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Critical Discourse Analysis of Obasanjo's Letter 'Before Is Too Late' to Jonathan

Ekhareafu, Ofomegbe Daniel, *Ph.D.*

Department of Theatre Arts and Mass Communication

University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria

Email: Talk2ofomegbe@gmail.com

Phone: 2348032682533, 2348027331784

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Ambrose, Chinenye Lynda

General Studies Unit,

Western Delta University, Oghara

Abstract

This paper asserts that language has a close link with politics and is not merely a mode of actions but a means of interaction. Language cannot make sense on its own if not well constructed and channeled. The basic for mutual understanding and communication among interlocutors is hinged on the way and manner language is expressed. The letter coming against the obvious disagreements between the two personae's, the paper takes a critical discourse analysis of former president Olusegun Obasanjo letter to President Goodluck Jonathan. We conclude that the author used a lot

of power and superiority, metaphorical extensions, Linguistic irony, pun and Face Threatening Act to convey the tone of the letter.

Introduction

Politics is largely conceived as the struggle for and the use of state power by a socialist group for the benefits of the members of the group. Although political scientists have no universal definition for the concept, there is a marriage between politics and communication, Hahn, (1998), conceives politics in this regard when he asserts that politics is the process that takes place through communication. He noted that the process begins from identifying a problem in society (perhaps through conversations with those suffering from it), through proposing a solution over others proposed, explaining the resultant law to the citizens and those in government whose job it is to enforce it. He concludes that politics is the process of solving public problems through the process of communication.

The political communication process involves the use of language in persuading the electorate and political watchers. Opeibi (2004) contends that the successful prosecution of political activities requires effective deployment of linguistic facilities. He further states that since politics involves language use to persuade, the effectiveness of the strategies adopted by political candidates may, to a large extent, determine how successful they will be in controlling power or keeping power. This suggests that language has a close link with politics and is not merely a mode of actions but a means of interaction. Language cannot make sense on its own if not well constructed and channeled. The basic for mutual understanding and communication among interlocutors is hinged on the way and manner language is expressed.

However paradoxical it may sound, Chaika (1985) states; language makes us free as individual but chains us socially. This means that language is socially or rather culturally linked. Upon this backdrop, the aspect of study linguistic pointing at discourse analysis will be mentioned. The study of discourse is the study of any aspect of language use (Fasold 1990). Consequently, the analysis of discourse, is necessarily the analysis of language in use (Brown and Yule 1983). Discourse constitutes utterance and utterances, however it may be, could be presented as subject to different ideological views; this is drawn from the level of interpretation given to it in a speaker versus hearer situation.

One very importance of discourse analysis in its typical form is critical discourse analysis which is explored by Van Dijk (1985) Ruth Wodak (1996) Norman Fairclough (1995) among others. Van Dijk (1985) observes that structured descriptions characterise discourse at several levels or dimensions of analysis and in terms of many different units, categories and scheme patterns or relations.

In a more elaborate term, the norms and values which underlie texts are often “out of sight” rather than overtly stated (Paltridge, 2006). Hyland (2005:4) observes “acts of meaning making (and in turn discourse) are ”always engaged in that they realize the interests, the positions, the perspectives and the values of those who enact them.”

Rogers (2004:6) puts it “discourses are always socially, politically, racially and economically loaded. However, from the foregoing, we cannot rule out the fact that critical discourse analysis alternatively referred to as CDA starts with the assumption that “language use is always social’ and that ‘discourse (in this sense) reflects and constructs the social world.

Based on this fact, Fairclough and Wodak (1997) defines a number of principles which underlines CDA. Thus:

- i. Social and political issues
- ii. Power relations
- iii. Social Relations
- iv. Reflection of ideologies

This brings us close to the components of discourse from where the analysis of this text will be made bare and interpreted.

These components are:

- Speech act by Austin (1962).
- Turn talking by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974).
- Co-operate principle (conversational implicature) by Grice (1975).
- Presupposition and preposition.
- Conversational analysis Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1975).
- Pre-condition and sequence.
- Context.
- Elliptical coupling- Merritt (1976).
- Field mode and Tenor of Discourse.
- Coherence and cohesion.
- Genres.
- Intension and Extension.
- Foregrounding.
- Discourse grammar.

The genre of discourse in this letter is an open written, formal discourse. The letter was dated, December 2, 2013. Taking a look at the graphological make-up of the letter, one could see the name of Nigerian’s ex-president, Olusegun Obasanjo boldly written on the top most centre of the letter.

One thing which is of stylistic relevance is the hand written ‘Dear Mr. President’ which by virtue of the personality of the writer could be deliberate, one would want to know why all the words in the letter was typed written except the opening ‘Dear Mr. President’ and the closing ‘Yours sincerely’ instead of yours faithfully as a formal letter should dictate. This is rather a clear show of power and superiority which settles the issue of language and power ideology of CDA.

The letter is paged at 18 which is a copious one, for a busy person like a president of a nation to read. This also has an undertone of power and superiority, had it been it was written by a ‘nobody’ it would not have gone this far. Again this is an ideal of social constructs and political dominance. From the first page and first paragraph the issues for discussion in subsequent pages were itemized with the use of determiners which are cardinal numerals one ... two.... Ten. The lists basically comprise simple compound and complex sentences without mixing each sentences with multiple sentence types. This has an undertone of command due to its clear syntactic nature and blunt semantic undertone.

The title is also straight forward with the adverbial phrase caption ‘before it is too late’ which signals an illocutionary act. Drawing from the contextual background, the fact is that the writer (Obasanjo) believes things are getting worse socially, economically and politically in Nigeria which is not far from the truth. Hence the locutionary act “Before it is too late” of which the perlocutionary act is not enforced based on the sequence of discussion and the parameters of pre-sequence.

The contents of Jonathan is reply on the issues of oil theft raised by Obasanjo shows that the bases for each issue for which he countered made Obasanjo’s accusations lack felicity conditions drawing from the context and background knowledge of Nigeria social- economic terrain. Obasanjo’s stance has an undertone of political ‘Godfatherism’ and power. Hence Obasanjo’s impolite speech at the end of page 1 paragraph 1 of the letter states:

“... I am concerned about your legacy and your climb-down which you alone can best be the manager of whenever you so decide’ this beams ‘light’ of sarcasm. This statement is also face threatening act. By conversational implicature, it means he is no longer behind President Goodluck Jonathan.

Obasanjo’s obvious show of piety by mentioned of God from page 1, 2nd paragraph to page 2 and even throughout the pages is a clear show of power which is implied in each sentences thus:

‘... the role God enabled me to play...’ (pg1, p2)

‘... You put me third after God” (Pg. 1 pg. 2 Line 3

‘.... God who put you there... “(pg 2, p2, line 4)

‘... Only instrument of God to adhere God's” (pg 2, p1, Line 3)

There is also a use of a forceful statement which signifies FTA in (Page 3, line 1)

... But the buck must stop on your table whether you like it or not.

... And only a fool would believe that statement you made ...pg. 3, line 19-20

In page 4, Obasanjo cited an end note of Jonathan's campaign manifesto for which he reminded him that he (Jonathan) was not interested in the said 'third term' accusing him of involving in “game of denial" this is also face threatening Act. He also accused the president of playing a “double game" in the 3rd paragraph of page 5. This is also a show of power and face threatening Act.

Obasanjo's predominant use of the first person personal pronoun 'I' and God has an undertone of egotism by implicature, the use of 'I' flouts the maxim of relevance because the situation in Nigeria does not call for one man show.

From page 2 to page 7, Obasanjo's recap was based on the leadership and the tussle in the said political party PDP. This issue does not flout maxim of relevance but it does the maxim of manner because he did not make clear the matter on ground clear. Linguistic irony is obvious in the sense that,

Obasanjo started off the letter in a serious tone in the first page which is in a bid to tackle major issues in Nigeria especially in the face of national insecurity. One could expect that he could have talked more on the Boko Haram issue. But his first mention of the insurgence was in page 8 having utilized almost seven pages discussing his political party, People's Democratic Party (PDP).The is also an outright quest and concern for power rather than solution to an impending danger on the lives of the ruled masses in the hands of popularized and notorious terrorism. The felicity condition on his applauding national interest and decrying corruption and terrorism is devalued. This implies that this (political party upheaval) is what prompted his letter rather than his claim of the letter being of national interest. It would be recalled that Jonathan fell apart with the former president following his strong intention to contest the 2015 presidential election. Obasanjo is widely believed to be a strong supporter of the Governor of Jigawa state, Sule Lamido to vie for the position. The way and manner the PDP national convention which produced the party executive was conducted appeared to have been in favour of the president. This did not go down well with Obasanjo's loyalist who felt shortchanged in the power game.

Now his lists of kidnapping, piracy, abductions and armed robberies “... Boko Haram which requires carrot and stick approach to lay its ghost to rest...” (page 8, paragraph 2) flouts the maxim of manner in the sense that his so called “carrot and

stick” does not seem to proffer a lasting solution. The menace of insurgence was foregrounded in this page yet, he was not clear enough on giving advice on what could stop the vicious acts of this terrorist group.

Obasanjo concludes this issue on that page by saying “Nigeria is bleeding and the hemorrhage must be stopped” here is an obvious use of metaphorical extensions, the biological ailment ‘bleeding’ and the medical term hemorrhage has been used as a substitution for the chaos and turbulence going on in Nigeria.

Obasanjo employed the use of sarcasm which is FTA to Jonathan in paragraph 1, page 9 where we accused Jonathan to be “possessed” to the exclusion of most of the rest Nigeria as an “Ijaw man.” In the same page, paragraph 2, he also accused Jonathan of keeping over 1000 people on political watch list, ... training snipers and other armed personnel secretly and clandestinely acquiring weapons to match for political purposes like Abacha”.

His further use of FTA was wrapped in his Yoruba adage; “The man with whose head coconut is broken may not live to savour the taste of the succulent fruit”. This by implicature is an open threat which by its proverbial nature flouts the maxim of quantity.

Obasanjo in his letter made reference to the past event and people i.e. Abacha, “Egypt must teach some lessons” Page 10 paragraph 1 (Last line) Another use of sarcasm and face threatening Act by Obasanjo to Jonathan is obvious in these lines extracted from page 10, second paragraph

“...Assisting criminals to evade justice cannot be part of the job of the presidency”. The person whom Obasanjo was referring was not stated hereby flouts the maxim of manner; however, he was referring Kashamu Buruji the then leader of the PDP in South-West Nigeria, whom he accused of invading criminal trial in the United States for as a drug baron. Although this presupposes that there is a criminal and the criminal is real in the Nigerian political context and by implication, the said criminal; walks as a free man.

The issue that constitutes the theme of page ten was foregrounded in paragraph three of the same page. This has to do with the oil and gas sector with the discourse on corruption preceding it. In his statement, “... The major international oil companies have withheld investment in projects in Nigeria”. Flouts the maxim of quality because based on the background knowledge of the oil sector, although facing its own troubles, has not in any way deterred foreign investors in Nigeria. During his tenure as president, Obasanjo did not appoint a minister of petroleum for the country. Yet, he was in charge of oil transaction; one wonders the basis of his pointing accusing fingers of corruption in the oil industry against Jonathan.

The reference to Olokola LNG, Brass LNG and oil theft in pages 9-11 embraces the maxim of relation in its relevance to current happenings in the country. Obasanjo's statement, "... It is only apt to say that when the guard becomes the thief, nothing is safe, secure nor protected in the house" page 11 paragraph 1 and 2 by implication means that the person who is put in-charge of the oil and gas in Nigeria is a thief; drawing from the background knowledge and conversational implicature. In this case, as part of Jonathan own approach at stemming the tide of oil buckering and pipeline vandalism, he appointed former militants and members of Oduduwa People's Congress (OPC) to protect oil facilities. Thus, his statement aptly suggests that the ex-militants and OPC members in charge of protecting oil pipelines are the thieves.

Obasanjo called this person a 'dramatis personae' which is an obvious use of literal metaphor. His use of FTA is evident in his impolite use of these words thus: "... high corruption which seems to stink all around you in your government." This implies that Jonathan himself is corrupt. He also uses a face threatening Act by accusing Jonathan of, according to him, "Amaechi- Jonathan face-off"

His use of the word 'possessed' as referring to Jonathan was further made explicit in page 13 paragraph 1 where he impolitely referred to his aides as 'sycophants', wreckers and selfish. To also show that this letter foregrounds its topicalisation on power ideology by predominantly citing the issue of PDP party leadership (the recent chaos and disorderliness), he also talked about a criminal who was made as PDP zonal leader in South-West. This presupposes that there is a ruling party which is PDP in the South-West who has a leader in the person of Buruji Kashamu and that he, by implication is a wanted criminal.

In page 16, paragraph 2, Obasanjo's states thus; "God is never a supporter of evil and will surely save PDP and Nigeria from the hands of destroyers." This implies that Jonathan and his cabinet are evil. This is also FTA.

In page 17, paragraph 4, Obasanjo recaps what he made mention of in page 10 concerning foreign investors and their "retreating from Nigeria, adopting 'wait and see attitude..." This also flouts the maxim of quality because based on background knowledge the Nigerian economy still has the backing of foreign investors.

Obasanjo still talked on the said National conference which according to him is fraught with danger of disunity, confusion and chaos, this also does not flout the maxim of relation because it is recent. The thinking of Obasanjo at the time was that a national conference in the face of the security challenges in the country and widespread animosity between the north and the south was capable of dividing the country. His position was against the popular demand for a people's conference that would address the issues that confront the nation. He concludes in page 17 with another FTA saying "the ovation has not died out yet and there is always life after a decent descent". This

use of ‘decent descent’ is pun which implies Jonathan’s life after presidency.

On a contradictory statement, Obasanjo ends his lengthy letter in page 18, last line before endorsement stating thus: “Accept, Dear Mr. President, the assurance of my highest consideration. This is obviously ironical drawing from his use of FTA in virtually all he said on the pages of his letter.

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