the sixth most corrupt in 2006.

In the labour force, the word 'Ghost-workers' are used to refer to non-existent workers whose names appear on the payroll. In fact ghost, (deceased) are workers whose names have continued to appear in payment voucher even though they are dead. This then implies that the so-called ghosts' have living souls behind their 'existence' for ghosts live in the spirit world and would therefore have nothing to do with any country's currency. People at the helm of affairs invented the expression ghost-workers' as a strategy of filling fictitious names into the pay-roll to siphon the country's resources.

Another abused expression in the labour section in the allocation of positions and resources is 'federal character', or 'quota system'. These expressions are used wrongly by the politicians to gratify praise-singers, sycophants, family members, people of the same religious or ethnic affiliation.

As regards political incorrectness, one expression that has suffered much abuse is the expression 'second term', 'third term', the political class have capitalized on their use to give false credibility to their respective governments, the expression has become a household slogan in the political parties of Nigerian's civilian to civilian transition as almost every incumbent political office holder seeks re-election popularly called 'second/third term bid' to ensure continuity in the execution of their programmes.

The politicians during the first republic were noted for obtaining ten percent of funds allocated to projects as bribes. The expression 10% is so named after the Christian practice of tithe paying that takes 10% of one's income. Another form currently in use is 'Kickback' to label the percentage that would go back to the source in the award of contracts. Also 'brown envelope' is constantly used in the political or governmental parlance to stand for bribe another expression is 'settle' which means 'to bribe', the impression created is that, there is hardly any illegal deal one wants to perpetrate in Nigeria that would not be executed if one could 'settle'.

We would conclude here that it is rather pathetic that the political incorrectness in Nigeria Democracy since the last ten years has left Nigerians with the impression either rightly or wrongly that '... for us in Nigeria, the political kingdom has for too long been the gateway to the economic kingdom' (Obasanjo, 2002), every one jostles for power to have their own share of the 'national cake'. The country's resources that ought to be well managed have been so labeled and reduced to the level of cakes meant to be shared freely at birthdays or wedding ceremonies. It is, therefore, not surprising that people resort to political assassination to eliminate their opponents to have access to the 'national cake'.

On a final note, the use of the term 'Nigeria-factor' in tackling every national issue calls for a careful consideration, because Nigerians have used it to trivialize the country's political and social value system. The term could be used in a positive sense that it would be a slogan in a bid to re-brand Nigeria in a bid to chart a new course for the national development scheme. This is indeed a subject for nation development scheme and the National Orientation Agency has a vital role to play.

Conclusion

The paper examined the language and politics, with special attention on language abuse in Nigerian democracy. It established the fact that language is not neutral in politics. In Nigerian democracy, it has become both a tool for both division and manipulation rather than for national integration. In conclusion, democracy cannot be consolidated where language is abused. For Nigeria to achieve unity, peace, and sustainable development, political leaders must see language as an instrument of building bridges, not barriers. The future of Nigerian democracy depends largely on the words we use today.

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