

PERSONAL PRONOUNS: A RHETORICAL STRATEGY IN POLITICAL SPEECHES

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Abstract

Language plays a vital role in every political action. However, some electorates misconstrue the meanings of rhetorical strategies in the language used in political speeches. It is against this background that this study examined the use of personal pronouns as a rhetorical strategy in political speeches as it pertains to propaganda in the 2015 Presidential election in Nigeria. Fairclough's (1995) Model and Analytical Framework was adopted as the theoretical framework and the methodology was qualitative. The data were drawn from print media advertisements in different national newspapers in Nigeria: *The Guardian*, *Premium Times* and *Vanguard*. The newspapers were published between January and March 2015 which was the most eventful period of political campaigning for the March 2015 general elections in Nigeria. The data were principally drawn from campaign speeches delivered at rallies by politicians who were members of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC). Content analysis was adopted for the analytical procedure of this study in analysing the data obtained against the background of the framework of analysis for the research. The results of the study revealed that personal pronouns impact the different social relationships between speakers (the politicians) and listeners (the voters). The study, therefore, concludes that politics is an unavoidable aspect of human existence where politicians use language especially personal pronouns (I, We) to change the political thoughts of the electorates.

Key words: Language, Personal Pronouns, Politics, Political Speeches, Rhetoric

Introduction

Language is the basis of interaction which forms a vital part of human behaviour and existence as it shapes our perceptions of reality. Groups of people all over the world are identified by their various languages. It is also the hallmark of any group of people, community or society. For these reasons, “politicians and their political activities frequently rely on language usage for communicative and persuasive reasons. So, language is seen as central to their verbal exchange activities when interacting with people for achieving their political aims” (Toska and Bello 272).

Meanwhile, political, economic and social affairs of a nation are circulated through language either in written or oral form. Thus, language is central as it constantly reflects in every sphere of human endeavour. The possession of language more than another attribute, distinguishes humans from other animals. Besides, language is not only used as a means of communication but also as a tool of communication. Politics, however, is an unavoidable aspect of human existence and everyone is involved at some time, in some kind of political system. Politics is a word that is part of social life, particularly in a democratic country.

Politics, according to Bayram, (2010), is a struggle for power in order to put certain political, economic and social ideas into practice. In this process, language plays a crucial role, for every political action is prepared, accompanied, influenced and played by language. Chimbarange, Takavarasha, and Kombe (2013) are of the view that the main purpose of politicians is to persuade their audience of the validity of their political claims. The above implies that politicians make efforts to convince the electorates to discard their political ideologies and hold on to theirs. Furthermore, Heywood (2013) argues that politics is an activity of a nation which is aimed at defending and amending general regulations to rule the life. Additionally, political leaders are responsible to present their ideas or the party's ideas in an influential way (Nakaggwe, 2012). Their goals are to persuade the audience to concur with them or to motivate a

change in perception or attitude towards a particular matter (Orji, 2016).

One major observation is that there have been political discourse studies of the speeches of each of the Presidents that Nigeria has had since 1999. There have been studies on President Obasanjo's speeches (see Yusuf 2003; Ayoola 2005), on Late President Umaru Yar'adua (Olaniyi 2010) and also on the language of Dr Goodluck Jonathan (see Kamalu and Agangan 2011; Abuya 2012; Waya and Ogechukwu 2013). Therefore, politics is one of the vital tools that politicians use in order to shape the political thoughts of the electorates with the aim of selling their ideologies to them. As a result, some of the electorates misconstrue the meanings of the rhetorical strategies in the language used.

It is against this background that this study examines the use of personal pronouns as a rhetorical strategy in political speeches as it pertains to propaganda in the 2015 Presidential election in Nigeria.

Political Speeches

Political speeches could be regarded as speeches delivered by political leaders representing political groups rather than as individuals. They are also speeches associated with either struggle for power or maintenance/control of it. These are supported by Allen (2007) who further explains that all meanings intended by the speaker aim to fulfil a politically strategic function by carefully scripted words. The aim is not to seek for the electorates' votes but to appreciate and inform them of the direction of the new government (its plans). Due to the persuasive nature of political speeches, political leaders rely significantly on the manipulation of language to meet the objectives. The objectives are to increase the population's political participation and to persuade them to have the same opinion as the politician (Hakansson, 2012).

However, a political speech is diverse because it encompasses the different forms of speeches that politicians deliver at political campaigns. Political campaigns refer to the total and collective efforts

of politicians to present themselves favourably to the public for acceptance and support. According to Aduradola and Ojukwu (2013:105), “the ultimate goal of almost every political campaign is to win election”. Some of the major forms of political campaigns are political rallies, political debates, political interviews and political advertisements (Opeibi, 2009). Given the social and political nature of the issues in the discourse, language becomes an active agent in the political process which is deployed forcefully and strategically for the execution of vital social and political functions. Fairclough (2012) opines that campaign language is capable of weaving visions and imaginations which can change realities. Chilton (2004), as cited in Bataineh (2019), asserts that both language and politics are intertwined, and politics is all about the appropriate use of language.

Personal Pronouns as Rhetorical Strategies

In political speeches, personal pronouns have various functions. One of these has been defined in terms of pronouns’ capacity to act as a means of expressing different social relations. Allen (2007) claims that personal pronouns are used by politicians to present positive aspects of themselves and negative aspects of their opponents. Hakansson (2012) concurs by adding that politicians tend to present themselves to be perceived as suitable leaders of the nation by their people. This is due to the inclusive and exclusive nature of personal pronouns. Alemi, Latifi and Nematzadeh (2018) assert that personal pronouns are a powerful device in political speeches when it is necessary to include or exclude a part of the society or institutions. As a rhetorical device in political discourse, personal pronouns do not only refer to politicians and others, but also suggest multiple identities of themselves and others, presented from a range of perspectives (Allen, 2007). Therefore, pronouns are some of the most favourable rhetoric strategies used by politicians to create multiple identities.

Meanwhile, rhetoric is a strategy of persuasive speaking and writing and a technique to attract the attention of the audience/readers. Crystal (2008) defines rhetoric as the study of

effective or persuasive speaking and writing. Similarly, Setiarini, Winarni and Junining (2019) claim that rhetoric is a useful way to control the audience, persuade and attract the public's attention. In verbal communication, appropriate use of personal pronouns by a speaker in a specific context is able to produce a desirable impact on the audience (Wahyuningsih, 2018). The term 'personal' is used to label the pronoun class to which the grammatical category of a person applies (Bhattacharyya, 2015). Personal pronouns are one of the rhetorical devices (Alemi, Latifi & Nematzadeh, 2018; Allen, 2007; Hakansson, 2012) used to persuade audiences of political speeches.

The study of personal pronouns usage has become an important aspect of analysing political speeches. As Bramley said in his work (2001), politicians exploit the flexibility of pronominal reference to construct a view of themselves and others that is favourable to their image. However, most politicians do not deliver speeches as individuals, but rather as representatives of political parties, governments, or nations (Irimiea, 2010:44). Thus, "the pronoun 'I' is used to construct a favourable image of the interviewee as an individual and is integrally related to how a politician does 'being a good politician'" (Bramley 2001:259). Moreover, "Benveniste (1971: 218) eloquently said: "'I' is the 'reality of the discourse' and 'I' signifies 'the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing I'" (qtd. in Bramley, 2001:27). Also, the pronoun "I" is employed to share a speaker's personal and professional experiences. Similarly, "the first-person plural personal pronoun "indicates inclusion and exclusion according to the intention of the speaker" (Gyuró, 2015:27). Furthermore, "when a politician belongs to a political party that is in opposition to another party, "We" is used to create an 'us and them' dichotomy between the two parties. Conversely, "We" can be used to paint a picture of the political party as a united team" (Bramley 2001). This is achieved while conveying specific political ideas which are similarly shared by the people. Also, the most motivating reasons, according to Håkansson (2012), for a

politician to use the pronoun “I” in his speech is to be considered as good and responsible, as well as to describe himself in a positive way and highlight personal qualities. These may be: being responsible; being in touch with the electorate; being a person of principles; being a person of action; showing lack of knowledge; being a person of power; and problematic personal issues (Bramley, 2001: 28).

Additionally, “We” is a common political strategy concurred by Nakagwe (2012), who states that, the pronoun it is able to establish a patriotic connection between the country leader and the people. Allen (2007) states that the pronoun “We” is used to induce a general collective response or attitude to a matter. Thus, “personal pronouns play an important role in negotiating social status in interaction. In other words, personal pronouns may perform not only a person deictic function, but also a social deictic function in discourse” (Wen Lin, 2011:476).

Theoretical Framework

For the purpose of this study, Fairclough’s (1995) Model and Analytical Framework shall serve as the model of analysis. Rodgers et al. (2005) cited in Mirzaee & Hamidi (2012) believe that Fairclough’s analytic framework includes three levels of analysis, namely:

- a. The text,
- b. The discursive practice
- c. The socio-cultural practice.

However, each of these discursive events has three proportions:

1. It is a spoken or written text.
2. It is an instance of discourse practice involving the production and interpretation of texts.
3. It is a part of social practice. The analysis of the text consists of the study of the language structures produced in a discursive event-an analysis of the discursive reproduction of the texts.

Method of Data Collection

The methodology adopted for this study is qualitative research. The data were drawn from print media advertisements in the following national newspapers in Nigeria: *Guardian*, *Premium Times* and *Vanguard*. The newspapers were published between January and March 2015 which was the most eventful period of political campaigning for the March 2015 general elections in Nigeria. The data were principally based on campaign speeches delivered at rallies by politicians who were members of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) and All Progressives Congress (APC).

Analytical Procedure

Content analysis is adopted for the analytical procedure of this study in analysing the data. References are made to some of the speeches and write ups made by politicians at different points during the 2015 electioneering processes in Nigeria. Personal pronouns (I, We) which are rhetorical strategies are manifested features of the language of political propaganda.

Discussion

The analysis of this study centres on instances of using personal pronouns (I, We) as rhetorical strategies employed by a speaker to market his identity (and ideology) and that of his party. In politics, the use of personal pronoun (such as I, We) is a basic feature of every political campaign or rally. The personal pronoun "I" is employed greatly to create a favourable image of the speaker while "We" is used to paint a picture of the political party as a united team. These are adopted for effective propaganda in electioneering speeches by politicians to reiterate their points. The use of the first person singular 'I' shows attention to the individual standpoint. For example; the following are extracts from President Muhammadu Buhari's speech at Chatham House, London, UK (Premium Times, February 26, 2015).

“...I, as a retired general and a former head of state, have always known about our soldiers: they are capable, well trained, patriotic, and brave and always ready to do their duty in the service of our country...”

“...Let me assure you that if I am elected president, the world will have no cause to worry about Nigeria as it has had to recently...”

“...and I, Muhammadu Buhari, will always lead from the front and return Nigeria to its leadership role in regional and international efforts to combat terrorism...”

“...I will, if elected, lead the way, with the force of personal example...”

“...On corruption, there will be no confusion as to where I stand...”

“...I am running for President to lead Nigeria to prosperity and not adversity...”

“...I believe the people will choose wisely.”

The first person singular pronoun “I” used by President Muhammad Buhari emphasizes personal involvement and responsibility that is supposed to give credit to him as a leader. This extract concurs with Bello (2013) who cites that the usage of “I” in this kind of speech is clearly to underscore three important issues: speaker’s achievements, humble autobiography, and speaker’s pledges. Karapetjana (2011) investigated the pragmatics of pronominal choice in political interviews and her finding showed that the pronominal form “I” implies a personal level which enables the politician to show his personal involvement and commitment, authority and personal responsibility (Karapetjana, 2011). This correlates with the position of Bello (2013) who argued that pronouns used to index self, like ‘I’ and ‘me’, simply show alignments with positive realities of achievements, humility and personal integrity all as commodities to be used in exchange for political acceptance. This also supports the view of Bramley (2001:259) who said that the pronoun ‘I’ is used to construct a favourable image of the interviewee as an individual and is integrally related to how a politician does ‘being a good politician’. It is also in line with Karapetjana (2011) who argued that most of the politicians who have been familiar with the communication strategies and communication techniques, tend to adopt personal pronouns “I” and “my” for statements regarding loyalty, integrity, commitment, views

and their personal perceptions. Besides describing speaker's beliefs and comments on a personal level as shown in Saj (2012), the most motivating reasons for a politician to use the pronoun "I" in the speech is to be seen as good and responsible, to describe himself or herself in a positive way and highlight personal qualities (Alavidze, 2017). A personal viewpoint demonstrated by a speaker as highlighted by Alavidze (2017) and good personality by Bramley (2001) and Kaewrungruang & Yaoharee (2018) are also identified in President Muhammadu Buhari's pronominal choice. A good personal quality and responsibility constructed by the president can be seen in the extract above.

Meanwhile, when the pronoun 'we' is used, it is utilized to assert the politician and the audience are involved in decision making of the government. For example:

Addressing a press conference, the spokesperson of Goodluck Jonathan's Campaign organisation, Femi Fani-Kayode said;

"...The APC leaders begged for the speaking engagement and we are reliably informed that they paid for it..."

"...we challenge the APC and its leaders to contradict this information..."

"...we are glad that Buhari is now saying the right things but sadly it is too little and too late..."

"...we challenge him to tell Nigerians and the international community anything tangible that he has done in the last 31 years to consolidate democracy in Nigeria..."

("APC Spent N5 billion on Buhari's Chatham's house Speech, PDP campaign alleges", *Premium Times* Nigeria, March 1, 2015).

Adamu Mu'azu ("PDP is my home, Goodluck to propagandists" *Vanguard*, March 10, 2015)

"...While you focus on your propaganda & lies, we have an election to win..." "..."we are in the PDP because we believe it represents Nigeria..."

Femi Fani-Kayode again ('PDP accuses APC of plotting military take-over after polls': *The Guardian*, March 24, 2015):

“...we say in clear terms that the video in question and the intentions of those behind it is reprehensible, irresponsible and it is unacceptable. We wish to take this opportunity to let the APC know that under no circumstance will we allow them to rob us of our legitimate mandate....”

“Secondly, we will not tolerate any act of violence or any attempt to assassinate anybody...”

“As a party, we are committed to the democratic process. We believe that that is the only way forward. We must not allow any political party...”

“...we must not allow a man like Gen. Muhammadu Buhari to set us back. We must always resist their attempt to incite people to violence. We must resist their attempt to prepare for war in the event of their losing and we must resist their attempt to demean and abuse the democratic process and set us back many years in this country.”

These extracts show that the first person plural pronoun, “We”, can be manipulated for political effect and is used to establish a sense of group unity (Alavidze, 2017). This also indicates other concepts in political speech such as togetherness, solidarity, oneness, sharing responsibilities, commitments, and as highlighted by Proctor & Su (2011), Hasan (2013), Ali, Christopher, & Nordin (2017), and Dou (2019). By using the inclusive personal pronoun, “we”, a politician might aim at establishing rapport with the interlocutors, thereby encouraging solidarity and creating interpersonal involvement with the audience (Karapetjana, 2011: 44). Additionally, it is a common political strategy concurred by Nakaggwe (2012), who states that, the pronoun “We” is able to establish a patriotic connection between the country leader and the people. The use of the personal plural pronoun, ‘we’, creates multi-faceted dimensions and groupings all serving different political purposes. Inclusive cases of “We”, as Mühlhäusler and Harré (1990) said, refers to an original source of a group including the speaker, listener and possibly some other people while Allen (2007) states that the pronoun, “We”, is used to induce a general collective response or attitude to a matter. Thus, the use of the first person plural pronoun ‘we’ is used to portray the speaker as part of the audience he is addressing and he is speaking for himself and on behalf of his presidential candidate and or political party. In this regard, personal pronoun, ‘we’, is thought as a lethal weapon for politicians in responding and anticipating both effects and consequences (Bramley, 2001).

Therefore, the use of personal pronouns may tell us about how much responsibility a speaker wants to assume for an idea. The first person singular pronoun, **I**, declares who is responsible while the first person plural pronoun, **we**, makes status of responsibility more unclear. First person plural pronouns in the introduction of a speech aim at an appeal to the sharing of interests between speaker and audience.

Finding

The finding of this study reveals that politicians use the first person pronoun, “I”, to create a good image of themselves while “We” shows how united they (the politicians) are in a political party. These personal pronouns impact the different social relationships between the speaker and the hearers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, politics is an unavoidable aspect of human existence where politicians use language especially personal pronouns (I, We) to change the political thoughts of the electorates. The pronouns are some of the most effective rhetorical strategies used by politicians to persuade audiences by creating multiple identities in political speeches.

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