

The Role of Political Communication in English in Developing A Strong Tradition of Democratic Practices in Multilingual Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria's political terrain, since after independence, has been a rough and chequered one. Chief among the contributory factors is our diversity and ethno-multilingual nature. The natural implication of these diversities is that language becomes a principal source of individual identity and also a social-political capital for interaction across different cultural and political borders. However, language and indeed political communication can be a veritable tool in stabilizing and ensuring a strong tradition of democratic practices in Nigeria. It is pivotal to the attainment of effective social mobilization and successful political process in any country that operates a system of governance that is based on Federalism like Nigeria. This paper explores how political actors can deploy language facilities available in the Nigerian multilingual speech community towards the success of democratic polity in Nigeria. The work is hinged on the Speech Act theory of Austin(1962). It was finally discovered that political discourses helps in the development of politics in this democratic country.

Keywords: Multilingualism, communication, politics, democracy and governance

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria as a nation is a multilingual country with three major ethnic groups namely: Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa/Fulani. These diversities both in language, culture and religion have created a serious problem in the development agenda in governance. To further complicate this milieu is the colonial language bequeathed to the nation by the imperialist [1]. There have been several debates from different linguists as whether priority will be given to the indigenous languages or the second language (L2). The debate, therefore has been what language(s) should function in the lives of the people given the various political, cultural, cognitive and economical role language plays in the socio-political architecture of nation.

Whatever stand they want to take, it is very obvious that English language as a Lingual Franca takes supremacy over the native languages as it in the Nigeria language policy. It is the language that

was brought to us by our colonial masters which is serving as a unifying factor to the whole ethnic groups. [2] describes the social pressure to learn English language and culture at the expense of the indigenous languages of the area. The English language is more or less the major means of communication that cut across the ethnic groups. The status of English language in politic cannot be over stressed.

Politically therefore, Nigeria as a country has experienced a lot of inconsistency in governance. This statement buttressed the assertion made by [3] that Nigeria is a good example of an unstable country in Africa. The country has witnessed a series of coups, counter coups, civil war, ethnic riots, religious disturbances, and general violent political disagreements since it became independent in October 1960. These contradictions in the Nigerian political system are also exacerbated by inter-state rivalry between the current

thirty-six states of the federation as well as by social, political, economic, educational and mass media inequalities. Chief among the contributory factors is the multilingual nation of the country. In the northern region, the response and attitude to English was quite different from the southerners. In Hausa region, the use of the English language was restricted to only the feudal class which is quite different to what is obtainable in the South. This dichotomy between the north and the south along linguistic, cultural and religious lines still exist today. Without paying cognizance to these differences, the colonial authority of those days amalgamated the Southern and the Northern protectorate for ease of governance and made English the official national language to administer the linguistically heterogeneous state [4]. This paper looks at the role of political communication in developing a strong tradition of democratic practices in multilingual Nigeria.

Nigeria and Multilingualism

It is an established fact that Nigeria engages in multilingual education by virtue of its multilingual, multi-ethnic, multi-religious and cultural nature. The Nigerian state therefore, is pluralistic in nature. That is, it is a multi-ethnic state or nation-state with over 400 groups of diverse ethnic and religious identity, every group is dissimilar to another based on the uniqueness of cultures, languages, religious and values systems [5]; [6]. These diversities have a lot of negative effects on security, education, and general development of the country. One thing that distinguished Nigeria from other African countries is the concept of multilingualism. As the most populous nation in Africa, she is equally regarded by the British Council as home to more languages than any other African nation. "*Ethnologue*² lists 526 languages in Nigeria; other estimates place the number between 500 and 600 though the lack of current census data on the nation's languages hinders a more accurate count" (p.9). In a multilingual country like Nigeria, language choice is not arbitrary. Instead, a particular setting such as

school or government may favour one language, while other language will be appropriate in other speech situations. Although there may be roughly equivalent expressions in two languages, the social meaning that attaches to the use of one language generally differs from that attached to the use of other [7].

Multilingualism is language situation where more than one languages are spoken in a given speech community. In other words, a speaker can be seen as multilingual when mark with the ability of speaking more than two languages. [8] are of the opinions that, the multilingual society has more than two language recognised officially and these languages serves various roles simultaneously without any restriction from government policy. For example, a country like Singapore has so many languages: English, Malay, Mandrin and Hoklein whose functions are not officially restricted to any domains [9]. This practice was possible in their country because they have different communities and groups.

[10] asserts that multilingualism is seen as "...phenomenon that results from a situation where people belonging to a particular society speak different languages." It is a situation where by different languages are spoken by the people situated in the same environment. Another description remains a linguistic behavior of the members of a group community which alternately uses more than two languages depending on the situation and function [11]. In the Nigerian situation, there is a dire need to promote the indigenous languages in order to curb the supremacy of the second language, English over our native languages. When the native languages are not being utilized, indirectly, the country will start losing her rich cultural heritage. Utilising the multilingual and the multicultural riches of a nation is one of the ways of harnessing the benefit of multilingual society. According to [12], language is the pivot on which all human activities, ranging from the most prosaic to the most profound revolve.

Role of political communication in developing a strong democratic practices

In a democratic country like Nigeria, it is a routine practice for politicians to use their political languages to persuade the masses to vote in their favour while campaigning for votes. Specifically, Political Communication examines the role of communication in politics and advocacy and applies public communication principles to advocacy and political campaigns. It includes the role of media relations in politics, the impact of television on political discourse, political message development, political advertising, ethics in political persuasion, and the impact of political communication on democratic institutions, as well as how to interpret public opinion, identify and reach constituencies, and develop political communication strategies.

Furthermore, political communication can help developing an image or impression in the voters. A politician can communicate compassion, competence, responsibility, a willingness to serve, strong family values, etc. through both earned and paid media. However, display advertising techniques are strictly for name identification, not for image development [13]. There are many other functions political communication can play like identifying issues worth solving through the media. Politicians lure voters by developing issues they will tackle like portable water, electricity, free education, fighting crime and other issues that they never remember when voted to power. It is an established fact that political advertising has become a relevant niche of advertising in the contemporary political terrain of Nigeria. This is not unconnected with its usefulness as a veritable means of making the electorates aware of candidates and manifestoes of political parties [14].

Excerpts of Political communication adverts

- i. *The umbrella is not working
No light, insecurity, collapse
educational system, No health care
plan, dwindling foreign reserve
Vote Buhari/Osibanjo2015
(Guardian Friday, February 6th,
2015)
Support obasanjo/atiku*
- ii. *For free & qualitative education for
your children
Do not waste your vote
Vote the winning party
For president Justice party*
- iii. *Our government will safeguard the
hard-won democracy*
- iv. *Our reform programmes will put
Nigeria back on the path of
economic prosperity (Opebi,2008).*

These excerpts above show the different communication strategies used by the politicians to increase their chances of winning the election. This is in line with what [15] say that candidates and consultants, within the campaign context, determine strategies which maximize their chance to win while minimizing their opponent's chance to win and rely on that formula in the construction of campaign advertisements". For them, the political campaigning increasingly filled with formula-like negative advertisements reduce complex political problems to formulaic prescriptions with the propensity to minify the quality of political debate.

As a matter of fact, it is the mobiization of a political language that fosters the attainment of all these political practices in Nigeria. The deployment of all these varieties of the English language facilities by the political actors is possible because of the multilingual nature of this democratic country. Socio-linguists have consistently argue that, apart from other non linguistic factors, human society itself owes its continued existence and peaceful coexistence largely to the roles language plays in every aspect of human affairs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Speech Act Theory

It should be recalled that man being a social animal will not have a meaningful life without the concept of communication. No matter the nature of the communication, speech is paramount. This is why we say that it is the most demanding of the four language skills. It is so complex because every speech is followed by an action. Therefore, to do justice to this issue of political communication, the speech act theory is the most adequate. The theory was propounded by [16] but was modified by Searle. Searle develops and extends the speech act theory that Austin introduced. Searle focuses on the *illocutionary acts* performed by the speaker.

From the work of [17], it is understood that language goes beyond speech or writing. This, in effect, means that language is a form of action. Whenever an utterance is made whether a request, apology or promise, we 'do' things or 'perform' actions. Austin succinctly captures this position through his work titled "How to do things with words". [18] reports that speech act in linguistics and the philosophy of language is an utterance that has performative function in language and communication. [19] support this view when they argue that 'the notion of speech acts is central to political discourse analysis, because it dissolves the everyday notion that language and action are separate' (p. 216). [20] did not use the term 'speech act', but 'performative sentence' which indicated that the issuing of the utterance is the performative of the action. Searle was the first to use the term 'speech Act' in his *speech Act: Essay in the Philosophy of language* where he claims that "talking is performing acts according to rules" [21]. Searle's categorization of speech acts into *representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives* has a direct implication to political discourse. These speech acts are performed in political discourse. These politicians perform actions during their political campaigns. The excerpts above, Searle's classifications of illocutionary act were used. For examples the first excerpt conforms to

the performative of *directives* which shows the speech act that can cause the hearer to take a particular action. *The umbrella is not working* can seemingly bring a change of mind.

Political language has either negative or positive effect on the electorates. Yet, many politicians are oblivious of the power of spoken word. There should be a relationship between what is spoken and what is meant. These language use in campaigning demonstrate the speech act theory which always have their effect on the masses. In the course of performing speech acts, we ordinarily communicate with each other. From the words of [22] perlocutionary act provokes the effects on the audience by means of uttering sentence. Such effects are special to the circumstance of utterances. Perlocutionary act, is the actual effect, such as enlightening, persuading, convincing inspiring, scaring, or otherwise getting someone to do or realize something whether intended or not.

Furthermore, the excerpts below are in conformity with commissive actions of the speech acts. Commissive is a speech acts that commit a speaker to some future action. Examples, *Our government will safeguard the hard-won democracy* (v) *Our reform programmes will put Nigeria back on the path of economic prosperity* etc are all making promises to the people. In essence therefore, they are promises that commit the speaker to a future course of action. The communicative goal is achieved when the hearer responds to and performs the speaker's intended actions. The hearers always respond with their votes on the election date.

The excerpts 1-3 are seen as being assertive in nature. With this speech act, the political actors commit the speaker to something being the case. The different kinds are: suggesting, putting forward, swearing, boasting, concluding. Example: *'vote the winning party'*. This is a kind of one counting her eggs before they are hatched. One can argue therefore that the political utterances go beyond giving

information about what exists. They are utterances directed towards the realization of specific communicative acts, and in fact, they can be regarded as acts in themselves [7]. Generally speaking, language is used to interpret and carry out any action. To look at the relationship between language and governance therefore, one discovers that actions of these political actors are carried out through political communication. This is the justification of the use of the speech act theory.

Language of Political Communication in the Nigerian Democratic Context

Communication as a complex phenomenon remains vital to a sustenance of relationships and human existence. It is in fact, the oil that lubricates human interactions. Despite this significance, communication is a double-edged sword which can be used either positively or negatively. [12] attested to the negative social intend of language from the perspective of its potential for complexity. She also observed that "language is often used, not to communicate but to deceive. This is often true of political and religious propaganda... ." Effective communication takes place during an interactive section between interlocutors if the language code is understood by both interactants. The English language is the preferred language of communication in Nigeria. The choice of English as the political, education, judicial medium of instruction is in harmony with the planned national policy to incorporate the teaching of English as the official language of instruction. This is why the English language is used in any form of official gathering as the language that cuts across the whole ethnic groups in Nigeria. The relationship between language and democratic governance is like a two sides of a coin.

In an era of serious emphasis on democracy and good governance, political communications offer the best approach in stabilizing and ensuring a strong tradition of democratic practices in Nigeria. Political communication according to [18] is an interactive process

concerning the transmission of information among politicians, the news media, and the public. Political communication equally can be defined as the connection concerning politics and citizens and the interaction modes that connect these groups to each other [10]. The messages being sent by the politicians usually have effects either positively or negatively on the masses. It is a subfield of communication and political science that is concerned with how information spreads and influences politics and policy makers, the news media and citizens. This includes the study of the media, the analysis of speeches by politicians and those that are trying to influence the political process, and formal and informal conversations among members of the public, among other aspects. The media acts as bridge between government and public. One cannot talk about the success or failure of politics in Nigeria without attributing all to the activities of the media. A onetime Nigerian Commissioner for Information reflecting on the fall of the Nigerian First Republic lamented that whoever and whatever ruined the Republic did so with the connivance and active collaboration of the greater part of the Nigerian press. One of the problems Ironsi had was one of communication which plagued him throughout his tenure of office while Gowon once complained about the conspiracy of the Nigerian press to pull him down from the reins of power [5].

There are certain characteristic features of political communication which always differ from the ordinary man's language. Some of these expressions are only peculiar to the politicians and politics. The language of political campaign embodied in propaganda and rhetoric, is persuasive. Politicians adopt these linguistic devices to cajole the electorate to vote for them and their parties by presenting themselves as the only capable persons for the job [20].

Political language is so emotional, deceptive as well as persuasive. It causes erratic response from the masses. [17] describes the language of politics as a "lexicon of conflict and drama, of

ridicules, and reproach, pleading and persuasion, colour and bite permeated. A language designed to valour men, destroy some and change the mind of others.”

The use of figurative expression by politicians is another unique feature that they use to cajole the electorate. These expressions are full of rhetoric, Biblical references and promises. A politician's rhetorical style gives him an edge of winning the election. Again, propaganda which is a political tool of politics is an embodiment of lies and expression of 'the more you look, the less you see'. The political languages and propaganda are

In this article, an attempt has been made to show the role of political communication in the politics of a multilingual country of Nigeria. It is a fact that language is a veritable tool for political discourse. It is a mark of social integration and unity. It is pivotal to the attainment of effective social mobilization and successful political process in any country that operates a

CONCLUSION

used in moulding and changing opinion of the electorate during campaign.

Politics in Nigeria wouldn't have gained a lot of grounds without the existence of the English language. It's role in politics has been so enormous that every facet of the society has felt the impart. According to [6] virtually every sociolinguistic domain of Nigeria lives has enjoyed the generous linguistic facilities provided by English. This is attested to by the various emerging features and varieties of English resulting from the contact between English and Nigerian languages.

system of governance that is based on Federalism like Nigeria. It is pertinent therefore to conclude that the political actors in this democratic country Nigeria employ political communication as a means of expanding their frontiers in politics. It helps in the development of a strong tradition of democratic practices in the country.

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