

# **Manipulation in Political Language: A Semantic Analysis of The Speeches of Two Nigerian Presidents**

*By*

**Inyang Udofot.**

*Department of English, University of Uyo  
and*

**Eventus Edem**

*Department of English, Akwa Ibom State University Oblokpa Campus*

## **Abstract**

*This paper focuses on Gen Abdulsalami Abubakar and President Mohammadu Buhari's political speeches Excerpts were drawn from Abubakar's inaugural and farewell speeches on July 20, 1998 and May 28, 1999 respectively. Also, Buhari's inaugural speech on May 29, 2015 and his return from medical vacation address to the Nation on 21 August, 2017 are examined in this paper. The paper applies the Speech Act approach in carrying out the analysis of the speeches to showcase how politicians and other leaders employ manipulative skills using English Language as a means of communicating their political intent to their audiences listeners to achieve pre-determined objectives*

## **Introduction**

Political language may be explained as the peculiar language used in politics. According to George Orwell, political language is designed to make lies sound truthful, respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind. Politics has to do with power: the power to make decisions, to control resources, to control people's behavior and their values. Political language therefore has certain features. It involves presupposition, implicature, metaphor, euphemism, structural parallelism and pronouns. ("Speech act"-Wikipedia). The importance of language as medium for communicating political messages cannot be underrated. Language is considered a powerful tool for everyday communication (McDougall, 1975). By implication, language is the vibrant part in all spheres of life endeavours. It is essential to building relationships, expressing thoughts, ideas or a need and responses provided as feedback, which may be positive or negative. Edem (2005) posits that language is indeed a force to be reckoned with in persuasive communication and invariably in social mobilization, especially in a democratic setting. The source further observes that since most of our leaders tend to use language for mass mobilization, and of course, in the larger implications which are examined in this work, it is very pertinent to note that a good speech event is as a result of a careful planning by the public speaker who pays particular attention to details such as: sources, objectives, contents and import or materials meant for dissemination to the public (Edem, 2005: 204). The interdisciplinary, multifaceted and extraordinary role of language situates it as indispensable in human existence and relationship.

Manipulation according to van Dijk (2006) as cited in Emeka-Nwobia, N. (2016:8) not only involves power, but precisely, abuse of power, that is subjugation or domination. Manipulation can imply the exercise of a form of illegitimate influence over another by means of discourse, where manipulators make others believe or do things that are in the interest of the manipulator and against the best interest of the manipulated (Nzozu, 2015, Baba and

Elegba, 2016). It is in view of the foregoing that pragmatic theory was chosen as a suitable approach in handling the notion of manipulation in political language because it provides an incisive, clearer understanding and interpretations particularly in a semantic analysis of political speeches. In this case, both the bearer (Nigerians) and the speakers (Presidents) have shared common background knowledge about the precarious socio-economic problems facing the nation supposedly caused by inept leadership. In this paper, the semantic implications of the use of politically manipulated language as an instrument of mind control by notable politicians in Nigeria are examined.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper anchors on the pragmatic theory as an approach because of the new dimensions it introduces to the interpretation of meaning. Pragmatics has been defined in linguistics as language in use and the contexts in which it is used. It is preoccupied with such matters as deixis, taking of turns in conversation, text organization, presupposition, use of pronouns, and implicature. Pragmatics encompasses Speech Act theory and other language behavior in philosophy, sociology and linguistics.

Speech act theory is a theory of language that says that our utterances (the things we say) are not just about words and their dictionary definitions. Our utterances can accomplish things and bring about various actions. J.L. Austin and John R. Searle are the two names often associated the speech act theory. In fact, Austin's 1962 book was about the *performative* potential of language-it's called *How to Do Things with Words*. On his part, Searle refined and tweaked what Austin posited. But there's disagreement among linguists and philosophers about how closely aligned the two men's theories are. Speech acts are nothing more than the actions that occur, thanks to language. For example, we use language to compliment and persuade, to beg or scold, and to ask for and give information. In other words, we do things with language, even though those things may not be physical actions like swimming, smiling, or taking an elevator. Commands, greetings, and assessments are all speech acts. A promise is a speech act. So is an insult.

There is disagreement over how many types of speech acts there are and how to label them. The names for those acts change, too, based on which source you are reading. Still, there are a few types that come up repeatedly in the literature. These are:

1. Representatives which represent a state of things. These are assertions, announcements, statements, claims, denials, disclosures, etc. An example sentence is *I like rice*
2. Commissives, as the name suggests, commit a speaker to do something. These are promises, pledges, vows, guarantees, and so on. The utterance: *I'll visit you tomorrow is a commissive*.
3. Directives are designed to get the listener to act in some way. These are admonishments, questions, dismissals, excuses, instructions, orders, requests, warnings, etc. An example is: *I warn you not to eat that entire bowl of corned flakes!*
4. Expressive let speakers convey their attitude or psychological state. These are apologies, condolences, congratulations, greetings, thanks, and so on. *I'm sorry to hear about your failure in the interview is an expressive*.

Manipulative languages are directives which are supposed to get the listeners to act in a particular way which is the kind of language that politicians use. The speech act theory

maintains that every speech has three acts, the locution, the illocution and the perlocution, while the illocution is the intention of the speaker, the locution is the utterance statement that is made and the perlocution is effect of the utterance such as persuasion: the perlocutionary effect of political speech is mostly persuasion/manipulation.

## **A Speech Act Analysis**

### **(1) Focus on Nigeria's Unity**

Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar recalled the tragic events which led to the death of notable Nigerian leaders which included Gen. Sani Abacha and Chief M.K.O Abiola describing it as unfortunate events in our nation's history

We must move forward and lay the foundation of good governance and democracy. This administration remains as committed as ever to this objective and will remain unwavering in maintaining the momentum towards its realization. (Extract from Abubakar July 20, 1998). With the use of the pronoun 'we' Abubakar's locution has the illocutionary force of identifying with the people by seeing himself as one of them. The people are therefore persuaded that he is one of them and he has their interest at heart. His perlocutionary force is therefore exemplified as he tries to sway his audience towards seeing him as one of them and as one who will protect their interest.

Abubakar spoke of his resolve to bring the government closer to the people and involve them in decision making despite being a military leader. His intention/ illocutionary force here is to make the people feel that they are carried along and added to the use of the inclusory pronouns we, and 'our' he possibly succeeds in manipulate the people and making them feel carried along with the use of phrases like 'endeavoured to consult widely, the desire and opinion of different groups, "we need to involve the people in our decision making'. These phrases carry the illocutionary force of persuading the people that they are carried along as shown thus: Since then we have endeavored to consult widely to ascertain the thinking, the desire and opinion of different groups of our population. In the absence of real democracy or credible democratic structures, this was the best we could do to involve the people in our decision making process (Extract from Abubakar, July 20,1998). Gen. Abubakar presents himself as a listening leader, who takes contributions from the masses as very important in his government when he said:

It is quite clear *from the efforts we have made to reach out to the people* that Nigerians want nothing less than true democracy in a united and peaceful country. It is clear that *Nigerians want a country where justice and equity are no mere slogans* but principles put into timely and indiscriminate practice (Extract from Abubakar, July 20, 1998).

This most Nigerians was indeed a welcome development. It shows commitment on the part of the leadership to right the wrongs of the past. The people were then persuaded to see him as their political messiah. Similarly, President Mohammad Buhari on his return to Nigeria after 104 days medical vacation in Britain in his address to the Nation on 21" August, 2019 spoke glowingly about his belief and faith in the "unity and oneness of the country, Nigeria" and that" the country's unity is non-negotiable". Buhari commended religious leaders and Nigerians at home and in the diaspora for their prayers which had helped me (him) to recover

quickly to continue with the great task which Nigerian gave me the mandate to serve (do). (Extract from Buhari, August 21, 2017).

This is a manipulative strategy by President Buhari so use God and his sudden recovery from his strange ailment as a sign of acceptance by the Creator for him to continue to provide leadership so the nation even in the wake of protests and renewed tension from a section of the country following his prolonged medical vacation abroad. He purposely chose words and phrases that have the perlocutionary force of compelling or whipping up emotional response such as the country's unity is non-negotiable" and "...Nigerians gave me the mandate to serve". The people are left with no choice than to allow themselves to be persuaded to accept him. Prominent Nigerians also reacted to President Buhari's medical vacation address. According to a civil rights activist, Israel Ekam,

Nigeria's unity can be negotiated since we are a people of diverse nature. The life of every Nigerian is very important and must be safeguarded by your administration. But we plead that you listen to the cry of responsible elements. Power belongs to the people and that's why national conferences are called so as to find a way to settling grievances and the solution lies on the 2014 national discourse report. Mr. President, regardless of your personal views, National Consensus is that Nigeria should be re-discussed. (Ekam, I. Facebook wall Post, August, 2017).

### **Portrayal of Self as a Messiah**

Gen. Abubakar in his last address to Nigerians recalled how the country was in the depth of despair, divisions and frightening uncertainty about the direction prior to their assuming power in 1998. Thus, from the moment of its inception, this administration was faced with immediate, clear and grave challenges. We accepted the challenge, we accepted our even though we recognized that time, resources and profound distrust were major constraints. (Extract from Abubakar, May 28, 1999).

This was a further proof of his determination to render selfless service to Nigerians irrespective of the difficulties he inherited. His identification with the masses through the pronoun 'we' again achieves his illocutionary effect of making the people see him as a selfless leader who was ready to deliver them from grave challenges' irrespective of lack of time, resources and profound distrust'. His diction deliberately suggests dreadful situations from which he was patriotically bound to ensure redress.

Shortly after, President Mohammadu Buhari took over from President Jonathan, he too towed the same line of his predecessor as he (Buhari) cut a picture of being on a messianic mission, by promising to fight corruption that had become endemic in the country and insecurity caused by Boko Haram, to a stand-still. His inaugural speech "I belong to nobody" was another manipulative device, a locution with a specific illocutionary force which was aimed at drawing attention to his image as a nationalist with the implicature that every segment of the country will be given equal opportunities to triumph in "a new era which is a clear departure from the past".

Edem (2005:204) observes that manipulation or use of propaganda or rhetoric by public office seekers in Nigeria apart from creating interest and expectancy in the minds of the audience also engenders the envisaged mutual relationship and rapport that had existed between the speaker and his audience. According to this source, if such association is sustained,

government would have little or no need for persuasion or propaganda to convince the public about the genuineness of its intentions. This argument is shared by Babs and Elegha 2016. Aduradola and Ojukwu 2013, Emeka-Nwobia 2016 and Esajere 2015).

### **Alignment with the Masses**

When Gen. Abubakar recounted a number of promises he made to Nigerians and how he kept the faith with most of them with his famous "we did so", he attempted to show his affinity or alignment with the masses as shown below

We promised to drop all politically related charges against our countrymen on self-exile. We did so. We urged them to return home... and they did so, we promised to protect freedom of speech. We did so. We sought to expand the boundaries and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms; of administration; also we fully kept our words on this. (Excerpt from Abubakar, May 28, 1999).

This was how the military ruler kept faith with the people and justified his stay in office. The speech further presents Gen. Abubakar, a former Head of State, as a listening leader and a promise keeper. He does this not only through the use of the pronoun 'we' but also through the use of parallel structures and the use of commissives, a special speech act which commits a person to do something, as in "we promised... we did so' and 'we urged them to -- and they did so.

Buhari on his part is known for his high principled stand on issues. He also aligned with the masses when he said, "Nigeria's unity is settled and non-negotiable. We shall not allow elements to start trouble and when things get bad they run away and saddle others with the responsibility of bringing back order, if necessary with their blood" By referring to "if necessary with their blood", President Buhari was only referring Nigerians to the last civil war during which many Nigerians lost their lives to keep the country as one indivisible and indissoluble entity. And when he said Nigeria's unity is settled and non- negotiable, Buhari is over-ruling any further discussion on the matter. His illocutionary force is to blackmail Nigerians into believing that with him in power there is a certainty of an and they have no choice but to believe him, his manipulatory tactics notwithstanding. Most Nigerian leaders (Military or Civilian) want the people to see them as symbols of hope and a new beginning in the country adding that any decisive action taken by them is in the best interest of the masses.

### **Extolling Good Virtues**

Just like most political gladiators in Nigeria, the former Head of State, Gen. Abubakar in his speeches extolled his good virtues by skillful deployment of linguistic properties. He reminded the people that some critics never gave his administration any chance. In his words, "even though the time has been short, we have indeed, come a long way. The event that we are about to celebrate represents for us profound achievements. When others doubted us, we knew we would come through together as Nigerians diverse but one, united and sharing the vision".

Here Gen. Abubakar conducts a self-appraisal of his regime and gives himself, the government that he heads and indeed Nigerians a pass for the successes recorded. Again,

his constant use of the personal pronoun "we" 35 times in his valedictory address to Nigerians as against the use of "I" only 13 times in the said speech was perhaps intended to demonstrate his style of leadership which was largely consultative, that he didn't take personal decisions and was not ready to also earn personal glories but to jointly share successes and strides. This personal attribute earned the military government wider applause from within and outside the country.

Buhari also shares similar views. According to him, he like most Nigerians has kept faith with the country despite our current travails. "Nigerians are robust and lively in discussing their affairs, but I was distressed to notice that some of the comments, especially in the social media have crossed our national red lines by daring to question our collective existence as a nation. Buhari kept no one in doubt about his firm belief in one Nigeria despite suspicions to the contrary is a step too far. With that narrative drawn from his medical vacation speech, President Buhari tried to sway public opinion to his favour at a time his government's public rating was at its lowest ebb, owing to hardship faced by the people and his long absence from the country on health grounds.

### **Alignment with the Suffering Majority of the Country**

Gen. Abubakar took important decisions to alleviate the suffering majority of Nigerians when he decided to tinker with the salaries and wages policy to bring medium and long term relief to workers. "Despite the regrettable reaction that the implementation of the policy generated, the administration stands by its decision to review salaries and wages upward". Still on economic front, "we did our best to turn around the oil industry as the engine of the development". The administration drew attention to the problem of long queues and the pains suffered by Nigerians at petrol stations". By describing the queues as "embarrassing" and also commending Nigerians for their "patience" in the face of these hardships demonstrate government's avowed commitment towards bringing succor to Nigerians. And when the military junta finally declared: *"not only have the queues shortened considerably, it is gladdening to note that all the four refineries in the country have resumed production"*, was indeed a sigh of relief to a people who had endured long sufferings and hardships orchestrated by poor leadership. Gen. Abubakar carefully chose words and phrases that connect and endear him psychologically with his audience. He informed them that:

On the socio-political and economic fronts, we have endeavored to do our best given the enormous constraint which we faced. Never in the history of this nation was an administration expected to do so much in so short a period. Nevertheless, with your unflinching support and cooperation we are satisfied that we have made our contributions, however modest in moving our country forward (Extract from Abubakar, May 28, 1999).

This statement depicts a humble leader whose diplomatic niceties could tempt even his hardest critics to give the army general a human face and thereby earned him public support which is presumably his hidden intention. The military ruler used these rhetorical strategies or devices such as "we have remained firm and resolute in our commitment to the peace, security and stability of our sub-region". Many other examples show the leader's common affinity and commonality with the masses and the down trodden vis-a-vis reassure them that he

understands their plights and sufferings. He also challenged Nigerians to rise up to the values of courage, honor which formed the bedrock of the Nigerian nation

My fellow Nigerians today we are at the dawn of an exciting era. We must break once and for all the cycle of instability and mistrust that have wrecked political life since independence. (Extract from Abubakar, May 28, 1999).

That phrase instills in the minds of the audience a sense of national rebirth or consciousness, a new era which everyone should embrace for the country to move forward. President Buhari on the other hand presents himself as not only a man that is ready to fight corruption in the country but also wants Nigerians to see him as a poor man, who could not even have enough money to purchase his party's presidential nomination forms. And while declaring his assets, he said he had only two homes in Daura, Katsina State, and Abuja, five farmlands and about 200 cows which lend credence to his modest/anti-corruption posturing and a no-nonsense ex-military leader. Buhari was also quoted as saying:

I live on borrowing, I borrowed from the banks to build the house in Daura and the one in Abuja and Kano, the bank then was Barclays, now Union Bank-Buhari. (The Sun Exclusive Interview, December 24, 2012).

In his inaugural speech, he called on 'patriotic Nigerians' to team up with him. But recent events widely reported in the social media have shown that Buhari was not a 'poor man' after all as he tried to manipulate gullible Nigerians to believe, as seven (7) of his children Fatima, Nana-Hadiza, Safinatu Mohammadu, Halima, Jusuf, Zahra and Amina are all enrolled in Universities in the United Kingdom (cf. Idongesit Uyo's Facebook Wall, September 15, 2017). The alignment with the poor masses carries the illocutionary force which may have directly or indirectly endeared Buhari to the people in his quest to be elected as President in 2015.

### **Restoration of Confidence in Government**

Nigeria has been faced with many years of military rule, interim government and various forms of political instability occasioned by forceful usurpation of power by the military. The people had lost faith in the government. Many Nigerian leaders normally cry out soliciting for the cooperation of the people, promising that their government would bring about the desired changes in the polity or "herald a new beginning". Gen. Abubakar and President Buhari knew this too and made conscious efforts to attract massive support to their administrations.

*"I am very much aware of the widespread cynicism and total lack of confidence in government arising from the bad faith, deceit and evil actions of recent administrations".* President Buhari went further to state how he was going to restore the people's confidence in the government. He noted that he was going to use men and women of proven integrity. An analogy is drawn from the biblical narrative when King Nebuchadnezzar deployed some Hebrew men of proven integrity in the form of Daniel, Shedrach, Meshach and Abednego. I will need good men and women of proven integrity and record of good performance to help me in my cabinet. (Extract from Buhari, May 29, 2015).

The military ruler Gen Abubakar sees himself as a symbol of democratic era. In introducing democracy to Nigerians, he said

There is nothing wrong in having differences it is how we manage the difference that is important. Democracy is about the resolution of the differences that exist in the society, Democracy is about working for the people and respecting their will and the rights of others. (Extract from Abubakar, May 25, 1999).

The military ruler apart from commending the members of the armed forces and the political for their support to his transition programme and government, he also acknowledges the huge support he received from the masses. I wish to pay special tribute to you the ordinary and women who gave your unflinching support and enable us to achieve the little that has de it possible to turn around the fortunes of our nation. (Extract from Abubakar, May 28, 1999) When the military ruler used the word "little" to describe his achievements he was being economical with the reality on ground and he used that phrase 'to achieve the little Nigerians thereby gaining their trust and confidence which were very rare attributes at the time. This was yet another illocutionary force deployed by the speaker to garner more support and goodwill from unsuspecting Nigerians.

### **Public Reconciliation**

I am determined to stretch my hand of fellowship to all Nigerians regardless of socio-political or religious leanings". This catch phrase runs through almost all the inaugural speeches of the two Nigerian leaders studied in this work. It is a good manipulative strategy aimed at attracting support to the new government even from its critics and perceived opposition forces that the new government deserves the support and cooperation from all and sundry. But Gen. Abdulsalam Abubakar was more apt in his last words to Nigerians when in his handing over speech he said:

While I say good-bye to, my fellow Nigerians, I wish you the best and I wish our country continued peace and prosperity. Our best days are yet to come. Thank you and God bless Nigeria. (Extract from Abubakar, May 28, 1999).

The phrase "*our best days are yet to come*" used by Gen. Abubakar is however pregnant with meanings. Apart from signaling a new era driven by all democratic tenets, he foresees a bigger picture for Nigeria in all facets of national life. For instance, that the new democratic government to be led by President Olusegun Obasanjo shall engender peace, check all forms of mistrust in the polity, bring about rapid growth in the socio-economic arena, improve basic infrastructures as well as facilitate national rebirth and integration amongst others.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of the speeches above are some of the instances whereby most Nigerian leaders manipulate political language to achieve desired impact, score cheap political points and also endear themselves to their unsuspecting audience. The use of the Speech Act approach has enabled a good evaluation of the hidden intentions in the utterances of the two Nigerian leaders studied in this work. Nigerians are not under any obligation to accept every political promise made by their leaders, military or civilian in view of current realities. Language is



indeed a force to be reckoned with in persuasive communication or as an instrument for manipulation and mind control by politicians especially in a nascent democracy such as Nigeria's. It is therefore observed that linguistic manipulation can be considered also as an influential instrument of political rhetoric because political discourse is primarily focused on persuading people to take specified political actions or to make crucial political decisions. It has been shown in this analysis that each of the Nigerian leaders has the tendency to portray themselves as messiahs who have the interest of the people at heart. They, through the application of Speech Act Theory, have been able to impose their hidden intention anchored on a perlocutionary force thereby making the people to accept their intentions. They have done this by identifying with the masses via the use of the inclusory pronouns 'we' and 'our' in their attempts at presenting themselves as messiahs thereby pretending to carry the people along.

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