



Creative Use of Metaphor in Nigerian Political Discourse

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Abstract

The paper investigated use of metaphor in contemporary Nigerian political discourse with the aim of revealing the multi-faceted patterns of metaphoric language in order to examine the creativity in political communication. The data were derived from a variety of illustrative texts sourced from Nigerian newspapers and magazines that are circulated nationwide. The study employed the cognitive linguistics approach originated by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson to discuss the two significant metaphor themes of war and journey in the corpus data. The findings showed that metaphors are used as persuasive strategy and manipulative tool by politicians. The metaphors of war revealed that politics is typically conceived of as warfare with the primary aim of winning elections at all costs and the metaphors of journey depicted a nation in search of solutions to socio-economic problems and moving towards nationhood. The study concluded that the use of metaphor in political discourse is not just an ornamental device but a necessary feature of political communication. This research will extend the existing perspective on the rhetorical imperative in the deployment of metaphor in Nigerian political discourse.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian political discourse is metaphor driven and almost everywhere one looks for analysis of events, a metaphor stares back. The Nigerian public is inundated with rhetorical quips from politicians who have a penchant for using packed statements and draw attention to metaphoric language because of the semantic import of their unique collocations. Metaphor is a condensed simile and a primarily ornamental feature of speech (Martin and Harre, 1982:90). It can be used to make a message more vivid and increase its retention (Katz,1996; Ortony,1995).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980:3) defined it “as the human cognitive tool which provides the way for humans to understand one concept from another concept.”

Scholars have shown remarkable interest in metaphor and this is evident in their elaborate study from diverse perspectives; (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff and Turner 1989; Gibbs 1994; Thornborrow 1993; Hiraga 2005; Goatly 2007). Researchers have been interested in how metaphors are used as persuasive devices and attempted to unravel the essence of the messages politicians convey. Graber (1993:305) contended

that political communication is “the lifeblood or mother’s milk of politics because communication is the essential activity that links the various parts of society together and allows them to function as an integrated whole.” Political discourse is replete with different figurative and rhetorical strategies like the use of metonymy, irony, symbolism, innuendo, euphemism and metaphor (Howe, 1988; Yusuf, 2003; Carver and Pikalo, 2008). Politicians in Nigeria often use indirect language when they want to be non-committal or deliberately ambiguous on any subject. It is true that politicians or public officers may not have comments on some issues but when prodded by the press or the public, they sometimes respond with innuendos, metonymies, metaphors or any other rhetorical device that has veiled or amorphous interpretations.

The present study examined the use of metaphor in Nigerian political discourse with the aim of revealing the multi-faceted features of figurative language in order to examine the creativity in political communication. Metaphor has different varieties such as; war, journey, peace, sports etc. and the focus of this paper is the metaphors of war and journey which are probably the most common themes of metaphor prevalent in Nigerian political discourse. The study employed the cognitive linguistics approach originated by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) to discuss the two significant metaphor themes of war and journey in the corpus data. Political discourse as used in this paper is a broad and diverse set of discourses, such as: party manifestos, electoral speeches, federal or state governments’ press releases or press conferences, magazine and newspaper articles on politics. The thread that binds them is that they are spoken or written by Nigerian politicians to the electorate, party members or political opponents. Wilson (2001: 398) described political discourse as; “language used in formal and informal political contexts by political actors, such as politicians, political institutions, government, political media and political supporters operating in political environments with political goals.”

II. FUNCTIONS OF METAPHOR

Metaphor is a multi-purpose rhetorical device which is effectively used by politicians and rhetoricians in varying socio-political contexts. Bill Bradley cited in Howe, (1988:88) remarked; “what you strive for is a metaphor that works.” Implicit in this quotation is the fact that a metaphor should be effective and communicate the message pointedly in the clearest possible way. Generally, metaphor is used for a variety of purposes and the most crucial is to persuade the people; politicians therefore, often use it to communicate with the general public and their numerous supporters on their programmes and policies in order to convince them of the rightness of their action.

A well-informed public is necessary in a democracy; metaphors have assisted politicians to communicate effectively using concepts that the public know and truly feel. Metaphors also make difficult topics accessible to the layman by simplifying complex statements and by comparing the unknown with the known to enhance comprehension. On this, (Campbell, 1988) observed; “by relating a seemingly new idea to something the learner already knows, metaphors give familiarity to the unfamiliar, thus making new information seem less overwhelming and more easily understood.” (Langer, 1948) also pointed out; “It allows new knowledge and ideas to be conveyed using frames of reference that are familiar to the learner.” The need to pass across information clearly to diverse audience makes the use of metaphor inevitable. Paradoxically too, politicians sometimes use metaphors to deliberately introduce ambiguity or complexity if clarity is disadvantageous in a particular situation. Politicians can detect ambiguity in communication but they can also intentionally use ambiguity to their own advantage. Metaphors are therefore manipulative tools for politicians who use them to sway public opinion in their favour or express views that are consistent with public opinion in order to score political point or connect with the public. Vertessen and De Landtsheer (2005:2) averred: “Politicians may attempt to establish a direct link between their worldview and the world of the citizens. Political metaphor being a gateway to the public’s thinking facilitates this linkage.”

Sentiments and emotions play a great role in achieving metaphorical effects, therefore when politicians feel the need to trigger emotions, they turn to metaphor which enhances their persuasiveness. On this, (Beer and De Landtsheer, 2004), remarked; “the powerful suggestion mechanism activated by metaphors triggers underlying emotions and connects them with political individualities and policies.” Politicians also use metaphors to explicate several political problems such as anti-corruption and transparency, combating crime and drug abuse, fighting terrorism, poverty alleviation etc. which are sometimes communicated clearly or as packed statements depending on what is politically appropriate in the context of use. The notion of metaphor as a packed language or story was well articulated by Stone (1988:118) who drew a parallel between political problems and stories. He contended that stories have a beginning, middle and an ending; they also have heroes, villains and victims with good battling evil; she opined:

Metaphors are important devices for strategic representation in policy analysis. On the surface, they draw comparison between one thing and another, but in a more subtle way, they usually imply a whole narrative story and prescription for action.

III. NIGERIAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Several scholarly works have been carried out on political discourse in Nigeria. Prominent among them was Adebija's (1988) 'My Friend, Where is Anini?' which analysed the statement made by former Nigeria's military dictator, General Ibrahim Babangida to the Inspector General of Police about the notorious armed robber, Lawrence Anini. Adebija examined the statement from varying intonational and paralinguistic cues and concluded that it was an indirect speech act which conveyed a different meaning within the Nigerian socio-political context than it would elsewhere. Akiyoye (1994), examined a three-part construction of a resolute African position in the use of metaphor in Nigeria's United Nations addresses. Drawing

from Lakoff and Johnson (1980), he claimed that a metaphor can focus on one aspect of a concept while keeping people from focusing on other aspects. Daramola's (2008) 'A Child of Necessity' attempted a functional-semiotic discourse analysis of Chief Ernest Shonekan's speech, 'A Child of Circumstance' and General Sani Abacha's speech titled 'A Child of Necessity'. The emergence of the metaphorical use of the word 'child' in their speeches was his linguistic interest using Ventola's systemic functional model as the theoretical plank on which the study rested. Taiwo's (2008) 'Metaphors in Nigerian Political Discourse' examined the use of metaphors in selected Nigerian political discourses and discussed them along three target domains of conceptual metaphors- the nation, politicians and politics.

The present study examined the use of metaphor in Nigeria political discourse with the aim of revealing the multi-faceted patterns of figurative language in order to examine the creativity in political communication. It employed the cognitive linguistics approach originated by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) to discuss the two significant metaphor themes of journey and war in the data and gave analysis of how politicians and political commentators use them as rhetorical devices to communicate with the people. Several issues shape political discourse in Nigeria, they include but not limited to unbridled official corruption, profligacy, ethno-religious crises, unemployment explosion, abject poverty and mass misery, election rigging and malpractices, insecurity of lives and property caused by terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, farmers-herders clashes, ritual murder and boko haram insurgency.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory employed in this study is conceptual metaphor or cognitive metaphor (henceforth, CM) which refers to the understanding of one idea or conceptual domain in terms of another. A detailed analysis of CM was done by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their work, *Metaphors We Live By* which stressed that metaphors are a matter of not only language, but of thought as well. CM uses one idea and links it to another to promote a better

understanding of the concept. The conceptual domain from which we draw metaphorical expressions to understand another domain is known as the *source domain* while the domain that is understood in this way is the *target domain*. An example is the expression, 'life is a journey.' We understand the abstract idea of life (target domain) in terms of our experiences of a journey (source domain); therefore, target domain is source domain. CM is used in our everyday lives and it allows us to make sense of and order our experiences of the world. It does not just shape our language, it also shapes the way we think and act; it affects our perception of things and our response to them. Lakoff and Johnson (1980:3) remarked; 'If we are right to suggest that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then....what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor.' Another variety of metaphor is Michael Reddy's insight which he described as conduit metaphor; this predated Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) work. Conduit metaphors state that expressions are containers for meaning and that sentences are meaningful even when said without context. Expressions such as; 'what *brought* that *into* your head?'; 'It's hard to *put* our thoughts *into* action.' 'It's difficult to *get* the message *across* to him.' All these are metaphors which are meaningful even when uttered without context. These examples show that metaphors are often used when we are describing abstract concepts.

Metaphors are prevalent in contemporary Nigerian political discourse and politicians do not just use them in communicating; they also actually act in accordance with the metaphors. Metaphors, therefore, are not just ornamental devices; they also help us to compose our reality and knowingly or unknowingly influence our perception of people, events and situations. Two significant metaphor themes are discernible in the data in this study; these are perception of politics as 'war' and 'journey' which are methodically expressed by various lexical and syntactical devices. The conceptualization of politics as war can be viewed from two perspectives: one, the war between good and evil; the forces of progress and retrogression. Two, politics is perceived as a battle which must be won at all costs, that is; winning elections

becomes a do-or-die affair. By drawing upon the journey theme, the politician sees the contemporary democratic experience in Nigeria as a march from the oblivion to the centre stage of civilization, from underdevelopment to development; a journey to nationhood embarked upon by both the rulers and the ruled. In the view of cognitive theorists, metaphor is pervasive in both thought and language (Lakoff 1987, 1993, Palmer 2006, Taylor 1995). The central characteristic of Lakoff and Johnson's theory is that metaphor is not the property of individual linguistic expressions and their meanings, but of whole conceptual domains. Thus, metaphor is perceived as a cognitive tool which structures and organizes human experience. In this study, we shall examine metaphor from the conceptual perspective and give analysis of how politicians and political commentators use them as rhetorical devices to communicate with the people.

V. PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

The data presented for analysis in this section are illustrative texts from the speeches of notable Nigerian politicians, public officers and commentators on Nigeria's democratic experience and they were sourced from Nigerian newspapers that are circulated nationally. The data have two significant metaphor themes of journey and war.

5.1) METAPHOR OF JOURNEY

The most pervasive conceptual metaphor in the Nigerian political discourse is that of journey. Political activity is seen as an on-going process of moving along a certain route towards a set destination. Many political actions are conceptualized through the source domain of movement along a certain path towards a prescribed destination. The metaphor of 'politics is a journey' is linguistically represented by such metaphorical expressions as *toeing a path*, *embarking on a journey*, *overcoming obstacles on the way* etc. The metaphors below demonstrate a universal tendency in structuring political concepts in Nigeria through such source domain as journey.

a) We have *left Egypt* but we have not *reached Canaan*.

(Chief Bola Ige's comment after General Abdulsalam Abubakar handed power to Chief

Olusegun Obasanjo. (Nigerian Tribune September 8, 1999)

This metaphor has a Biblical underpinning because the concepts of Egypt and Canaan are representations of slavery (Egypt) and freedom (Canaan) as recorded in the Holy Bible. In this context, military rule is metaphorized as a state of slavery when the people have no freedom of speech, association and they live in fear while democratic rule is conceptualized as a state of freedom where the people's rights are respected and their dreams and aspirations will be realized. Implicit in this metaphor is the fact that the people are on their way to the promised land or nationhood in a democratic dispensation. The metaphor shows that Nigerian politicians and people are expected to move along the prescribed route with discipline and a sense of purpose. These qualities will provide the requisite speed to reach the final destination of their political journey. The source domains are: (Egypt and Canaan) while target domains are; (military rule and nationhood)

b) With the new government in power, *Nigerians have entered one chance*. (The Sun, November 2015)

'Enter one chance' as a Nigerian experience refers to criminal activities of some commercial bus drivers who transport their passengers to a hideous location different from where they intend to go in order to rob them of their money or valuables. This is a popular Nigerian expression commonly used in informal contexts to describe the ineptitude of political leaders culminating in varying degrees of dashed hopes and unfulfilled expectations of the electorate. As a political metaphor, the expression is used to describe any government (state or federal) that performs below expectation and fails to deliver on its electoral promises. The direction they are moving to is not the direction Nigerians expect them to go. In this metaphor, the source domain is 'one chance' while the target domain is the 'new government'.

c) The President is *baba go-slow*. (The Guardian, October 10, 2017)

The meaning of go-slow in the Oxford Advanced Learners' dictionary 9th edition is; 'a form of industrial action in which work or progress is deliberately delayed or slowed down'. However, as a Nigerian expression 'go-slow' means congested traffic, which culminates in vehicles moving slowly or driving bumper-to-bumper. The word 'baba' means father, so 'baba go-slow' literally means; 'father that is moving slowly'. This is a pejorative expression primarily used by the people to show disappointment in their leaders and as a political metaphor, it depicts any government official (president, governor, minister) who is lethargic or very slow in making decisions or taking actions. It is however, worthy of mention that apologists of government office holders often contend that what the people call 'go slow' or inaction of political leaders is indeed an act of introspection that will yield sound judgment about critical national issues.

d) Today, we are *embarking* on a long and challenging *journey* to create a united state, free and prosperous country. (Alhaji Atiku Abubakar when announcing his Presidential ambition,

(The Vanguard, November 26 2006)

Alhaji Atiku Abubakar was the former Vice President of Nigeria between 1999 and 2007. Towards the end of their tenure, he had a frosty relationship with his boss and President of Nigeria, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo. He had the firm belief that Nigeria would be better governed if he were the President. His conceptualization of the nation as embarking on a challenging journey was used to express the parlous state of development of the nation in terms of unity and stability. It depicts the various problems plaguing Nigerians as a nation and expresses hope of a better future if we embark on the journey. This metaphor of Journey reflects the idea of a nation on the path to a destination and the political leaders are charged with the responsibility of guiding and providing direction for the people.

e) We can avoid this monumental setback by *toeing the path* of reason.

(The Sun Editorial, October 16 2006)

This metaphor accentuates the fact that we have to do what is morally, legally and politically

right if we are desirous of avoiding setbacks in all ramifications. The concept of politics as a journey in the above example is meant to present the picture that every right step we take on the journey advances us towards a better future and we can always avoid great catastrophes if we do the right things. Politics as an important human activity is conceptualized as a journey with politicians and the citizens seen as travellers in a continuous motion along a chosen route towards a prescribed destination.

5.2) METAPHOR OF WAR

Our society has become increasingly insecure given the high rate of violent crimes, such as; the boko haram insurgency, ethno-religious crisis, farmers-herders clashes, kidnapping, ritual murder, jungle justice, brazen official corruption, armed robbery and general insecurity of lives and property. It is observed that our language has inevitably shared in the acute bedlam and new discourses have emerged concomitantly. Examples of conceptual metaphors of war are listed and discussed below. In the sentences, the words and expressions which have more than literal interpretations are italicised.

a) Those *beating the drums of war* should take a look at crises bedeviling countries like Syria, Egypt, South Sudan and see the effect of war and terrorism. (President Goodluck Jonathan's Christmas day comment in the service held at the Cathedral Church of the Advent Life Camp, Abuja)

Sunday Punch, December 27, 2013.

This speech was a response to Chief Olusegun Obasanjo's letter titled 'Before it is too Late' in which he sharply criticized President Jonathan's style of governance. The metaphor, 'beating the drums of war' is a reference to critics who are directly or indirectly calling for civil insurrection by inciting the people to revolt against the ruling government. This is done in so many ways at various fora; in press conferences, on television, in newspapers and places of worship. When politicians make unguarded statements that could lead to a breakdown of law and order, they are beating the drum of war. When the press publishes malicious and sensational news that could cause mass protest or when the opposition deliberately presents the

government in bad light so as to cause civil insurrection; it is coterminous with beating the drums of war.

b) We must *fight the war* on corruption and *win* it.

(President Goodluck Jonathan. The Sun, July15, 2013)

Nigerians express a plurality of views on variety of subjects but there is a near consensus on the fact that corruption is our greatest problem as a people. It permeates the whole of our lives and to tackle it, successive governments in Nigeria have set up various anti-corruption agencies such as: Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), Code of Conduct Bureau (CCB), Code of Conduct Tribunal (CCT) and special task forces. The war mentioned in the president's speech has nothing to do with military battle, it is only a metaphor on the government's zero tolerance for corruption and a resolve to rid the nation free of it. This could be achieved by introducing harsh legislations and recruitment of dedicated officers to be in charge of government anti-corruption crusade.

c) A *frontline* politician in the South West, *fired the first salvo* at Obasanjo's political *enemies*.

(The Guardian, August 10, 2002)

The firing of salvos is a military action carried out at the battle front and 'frontline' is a term associated with the military which indicates the place where fighting happens in the war. The word 'enemies' is also suggestive of combat situation where there are two opposing camps poised to defeat each other. In this context, what is being communicated is the fact that an important politician from Chief Olusegun Obasanjo's geo-political zone was the first person to criticize Obasanjo's opponents.

d) Oyo State is a *garrison* and Chief Lamidi Adedibu is the *Garrison Commander*.

(Senator Ahmadu Ali, former National Chairman of PDP. The Punch, Dec.19, 2006)

Col. Ahmadu Ali, referred to Oyo State as a 'garrison' and instructed a democratically-elected Governor, Chief Rasheed Ladoja to take

instructions from Alhaji Lamidi Adedibu, whom he described as the political ‘Garrison Commander’ of Ibadan. Alhaji Adedibu, popularly referred to as ‘the strong man of Ibadan politics’ was no doubt a grassroots politician who had helped many political aspirants to achieve their dreams including Chief Rasheed Ladoja. However, in a democracy, an elected governor is not subordinate to any ‘political kingmaker’. Col. Ali’s garrison metaphorical creation encapsulates the blatant violation of the rule of law which negates the tenets of democracy. In the context of this usage, retired Colonel Ahmadu Ali tried to establish a direct link between his worldview as a soldier and the worldview of the citizens and conceptual metaphor being a gateway to the public’s thinking facilitates this linkage.

e) Lagos State is the real *battleground* of the general elections.

(Chief Olabode George, The Punch, January 20, 2007)

Chief Olabode George is the PDP leader in Lagos State and he once described the 2007 general elections as significant because it would be a test for our democracy. He remarked that Lagos State will be the real battleground of the general elections because PDP was ready to unseat ACN, the party in control of Lagos State. The focus here is the word, ‘battleground’ which is associated with war. This metaphor is based on two conceptual domains—the source domain of war is linked to the target domain of general election. In other words, electoral contests are perceived through the concept of physical fighting or war. The basic implication of the war metaphor is that politics is associated with confrontational and uncivilized means of solving political problems and our present political dispensation is not yet weaned from military mentality.

VI. CONCLUSION

The analysis of data in this study reveals the persuasiveness of metaphors in political discourse thereby proving that they are not just ornamental device but a necessary feature of political communication. A noticeable rhetorical strategy used in political discourse is indirect

language which is expressed by changing the nature of words and giving it expanded application. Metaphors and other figurative language assist politicians to communicate effectively because they transfer meaning from what is easily understood to complex concepts that are harder to grasp. They are like bridges between what is familiar and unfamiliar; the literal and figurative, the known and unknown. It is observed that simple metaphors which are easy to understand are commonly used in Nigerian political discourse primarily to influence public opinion. Deep or complex metaphors are rarely used because they will not be intelligible to majority of the Nigerian public and purpose of communication which is comprehension will not be achieved.

Politicians sometimes use them to manipulate the electorate, justify their past and present actions, frame policies for the future and negotiate with others. If used appropriately, they allow the general public to grasp the meanings of political events and feel a part of the process. By simplifying language and connecting with the public through the use of metaphor, politicians prepare their audience for action. Jeffery (2005:288) remarked that ‘speeches that contain more metaphors may be perceived to be more inspiring because they can stir up emotional connections with the topic or with the speakers while also conveying the message of action’. As metaphors can be used to deliberately mislead the people, they can also inspire and motivate for a noble cause therefore, a splendid use of metaphor is an indispensable tool in the hands of an adept politician.

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