

THE IMPACT OF SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXTS ON POLITICAL DISCOURSE: A READING OF SELECTED SPEECHES OF NNAMDI KANU AND SUNDAY IGBOHO

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Abstract

This study examines selected speeches by Nnamdi Kanu and Sunday Igboho, focusing on how socio-historical contexts influence their rhetorical and discursive strategies. The aim is to reveal how the socio-historical challenges faced by Kanu, who represents the Igbo ethnic group, and Igboho, who represents the Yoruba ethnic group, shape their communicative approaches. The study adopts a qualitative research method, utilizing descriptive and textual analysis to examine selected speeches of the activists. It considers not only how historical narratives influence their choice of language, but also how such narratives shape the audience's perception. A purposive sampling technique was employed for data collection. Using Wodak's model of Critical Discourse Analysis as the theoretical framework, the findings reveal that historical memories significantly influence contemporary political discourse in Nigeria. The study further shows that emotive language and historical references enable the activists to connect with their audience, who readily accept their ideologies. The study concludes that socio-historical contexts play a crucial role in both the activists' linguistic choices and the audience's engagement. It therefore recommends that Nigerian activists should focus their speeches on educating the public. Historical and sociopolitical narratives should be positively framed to inform and raise awareness, rather than being used to incite negative sentiments such as hatred toward other ethnic groups or the government, which may lead to ethnic conflict.

Key words: activists, political discourse, ethnicity, sociopolitical contexts, audience perception

Introduction

Political speeches usually draw on historical events or cultural narratives. Historical discourse plays an important role in shaping political discourse by influencing how sociopolitical issues are not only framed but communicated in the society. The complex sociohistorical landscape in Nigeria has given rise to various political discourses, often shaped by ethnicism. Historical narratives shape how current political events are understood. They explain avenues through which past events are constructed and presented sometimes through framing. They are frameworks through which communities understand their history thereby forming collective identities and interpreting a political discourse. On the other hand, socio-political narratives refer to the relationship between social events and political tussles. Both historical and socio-political narratives play crucial role in understanding the intricacies of social systems. (Helmond and van der Vlist 2019).

The language used by Nnamdi Kanu and Sunday Igboho is highly influenced by the historical contexts of their communities; highlighting the themes of economic exclusion and marginalization as well as the need to gain cultural identity. The sociohistorical contexts in which they operate are marked by Nigeria's colonial and post-colonial challenges and prevalent ethnic tensions highly influence their messages as well as the emotional connection they create with their audience.

The Concept of Discourse and Discourse Analysis

Discourse is a process of social interactions that exist between texts, changes and new forms in the texts. Discourse also involves new systems of distributing texts. Hidalgo (2011:184) posits that discourse can be traced to Michel Foucault who sees discourses as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak". The author equally adds that discourse can be activities participants engage in as well as the power produced and reproduced through them.

In addition, Widdowson views discourse to be a pragmatic process of meaning negotiation with text as its product. (Hidalgo 2011). It is a way of finding meaning using text. Citing van Dijk, Hidalgo equally holds that discourse should be seen at the syntactic, semantic, stylistic, and rhetorical levels, interlocutor's processes of production, reception and understanding. He also understands social aspect of discourse to mean a sequence of contextualized, controlled and purposeful acts established in society. He goes on to name these acts to include a form of social action taking place in a context. It comprises physical setting, temporal setting as well as participants. By implication, Van Dijk suggests linguistic, cognitive and socio-cultural definitions.

Discourse analysis (DA), therefore, is the study of talk and texts (Taylor and Yates in Agbedo 2003). It is a set of methods and theories for investigating language in use and language in social contexts. It incorporates the investigation of both verbal and written conversation, in addition to other forms of communication in order to understand its social and linguistic meanings as well as implications. Discourse analysis can be regarded as the organization of language above the sentence level. It studies the relationship between language and the contexts in which it is used. It captures what language is used for in social and cultural contexts respectively (Kamalu and Osisannwo 2015).

Theoretical Framework

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is viewed as an approach that consists of different perspectives and methods for studying the relationship between language and social context. It is particularly interested in power abuse, breaches of laws, rules and principles of democracy, equality and justice by those who wield power. Critical analysis aims to produce interpretation as well as explanations of aspects of social life which identify the causes of social wrongs and come up with knowledge which could yield to righting or mitigating them (General Introduction Fairclough 2010).

Wodak's historical approach attempts to describe those areas where language and other semiotic practices are used by people in power to maintain domination (Hidalgo 2011). Hidalgo also recounts that initially the approach was concerned with prejudiced utterances in anti-semitic discourse but recently, it has the inclusion of the discursive construction of national sameness and the social exclusion of out groups through the discourses of difference. It also admits the reconstruction of the past through sanitized narratives. In other words, historical information as well as knowledge of what had happened before are inevitable in the understanding of any discourse. Her primary focus is that history and context of discourse are central to the analysis and interpretation of discourse. Discourse, she said, is always historical and so can connect both synchronically and diachronically with both past and present circumstances as reflected in language use. Discourse – Historical approach is described in four layers as given by Wodak and Meyer (2009): (i) the linguistic co-text (ii) the intertextual and interdiscursive level (iii) the extra linguistic level and (iv) the socio-political and historical level.

Political Discourse and Ideology

Political discourse comprises political talks that relate to political views. Sharaduma (2015) concurs that political discourse is a term that houses various political talks made at different political forums such as political campaign rallies, party manifestoes, inaugural speeches and so on. Again, Indra (2009) comments that political discourse is mainly centered on persuading people to take specified political actions or to make important political decisions. Sometimes, this persuasion is usually achieved through manipulation of language. This is strongly attested by Chilton in the work of Rozina Gunta and Karapetjana (2009:3). Their words:

The strategy that one group of people take to make the other group of people do what it intends to be done, is known as linguistic strategy. It involves manipulative application of the language. Therefore, linguistic manipulation is the conscious use of language in a devious way to control the others ... Linguistic manipulation is based on the use of indirect speech acts, which are focused on pre locutionary effects of what is said.

Political discourse fulfils various functions as a result of political activities. Citing Woods, Ike-Nwofor (2015:28) states some of the functions performed by political discourse which include "to protest, intimidate, legitimize, persuade the people or lead them to a particular view of political reality". Woods compares the political discourse with discourse of advertising which is created to lead its audience towards a particular thought, belief and actions. He finally asserts that political discourse relies heavily on devices usually used in advertising discourse in the areas of sound, syntax, words which are primary elements in planning political messages to achieve desired effect. Any political discourse can be highly ideological. By implication, no political discourse is free from some kind of covert ideas (Jawad, EL Bakri 2012). Ideology forms a view on the world, reality as well as other problems of common interest to social communities. In the words of van Dijk, "ideologies are basic beliefs shared by the members of groups" (no page). In a similar manner, Eagleton (1991) submits that "ideology is a body of ideas or belief systems socially shared by a particular social group, class or society as well as ideas which help to legitimize such a dominant political power" (qtd in Ike-Nwofor 2015:18). Again, citing Luke 2008) Ike-Nwofor further states that ideologies consist of shared social representations that define the social identity of a group.

Ethnolinguistic Language and Identity

"Every language carries a distinct and weighty ethnic baggage" (Fishman et al in Obeng and Adejibija (1999:253). The examination of language practices such as language choice or the use of the ethnic labels such as Greek helps to describe how language users perceive ethnic membership, how they preserve ethnic group boundaries and finally exclude those who do not belong to the group. In a similar vein, the study about language practices enables us to investigate how ethnic boundaries may not be given at once but with negotiation and resistance (Lytra 2016).

Citing Pavlento and Blackledge, Lytra (2016) explicitly admits that language may not be the only mark of identity but also point of resistance, solidarity, empowerment and discrimination. In a clearer view Lytra (2016:23) clearly admits:

The examination of the relationship between language and ethnic identity demonstrates how language use is intrinsically linked to societal and individual beliefs and language (influenced by political and historical conditions); to asymmetrical relations of power, and language users' own views of how they see themselves and each other ... The focus on language and ethnic identity illuminates processes of cultural change and continuity ..., it highlights not only how individuals and groups construct group membership through language practices, but also how group membership has changed or stayed the same and the role of language practices in these processes.

Tracing from history, the beginning of language as a major marker of group identity is closely related with the rise of the ideology of nationalism in the late 18th and 19th centuries especially in Sub-saharan Africa. There exists a strong emotional link between language and ethnicity. Language and ethnic sameness provides a bond of acceptance and reason for togetherness, solidarity, identity, separatedness and brotherhood. In fact, language and ethnic identity relationships provides insights into the relations that exit between language and culture (Obeng and Adebija 1999). No wonder it is not uncommon to hear a Nigerian or Ghanaian address somebody as my brother just on the ground that they share the same language and ethnic group background. In addition, there is a stronger feeling of solidarity when a member (s) of the same group meet one another in diaspora.

Before colonial rule, Africans lived predominantly in distinct ethnic and linguistic groups. Then, the many ethnic groups lived as autonomous, each ethnic group had its own government, its unique language and cultural values, sometimes with members speaking the same language which served as a tool for self-manifestation and intra ethnic communication. Consequently, each African language, thus, posed a binding force that bound families, lineages, clans and all the ethnic group. Thus, linguistic and ethnicity not only heightened the group but also consolidated their walls against invasion (Obeng and Adagbija 1999). It is not odd, therefore, to say that speakers of the same language within the same ethnic group express the feeling of solidarity. Hence, they stuck together in challenging periods of strife and even in jubilation. However, the authors did not hesitate to remind us that language was not the only means that fostered unity.

In fact, in Sub-Sahara Africa and specifically in Nigeria, it was and still and will be almost impossible to discuss language without ethnicity. They usually go toward the same direction. Coupled with the multiplicity of ethnic groups and languages that are prevalent in the country, the membership of one to any ethnic group becomes a tie of togetherness and solidarity. No wonder Nnamdi Kanu of Igbo ethnic group and Sunday Igboho of Yoruba ethnic origin attract much solidarity and attention from their audience. This is partly because they share identical language and ethnic groups. People who are their major audience, who doubles as the members of their ethnic groups, pay allegiance to them despite their huge attack from the federal government. They strongly uphold and believe in the spirit of oneness in all circumstances.

Nevertheless, ethnolinguistic and sociopolitical situation which arose from sharing of language did not go without any disadvantage. Most times, the disadvantage was simply the opposite of inclusion. Exclusion is viewed as a major challenging factor in the face of language use for ethnic membership. The togetherness of the in-groups who share the same language and ethnicity resulted into the exclusion of others who share different language and ethnicity. In the face of this exclusion, it usually caused several forms of indifference and ethnic prejudices.

Yunana Ahmed in 2017 researched on language, rhetoric and politics in a global context through a de- colonial critical discourse perspective on Nigeria's 2015 presidential campaign. The study captured a rhetorical and linguistic analysis of politics from a de-colonial framework. Drawing analysis from Aristotle's classical rhetoric, cultural rhetoric and linguistics, the study revealed different ways ideological and hegemonic struggles are discursively constructed in Nigerian political campaign discourse. The data for the study was drawn from two speeches delivered by former President of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan during the 2015 electoral campaign. The research showed the richness of conceptualizing political discourse within its immediate and larger contexts and the effectiveness of an interdisciplinary approach in unmasking the different forms of hegemonic struggle in discourse. Analysis of linguistic elements like tense, and the rhetorical elements of apologies and fictive kingship terms such as my sister revealed that hegemonic discourse in a Nigerian context is not autonomous but constituted by multiple heteroglossic and complex processes.

Addae, Aikins, Daniel Arkoh Fenyi and Hamidu Alhassan in 2021 carried out a research in Ghana, through the analytic guide of critical discourse analysis of selected speeches of Kwame Nkruma, to investigate the role of language in creating ideology and sustaining power and ideological discursive structures in political speeches.

The study employed the qualitative research approach and textual analysis design. The purposive method was used to draw sample. The theoretical frameworks of Fairclough's CDA and van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach were combined to achieve the objectives of the study. The study revealed that the ideologies were carried out through discursive structures such as metaphor. The study also revealed that Nkruma relied on language to produce ideologies of nationism, power and dominance in his speeches. The study finally concluded that the speeches that were analysed were used as a means of establishing, maintaining and sustaining power and asymmetrical power relations. The study was conducted in Ghana of which a similar work may be replicated in Nigeria.

In 2022, Theresa Eze and Ephraim Chukwu provided a comprehensive comparative analysis of rhetorical devices in selected political speeches of Nelson Mandela and Nnamdi Kanu. Adopting persuasion theory and van Dijk's critical discourse analysis, the work attempted to find out if the use of rhetorical devices and hate language in political speeches can help politicians persuade their audience and make them align with their political ideologies. The population of the study comprised political speeches that contained rhetorical devices and hate speech. Data for the study comprised excerpts from three political speeches each made by Nelson Mandela and Nnamdi Kanu. The study adopted textual analysis method to evaluate the data. The findings revealed that the above political activists copiously employed rhetorical devices to persuade their audience and influence them to align with their political ideologies and pledge their unalloyed support to their political struggles.

Luliia Khabarova underscored a socio-political discourse analysis of digital articles on the portrait of Edmund Belamy which was created by AI team and sold at Christie's auction for 432,500 US dollars. The purpose was to explore AI and its integration into artistic practices and media discourse surrounding the event. The sample size of the research consists of 12 articles from the UK and the US outlets. The work was supported by Actor-Network theory and Media Dissemination theory and analysed using Van Dijk's SPDA concepts. The findings showed that critical analysis offers various notions on AI generated networks, challenging traditional views of creativity and cultural productions.

It becomes obvious that not much have been researched on the impact of socio-historical contexts in political discourse using fully Nigerian activists from South East and South West Nigeria respectively, who are making significant impact on the path of activism in the most recent past in Nigeria. The present research therefore seeks to examine the impact of socio-historical contexts in political discourse using fully Nigerian indigenous activists; Nnamdi Kanu and Sunday Igboho. This is with the aim to reveal how socio-historical challenges faced by the activists shape their communicative approaches.

Analysis of the Selected Speeches

Text 1: ...Regrettably, the British colonial masters forcefully merged BIAFRA with the other two nations of AREWA and ODUDUWA to form what is known today as Nigeria. For over 100 years, Biafrans have endured the unholy marriage called amalgamation and creation of Nigeria by the British colonial masters (Kanu .312). Here, Kanu made a solidified reference to the long time unforgettable history of the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914 by Lord Lugard who joined the North and South Nigeria. The act was hypothesized to be the stand point of political bigotry in Nigeria which metamorphosed into the Igbo ethnic marginalization and exclusion. He referenced it to underscore the present struggles of the Igbo people. His reference to this creates a deep sense of historical continuity in the struggle for Biafra. It also fosters unity and collaboration among the Igbo. Again, Kanu deployed the use of history to satisfy the curiosity of his major audience; the Igbo ethnic group. Using historical allusion of amalgamation as a reminder to the genesis of their predicament, Kanu not only appeals to the emotions of his people but also exploits the African rich tapestry of cultural narratives. He emotively appealed to the minds of his audience for them to actually understand the genesis of their predicament. One can, therefore, rightly attest to the heavy input of historical appeal in Kanu's speeches.

Text 2 : We share a common ancestry with our Jewish brothers and should follow similar strategy in achieving the nation of Biafra (105).

Many Igbo strongly believe that they are descendants of Israel as a result of some similar cultural practices they claim to share though there is no sufficient evidence of proof. Sequel to this, Kanu's reference to this connection helped to create a deep sense of identity as well as unity among the Igbo ethnic group. Using this political allusion, Kanu draws a line between the historical sufferings of the Jews and the bitter experiences of the Igbo. This framing of Biafran struggle in a similar context to that of the Jews helped to attract more sympathy and support from different quarters of his audience.

Text 3: ...Look at the amount of money Magu looted as EFCC chairman...If Magu was Yoruba man, he would be in prison till date. How much did my father from Ila, Tafa Balogun embezzle that he was imprisoned by Obasanjo? It was because he is a Yoruba man. Look at how much Magu embezzled only for himself. Aishat, a

thirty something year old girl was made head of Tinker in our father's land here in Lagos where she embezzled about one hundred and something billion and was asked to suspend her (559- 565).

Looking at the above extract, it could be discovered that Igboho has a clear history of what actually transpired in the Nigeria politics at the time of making this speech. It was on record that Ibrahim Magu the then EFCC (Economic and Financial Crimes Commission) acting chairman between 2015-2020 embezzled some huge amount of money of about 431,000,000.00 (forty-three million) that was not properly accounted for. However, he was later cleared of the corruption and acquitted. On the contrary, Ila Balogun, an Inspector General of Police in 2005 was charged of a similar crime of stealing and money laundering of about 4 million. Unfortunately, he was remanded in custody where he fell ill and finally gave up the ghost.

This was fully referenced in Stella Korkus.Com (2023). The use of evidence to buttress the socio political crisis on ground seriously evoked emotional responses from the audience. This again aligned with Aristotle's rhetorical element of pathos. The fact that someone else who was not of Yoruba ethnic origin was pardoned for a more grievous crime than that was a clear red light of marginalization of the Yoruba ethnic group. Igboho critically framed the issue thereby working on the emotion of his ardent followers. Thus, Igboho emotionally appealed to his audience to be weary of the type of treatment given to their brothers. He repetitiously emphasized that in order to create a high positive response on the audience who wholly received his ideology without reserve.

Text 4: Look at the 6 million Fulani, less than 6 million, they control 220 million people (Igboho 706).

In the above extract, Igboho made a substantial reference to the population of Nigeria which was 206,139,589 million in 2020 (Sasu 2024). With little exaggeration, he compared it with that of Fulani which had about 6 million or less population. Surprisingly, the smaller group roughly controls the entire nation with 22 million population. Igboho uses this historical evidence to touch the emotions of his audience for them to rise to action.

Text 5 : On the 14th of September, 2017, the terrorists of the Zoo came to kill me (Kanu 141).

Initiated and continued annual 30th May Biafra Heroes Remembrance Day. The 2015 Edition at Aba recorded over 3million attendees without a single adverse incident recorded (Kanu 113: iii-iv)

Kanu carefully harnessed the statistics records of important events that metamorphosed into history in the course of their agitation. This projected him as worthy leader with charismatic qualities. On the other hand, this strategy enhances commitments, engagements and above all solidarity and support towards his cause. The 30th May Biafra Heroes Remembrance Day has come to stay as an annual event till date. It meditatively reminds the Biafrans of their beginning and the people who suffered for the cause.

In all, the activists leveraged on the historical narratives of their people with the aim to foster a sense of solidarity among their audience. Using the historical struggles, they garnered support for their causes to quick response through rallies, protests, conferences in opposition to the Nigerian government.

Conclusion

Language has been proved to achieve several objectives which include to inform, persuade and convince. The speeches of Kanu and Igboho vividly highlighted a mixture of rhetorical and discursive strategies which aimed at mobilizing support against the accumulated grievances and struggles of their respective audiences. Carefully chosen rhetoric and ideological strategies that resonate deeply with their respective audiences were deployed. They effectively mobilized their people through framing their grievances and struggles. Historical and sociopolitical narratives were framed in their attempt to register their cause. The activists leveraged on the historical narratives of their people with the aim to foster a sense of solidarity among their audience. Using the historical struggles, they garnered support for their causes to quick response through rallies, protests, conferences in opposition to the Nigerian government.

The study, therefore, recommends that government should adopt inclusive policies that will accommodate the interest of every ethnic group in the country. Historical and sociopolitical narratives should be positively framed to inform the people and increase their awareness instead of framing the events to make disparaging comments that might spur the minds of the audience into taking wrong choice of action such as hatred towards other ethnic groups or government.

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