A Linguistic–Stylistic Investigation of the Language of the Nigerian Political Elite.

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Intention

The study reviews and analyses the language of the Nigerian political elite whilst integrating the business of politics with a view to finding out functional reasons for the features that characterize or permeate this language variety.

Definition

The political elite, we have in mind in this paper, are Nigerians that are educated and saddled with the task or business of political leadership and those occupying various political positions like Presidency or Head of State, Governorship, Minister, Ambassador, Adviser, and other political offices. The term also embraces those who are involved in political practice as well as politicking either civil or military units and are educated.

Since independence, Nigeria has been under the tutelage of two different kinds of political regimes: the civil political administration and the military political regime. Each regime has always produced its own political leaders and elite. However, this study will not segregate or sectionalise the political elite whose language is examined in this paper. But the study specifically concentrates or focuses on the elite that have made significant contributions to the building and development of Nigerian political history across various regimes and governments that we have had so far in this country; military or civilian.

Scope of the study

In view of the large number of people covered by our classification or definition vis-à-vis the size of the country, and considering the shortness and limitation of the space for this study, it thus becomes imperative to restrict the selection of the political elite to notable ones across different regimes and various geo-political zones or regions of Nigeria. Such notables include Chief Obafemi Awolowo (South West), Chief Nnamdi Azikiwe (South East), S.G. Ikoku (South East), Chief Nwawor Orizu (South East), Mr
Tunji Braithwaite (South West), Uncle Bola Ige (South West), Chief Ebenezer Babatope (South West), Tafawa Balewa and Alhaji Shehu Shagari (North East), General Aguiyi Ironsi (South East), General Olusegun Obasanjo (South West), General Badamosi Babangida (North Central) and Major Kaduna Nzeogwu (South East).

**Analytical approach**

To get to the linguistic features of this variety of language, there are various linguistic options or approaches that could be explored. The options include the Text-Linguistic approach as well as the Discourse and General stylistics approaches. In this study however, the procedure of General stylistics analysis is adopted for reasons discussed below:

In the first place stylistics itself is described as a “linguistic study of different styles” (Chapman, 1973; Ayeomoni, 2002; Babajide, 2002; Romano, 2000; William, 2002); it is a product of social situation which implies that there is a common relationship between language use and socio-political situations. *Stylistics*, in this wise, is taken as an integral part of socio-linguistics, in the sense that it studies humans in relation to their society. Furthermore, stylistics could also be described as an academic field which studies certain aspects of language variation. Crystal and Davy (1969) stress that stylistics aim at:

… analyzing language habits with a view to identifying … the General mass of linguistic features common to English as used on every conceivable occasion …(page 10)

The general stylistic method of analysis applied here offers three major benefits to us in this study. Firstly, analysts will be aware of the structural pattern of language permeating a text so as to be able to identify the prominent or foregrounding stylistic features of the text. It also enables analysts to be consciously aware of the kind of social variations that the inherent linguistic features are identified with. Finally, of course, the approach also enables analysis to know the technique of putting these features down systematically in order to reveal the internal patterning of various texts. It is this phenomenon that has equally induced Crystal and
Davy (1969) to argue that the central requirement of stylistics is to provide a single, clear technique of description with which it is possible to cope with any piece of language (13-14). The stylistic approach is, therefore, synchronically applied to the codes available in the English language, currently vis-à-vis this study. This is what Chapman (1973) and Crystal and Davy (1969) refer to as codes and linguistic levels of analysis respectively. According to Crystal and Davy, the levels of analysis are: Phonetics/Graphetics, Phonology/Graphology, Grammar/Lexis and Semantics.

Language and Politics

It is widely conceived that language and politics are interconnected; language is, for instance, considered the vehicular expression of politics. It is the means by which politics or political discourse and ideas are widely disseminated, Mazrui (1975) corroborates this when he writes that:

Language is the most important point of entry into habits of thought of a people. It embodies within itself cumulative association derived from the total experience of its people (page 48).

In the same spirit, Harris avers that “in politics words have a powerful effect” (1979: 58). Furthermore, Harris asserts that George Orwell is interested in demonstrating how “political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable” (1979: 58). In his discussion of Disraeli, Harris opines that he (Disraeli) is of the view that “with words we govern men” (53); and in his own contribution to the issue of language and politics, Harris opines that “language is the means by which political ideas are transmitted to the community,” (56) and reviews Locke’s observation that the strength of language in politicking is enormous (55). In a separate study Ranney (1975) submits that:

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1 Due to the limitation of our resources, it was not always possible to view the original works discussed by Harris. For this reason we rely on Harris's study as a primary text in citing these theoretical claims about the political affect and effect of language as communication and language as politics. We appreciate that the ubiquity and popularity of these claims as regards politics and language (as well as the politics of...
[f]our hostile newspapers were the equivalent of 100,000 enemy troops on the field of battle underlining the extent to which political language is itself a weapon (page 130).

He claims further that every “political authority will lead to justify itself by an appeal to language in its symbolic or realistic sense” (page 130).

It is apparent that according to the various opinions stated above, language is the key factor in political behaviour intended to mobilize the people to support and applaud the officials; it is this relatedness of language to politics that justifies the need for this research—so as to identify and highlight the features inherent in the language of the political elite.

**METHODOLOGY**

The public speeches of the abovementioned politicians in the course of their addressing political issues are extracted as data for this study. The speeches so collected are studied and analysed along the following linguistic parameters:

(a) Nature of the lexical choices and functions.
(b) Forms or types of sentences prominent in the speeches and functions.
(c) Rhetorical devices prominent in the speeches and functions.
(d) Contextual semantic implications of the features.

The identified features are then related to their contexts with the intention of drawing the concomitance or relatedness between the features and the intended messages.

**Analysis**

The linguistic features that are manifested in these speeches are summarized as follows:

**Sentence/Clause Typology**

1. **Simple Declarative Sentences and Clauses:** This future is widely or largely manifested in these data.

You are all aware that the Constituent Assembly has completed its task of fashioning out a new constitution for our country; you are also aware that I have formally expressed the gratitude of the nation and that of the Supreme Military Council to the entire members of the Assembly for the successful completion of their historic assignment…(Ojiako:195)

In the speech above, all the sentences are in Declarative form with all the obligatory sentence elements of (SPC) – Subject, Predicator and complement. For instance, we have:

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
S & P & C \\
You / are all aware / that the Constituent Assembly had completed... \\
\end{array}
\]

Besides, the declarative nature of the sentences, they are mainly of simple typological form. This feature is in tune with the simple and determined attitude of the politicians who are vying for what they want. They often make their messages clear, simple and unambiguous.

In the same vein, if this speech is contrasted with the speech of Shehu Shagari, 1979 President – Elect, at a Lagos Press Conference, after the result of his election was announced, a similar feature is also obtained thus from this speech:

(Data II) As you all know the Federal Electoral Commission yesterday announced to this nation the final results of the Presidential election held on the 11th of August, 1979. Nigerians gave their unmistakable verdict and I was declared the First President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. (Ojiako: 218)

As usual, the clauses in the speech are declarative as shown below with the clause elements labelled as:

\[
\begin{align*}
S &= \text{Subject} \\
A &= \text{Adjunct}
\end{align*}
\]
The clauses analysed above are simple declarative ones. This feature facilitates direct and emphatic pronouncement of the speaker’s intentions and messages. Besides, the clauses are syntactically balanced and complete with all the obligatory sentence elements, as they often present their messages in complete, unambiguous and straightforward forms.

**Metaphoric Feature:**

The speech of Ikoku, who was the secretary–general of the People’s Redemption Party (PRP) in the Second Republic, will be used to illustrate the Metaphoric feature and style. This feature manifested in this speech is shown thus:

(Data III) We in the PRP have no doubt that the entire country will draw a conclusion from this precipitate action that Alhaji Shagari is the favoured baby. (Ojiako: 209)

This speech as it is, is highly figurative. For instance, the phrase *precipitate action* is a metaphor, as is the nominal phrase *favoured baby*. We have this feature here because more often than not, irrespective of the subject of the discussion, the political elite often resort to using figurative language in some political contexts. So, the language of this political class is usually figurative and metaphoric *when* they desire to force their ideas.
through and make them convincing and impressive. For instance, in this speech, the descriptive nominal phrase – “precipitate action” – stands for the declaration of Alhaji Shehu Shagari as President. Then the nominal phrase – “favoured baby” – contextually implies partiality, with the political implication that the election (that has brought Alhaji Shehu Shagari in as the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria) was not free and fair.

Illustrating the metaphoric feature further is Chief Obafemi Awolowo’s speech in *Voice of Courage*: He says:

**Data (IV)** … our experience during the past 6 years has shown … that though we are (ostensibly) free as a nation, yet as a people we remain, tightly shackled in the chains of ignorance, disease, want and native tyranny… (Awolowo: 110)

In the above speech, there is the use of metaphor in the phrase “shackled in the chains of ignorance, disease (and) want and native tyranny.” This metaphor, according to Awonuga (1988), could be linked with Chief Awolowo’s attitude to colonialism, capitalism and socialism. In this connection, the metaphorical chains in the above quotation refer to colonialism and neocolonialism, which should be destroyed by all means.

Similarly, Chief Ebenezer Babatope, a stalwart of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) says in *13 years of Military Rule in Nigeria*:

**Data (V)** We wish to assert that this ordinary meaning is not only abnormal but also outrageous and irrational. (Ojiako:210)

In the above statement, the noun phrase “ordinary meaning” is metaphorical; it is used to express a view or position regarding the subject that is generally considered unacceptable to the speaker’s party and his people.

Then Uncle Bola Ige, in his maiden speech in (1979) as the Governor of the defunct Oyo State states:

**Data (VI)** I promise, once again, that during my own time life will be made more meaningful. I will turn stone to bread; the poor will reap the fruits of their labour. I know that, you my fathers and mothers will pray for me and our state and your prayers shall be heard. (Ige:3)
In the above speech, Uncle Bola Ige is highly metaphoric since most of the nominal items in the speech are also metaphoric and symbolic. He uses for instance, the words: (‘stone’, ‘bread’, ‘fruit of labour’, ‘fathers’, and ‘mothers’ to represent hardship, prosperity, benefits and mentors respectively.)

In the “Sunday Times,” of October 29, 1972, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe on “analysis of the political theory,” a lecture delivered at Lagos University, he says:

It is difficult for human beings to profit from experience. They learn nothing and forget nothing.
Four years before the Military hand-over to Civilian rule, I am bound to speculate whether the prospective civilian rulers of Nigeria have learned lessons from the events of the last six years and have made up their minds to forget and forgive. (Sunday Times Oct. 29, 1972: 5)

Azikwe’s use of language here is not only philosophical but also figurative. For instance, there is a paradox or irony in: “they learn nothing and forget nothing”. This is a clear case of juxtaposition of two opposite statements. Besides this, there are instances of pun and alteration in the speech as showing in Data (VIII) below:

**Data (VIII)**  
... have made up their minds to forget and forgive.

Nnamdi Azikwe as a politician is noted for always being figurative and philosophical in his political speeches. This is done perhaps to sustain the attention of his audience and to unconsciously penetrate their minds.

**Liberal Rhetoric Feature**

The Liberal Rhetoric feature is also obviously found in the speeches of the political elite in this country. A good example of this is provided by Tunji Braithwaite, a Lagos–based lawyer and one time Nigerian Advanced Party (NAP) chieftain in the Second Republic (1979). In one of his campaign speeches, he resorts to the use of liberal rhetoric device or style for the purpose of convincing his listeners. He states in *13 years of Military Rule* that:
Data (IX) We are going to produce food in abundance not only for all Nigerians, but also to export abroad and earn foreign exchange… (Ojiako:205)

This speech is flamboyant, exaggerated and appeals to the collective sense of the people. The use of phrases like “to produce food in abundance” and to “earn foreign exchange,” both attest to this. This liberal and hyperbolic style is adopted in order to woo and lure the people into the folds of the speaker and to cajole them into accepting them and their designed programmes.

In the same exaggerative and liberal tone, the former Acting Civilian President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Dr. Nwafor Oritzu declared in his broadcast to the nation on the 16th of January, 1966 that:

Data (X) … I have to-night been advised by the Council of Ministers that they had come to unanimous decision to voluntarily hand over administration of the country to the Armed Forces of the Republic with immediate effect. All ministers are assured of their personal safety by the new administration … it is my fervent hope that the new administration will ensure the peace and stability of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and that all citizens will give them full co-operation. (Ojiako: 6)

Dr. Oritzu’s speech above is mildly exaggerative and appeals to emotions. Phrases like “have been advised,” “unanimous decision,” “to voluntarily handover” connote that he respects the popular opinion and interest of the people. Then the call for “peace and stability,” equally shows his liberal postures and avowed interest in the promotion of oneness and the peace of the country. This has always been the stylistic trend of the language of the political elite whenever they have an interest and image to protect and programmes to canvas for or to “sell.” But the true situation is that after getting what they want (absolute power), they start singing to another tune, they often get totally intoxicated and lost in power. They become, within a short time, arrogant and dictatorial without respect for the promises made to the people at the onset of their governments. As a result, people soon become dissatisfied and disenchanted, and start looking for an
alternative government. The consequence of this is constant coup and counter-coup often witnessed in this country. This thus explains reasons for constant change of rulership’s baton in this country, to the extent that in less than twenty three years, we have had eight military political reigns (see Ojiako 86:82 for details).

**Coercive Feature**

This feature is mainly found in the military political elite’s speeches whenever they want to force the governed to keep the peace. In order to ensure calmness and total submission and subjugation. On such occasions, they roll out compelling decrees and orders. During this period, the language they use becomes coercive, harsh and compelling in tone. Though this feature to some extent is found in some civilian political elite’s language it is more pronounced among the military elite, for instance, Major Kaduna Nzeogwu, during the revolution of January 1, 1965 declared unequivocally:

**Data (XI)**

This is not a time for long speech-making and so let me acquaint you with the proclamation in the Extra-ordinary orders of the day which the Supreme Council has promulgated…

You are hereby warned that looting, arson, home-sexuality, rape, embezzlement, bribery or corruption, obstruction of the revolution, sabotage, subversion [will be dealt with severely] …

(Ademoyega:88)

And General Obasanjo (1975), reacting to Dimka’s coup said:

**Data (XII)**

… the Supreme Military Council has taken a firm decision that all those found to be guilty will be summarily dealt with in a military way.

… I therefore appeal to all sections of Nigeria not to take the law into their hands. (Ojiako:144)

In the two speeches above, the tone of the language is harsh, forceful, coercive and compelling. For instance, the use of the words like ‘promulgated’, ‘warned’ ‘firm decision’, and ‘summarily dealt with’, directly denote force and coercion.
The use of phrases and words like: ‘acquaint,’ pragmatically denote a desire to inform of an order that should not be queried. Then the use of verb – ‘promulgated’ and the nominal phrase: ‘Extra-ordinary orders’ simply means laws or orders enacted and meant to be obeyed without resistance.

The language of the political elite assumes this style when there is disorder or disruption to the political system. So, to restore order, peace and stability, they change the style of their language from the usual liberal, mild and appealing one to the fiercely harsh and coercive form in order to ensure compliance with the orders and to ensure obedience to the laws and decrees of the land.

**Faceless/Collective Pronominal Reference**

The extracts below (data xii-xv) show the use of the pronominal reference, we, you, our, and so on, in the political speeches. In June 1990, General Ibrahim Babangida defeated a coup which began during the graduation of students at Military Command College in Jaji. Afterwards he stated:

**Data (XIII)** Those who hatched the coup and implemented it were apparently not part of the civil war and do not seem to know the lessons of that war. Had they been part of the experience of the civil war, they would have known that they were inevitably plunging the military into another civil war and with it the society within which they sought to correct their effort (Babangida 1989:2).

On June 25, 1989, at the inauguration of the Armed Forces Constituent Assembly in Abuja, President I.B. Babangida said:

**Data (XIV)** You all know as I do, the military remains the bastion upon which the survival of the Nigerian polity rests…. If we allow the military as an institution to be ruined or humiliated, then the consequences for Nigeria, would indeed be very grave.(Babangida 1990:)

In his broadcast which was christened as The Dodan Declaration, the then Head of State Lt. General Olusegun Obasanjo says:
Our major pre-occupation is the stability of the country, and the mechanics of raising and improving the standards of living for everyone who lives. We cannot afford to build a nation in which a handful of people exclusively own and control the means of production and distribution to the perpetual detriment of the majority … We must all rededicate ourselves to the task of reducing the mental and material hardship brought on fellow Nigerians … (Bulletin on foreign Affairs 1977.vol.7:2)

In data (XIII), the speech opens or begins with the deictic “those”, this makes it difficult to know the identities of the people being referred to. This facelessness is further reinforced and heightened by the use of other pronominals like ‘they’, which equally does not give a clue to the sought identities. This indicates that all the pronominal references in the text, except ‘it’, have faceless or indefinite referents; that is, people of hidden identities. The identities of the actors here are unknown or hidden because of the illegal and shameful act of coup plotting that they were involved in. In Nigeria’s socio-political context, even in the military regime, coup plotting is frowned upon and is considered illegal and sinful; hence it is always hatched in secrecy, with the perpetrators hiding their faces and identities. This then explains why the referents of the references are faceless and unidentified. It also confirms the illegality of a government run by the military. So, here, it is a case of a “thief” chasing a “thief”; a “faceless government” pursuing a “faceless government hijacker”.

Equally in data (XIV), the speech as usual opens with a second person pronominal reference to refer to the generality of the people being addressed. And considering the context in which the speech is made, it is directed to all Nigerians, including even the speaker himself. He thus resorts to the use of, in the second clause, the first person pronominal item ‘I’ in order to prove his intention of being self-inclusive.

He further reinforces this idea of non–exemption of any mature age Nigerian, with the introduction of the third person plural pronominal reference ‘we’ in the second sentence. This reference ‘we’ now anaphorically refers to the two pronominals ‘you’ and ‘I’, all of which refer to the addressees of the speaker, that is the generality of the people called Nigerians. The use of these pronominal references (‘you’ and ‘we’) to stand for, or refer to the generality of Nigerians without exemption, simply suggests that the issue or the art of governance (politics or rulership) concerns and touches everybody without
exemption and its problems should be seen as a general problem requiring everybody’s attention.

We also have other cohesive ties in this data that are significant, these are the ties of substitution and ellipsis. For instance, in this data, we have the subordinating clause ‘as I do’. This clause is a proform used as a substitute for the very ‘know.’ This is done to avoid unnecessary repetition of the same word. Besides, the use of lexical substitution in this speech further reinforces the fact that the military is the only substitute or alternative to bad governance in this country; it is thus seen as the last hope for common Nigerians. So, the lexical substitution here reinforces the substitutional nature of the military to civil rule especially in Nigeria.

Then in data (XV) there is also the frequent use of the first person pronominal reference in the form of “our”, “we”, “ourselves” and “us”, in the speech. The speech, like the preceding ones, opens with a pronominal reference that has no definite anaphoric referent. Then the subsequent pronominal references in the speech are anaphorically related to the first one which opens the speech – ‘our.’ When the speech is placed within the socio-political background in which it is delivered a lot of information or extra-linguistic facts emerge from the contextual (pragmatic) consideration of the speech. It is known from the context of the speech that it is the Nigerian Head of State that is addressing all Nigerians, therefore, exophorically all the pronominal references in the speech refer to Nigerians.

**Lexical Borrowings and Allusions**

The feature of lexical borrowings and allusions is also preponderant among the political elite. In this respect, it is discovered that words are taken from various sources and fields of human endeavours like Geography, Economics, Politics, Judiciary, Sociology and so on. This is done in order to produce a vivid picture of the situation and thus the message becomes more clearly understood. So, in the cause of trying to achieve this aim, allusions to relevant fields or units of the society are resorted to. For instance, Major Nzeogwu in 1966 in his speech, alludes to the geographical features of Nigeria. He says:
Data (XVIII) … I leave you with a message of good wishes and ask for your support at all times, so that our land, watered by the Niger and Benue between sandy waters and Gulf of Guinea washed in salt by the Mighty Atlantic, shall not detract Nigerians from gaining sway in any great aspect of international endeavour. (Ademoyega:88)

In the speech above, the following words and phrases are widely used; Land, watered, Niger, Benue, sandy waters, gulf of Guinea, and Mighty Atlantic, these are geographical terms normally found in the lexical register of Geography. In the context of usage here, they perform demarcating functions as they identify and specify the geographical terrain affected and covered by the speech, as well as the geographical terrain of those subjects being addressed. Besides, the speech is also meant to adorn and shower praises on the creator for the natural blessings and gifts bestowed on this country, as a way of exposing the greatness of the country! This is however, also meant to woo the populace and lure them into accepting him as the new ruler, through flattery.

General Aguiyi Ironsi states further in data (XIX) that:

Data (XIX)  The National Military Government further decrees:

a) That there shall be appointment a Military Governor of the Regions shall continue to hold their appointments…

b) That all holders of appointments in the civil service of the Regions shall continue to hold their appointments…

c) That all Local Government Police Forces and Native Authority Police Forces shall be placed under the overall command of the Inspector-General.

The three sentences (a-c) above, which are extracted from the January 17, 1966 speech are framed in accordance with the legal variety of language:

i. Introducing or beginning the sentences with the subordinating conjunction, ‘that.’

ii. The use of the non – obligatory future present tense auxiliary ‘shall’ in the place of “must” to indicate compulsion.

iii. The sentences are lengthy with a close use of punctuation marks.
The intention of these military politicians here is to bring legality and sanity into their illegal act and government. So language becomes a way of legalizing their illegal government so as to gain acceptance and popularity.

Conclusion

It is obvious from the analysis of the political speeches given in this paper, that the language of the political elite in Nigeria, more often than not, exhibits some unique language features. In addition, it is generally felt, as it has already been established in this paper, that language and politics are intertwined and inseparable. This relationship between language and politics is usually exploited by, and in order to bring advantage to, the political class which seeks to seize power and to consolidate it. In order to acquire and consolidate power, the political elite use language in various manipulative kinds or forms to achieve their political intentions and goals. Thus the language of politics in Nigeria is often found (from the data used for this study) to possess a preponderant use of simple declarative sentence typology, which is balanced and complete in components. This simple structural sentence form usually facilitates easy flow and conveyance of the speakers’ intentions and messages.

In other contexts these politicians often resort to using figurative or metaphoric language. They adopt this style when they intend to convey their intentions or messages convincingly so that the intention projected leaves a lasting impression on their listeners. It is also a language strategy used to arouse the feelings and collective excitement and sentiments of the followers, so as also to sustain their support, loyalty and followership.

In addition, the political elite often resort to using liberal and exaggerative rhetoric, whose tone is soft, mild, appealing and inviting. This is often the strategy adopted when they are campaigning or scrambling for power. This strategy is also used when they are trying to ‘sell’ their programmes and entrench themselves in office.

In addition, coercion is also part of the elements of this variety of language. This strategy is normally used to compel people to submission and to secure their obedience and compliance to laws and orders of the land. This is more or less a negative way of securing the loyalty and cooperation of the governed as well as their mandate – it is at
least coercive. This language strategy is mainly used during periods of crises, disruption, anarchy, or when there is a total breakdown of law and order. However, it is of note that this strategy is more popular with the military political elite than their civilian counterparts.

Finally, the language style or strategy adopted within a particular socio-political setting depends on a number of variables such as subject matter, nature and form of setting, participants or audience and of course, the language prowess, or communicative skill, of the speaker.

References


Source of Data


