

## Word Choice Analysis of President Muhammadu Buhari's May 29, 2015 Inaugural Speech: A Stylistic Study

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### Abstract

*Inaugural speeches are crafted to achieve interactive goals between the president elect and the electorate. Various analysis have been carried out on President Buhari's 2015 inaugural speech but very few have been focused on the speech act analysis of it; therefore, this study aims at examining the speech act models used in the speech with a bid to explicate the stylistic effects they have on the text and the readers. The study adopts J.L. Austin model of critical discourse analysis using speech act as the theoretical framework. The May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015 inaugural speech of Muhammadu Buhari forms the data for the study. The text is subjected to discourse speech act analysis with a focus on functional grammar. Findings reveal amongst many that the speech has many lexical items that reveal the prevailing socio-political context of Nigeria. The verbal usages reveal/express the obligations, commitment, promise and proactive measure which the president hopes to make in order to ensure the general welfare of the people. The choice of pronouns and sentence type show the president's readiness for an inclusive governance, unity and social cohesion. He metaphorically uses lexical items relating to war and growth to create a graphic image about the realities in the country with regard to social development and civil unrest which is bedeviling the country. The study concludes that presidential inaugurals are usually filled with covert ideological issues.*

**Key words:** Speech act, persuasion, political speech, Muhammadu Buhari, stylistics

### Introduction

Language is an important tool for expression in all human interactions. These expressions are referred to as “claims or commitments” (Toolan, 2010). Expression/interactions can be verbal or non-verbal. A number of activities can be achieved through speech or talk. The activities we can perform through speech/talk are important tools for expressions in all human interactions. These expressions are referred to as “claims” and include greetings, apologies, complements, requests, offers, questions, etc.

The context in which a particular speech is made is very important as it helps determine the type of speech act in use. If we imagine a speaker saying each of the following in a typical kind of context in which that remark is usually heard, we know very well that different things are being done through the speech in each case.

*“Good afternoon Mrs. Mark.*

*I’m really sorry for my actions.*

*That dress looks great on you.*

*Could you come back tomorrow?*

*Do you have a car?*

These are typically a greeting, an apology, a compliment, a request and a question respectively. It is clear from these that different activities are performed through talk.

Stylistics is a practical descriptive discipline which aims at establishing basic principles capable of explaining the linguistic choices that are employed by writer(s) in order to establish the genre and register of the text. It is a systematic discipline which explains the workings of language use in different genres and varieties of texts at different levels of language use to reveal the style used in the text (Chloupek and Nekvapil, 2016).

Stylistic study is scientific in nature because it employs verifiable facts in its data analysis. Political discourse is characterized by diverse strategies which political actors use in driving home their ideologies. There is always a talk (communication) between politicians and their audience (the electorate). This is so because an understanding must be reached between the politician and the electorate. In order to achieve this objective, the politician employs various strategies in negotiating their discourses. One of the ways in which this is done is through offers in form of persuasions. Diamond and Cobb (1999) view this persuasion as ‘the act of conversion, that is, convincing others, changing their views, shifting their ideal point along the imagined line’. Persuasion is the act of

making others embrace certain beliefs in order that they may either adopt new goals or abandon old ones for a higher goal presented by the persuader (Poggi, 2005).

Persuasion is an inherent human motive in interactions. Thus, it is always present or used in the political process by the actors in form of offers, requests or inform to persuade the people to accept their ideologies. This is because politicking is all about gaining the support of the electorate and state institutions.

Politicians are saddled with the task of devising strategies with which they can win the support of the electorate with ease. The task becomes burdensome at times as it involves getting people to change their mindset about their long held ideologies and making (forcing) them see through your own eyes and accept your own ideologies. Language thus becomes the channel of plying the trade of politics. Language therefore is used as a weapon of manipulation to make the people comply with their views through persuasive use of lexical items. Lohrey (1981) admits that “politics relies on language as its tool of trade”. Fairclough (2001) also opines that “language serves as the means of expression in any social process.” This means that the success of any social activity, political activity and inclusion relies on efficient deployment of the resource of linguistics.

Inaugural speeches are the first speeches made by people occupying leadership positions. In Nigeria, such speeches are used to win the interest of the electorate for collaborative and all-inclusive governance. The inaugural speech of President Muhammadu Buhari was delivered at the Eagles Square, Abuja on 29th May, 2015 shortly after his swearing in as the executive president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Muhammadu Buhari is a retired Nigerian Army Major General. He was once the military Head of State of Nigeria from December 31, 1983 to 27<sup>th</sup> August, 1985 after taking over power in a military coup d'état. “Buharism” is a term used in describing his military led government. In 2003, 2007, and 2011, he ran unsuccessfully for the presidential post. In December 2014, he emerged as the presidential candidate for All Progressive Congress (APC) for March 2015 general elections. He defeated the incumbent president – Goodluck Ebele Jonathan and became the president-elect. Linguistic resources are deployed to achieve certain goals in the inaugural speech of the president. This gives credence to the fact that there is a strong connection between language and ideological representations. As noted by Fairclough (2001), “ideology is central to social groups, class or society and ideas help to legitimize a dominant political power.”

Inaugural speeches of presidents are crafted to spell out the visions and missions of the president and thus solicit support from the audience/participants (electorates). In a bid to achieve this, effective use of offers, informs and requests are employed to persuade the people. Many inaugurals take the form of appeal to the people's emotional psyche as the president tries to arouse the feelings of the audience in order to attract their attention and boost their morale. Presidential inaugurals are filled with series of ideologies which are either overtly or covertly stated. A stylistic analysis using speech act theory helps to uncover the hidden

intentions in such speeches. It is against this background that the current study investigates the inaugural speech of May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015 of President Muhammadu Buhari with a view to explicate and describe the persuasive effect of the speech act models used in the text.

### **Speech Act Models and the Context of Nigerian Politics**

The use of speech act models as a strategy shows the different activities which can be performed through speech. Toolan (1998) noted that “there are hundreds of distinguishable acts performed through speech and that diversity emerges from a quite delimited systemic core of set of speech functions.” Speakers/conversationists use language to exchange information and services, which can be mental or verbal. However, ‘talks’ are not often reciprocal in nature. It can just be a transfer of information and/or service. Thus, when individuals talk to one another, they engage in an exchange which can be physical or mental and the grammar reflects it. Using the SFL approach, three speech act models are used to categorize the functions performed by Muhammadu Buhari in his inaugural speech as he tries to persuade the audience through informs, offers and requests. For example:

*I am immensely grateful to God...*

*I thank you all.*

*Today marks a triumph for Nigeria.*

*I intend to keep my oath and serve as president to all Nigerians.*

The president uses the above informs to perform different activities. The first expresses his gratitude to God, the second his gratitude or appreciation to those who voted him in, his victory becomes Nigerians victory in the third inform. He uses this particular inform as a tool to integrate/create a sense of belonging in the electorate. The next inform is aimed at showing the president’s readiness to govern the people with equity as he promises to be the president for everyone and not for a selected few. The above informs also serve to boost the morale of the people especially those who felt left out by the former Jonathan led administration.

He further maintains that Nigerians have made the right choice in voting him as he claims to maintain democracy, rule of law and spike off national development.

*There is a national consensus that our chosen route to national development is democracy.*

*Our journey has not been easy.*

*Nigerians will not regret that they have entrusted national responsibility to us.*

*The Federal Executive under my watch will not seek to encroach on the duties/functions*

*Of the legislative and judicial arm of the government.*

The president also uses inform to let the whole world know that Nigeria is capable of governing herself.

*We can fix our problems.*

This he uses to let the international society who has come to expect the worst from Nigeria know that Nigeria has grown to the point where she can handle her own things without foreign aid/assistance.

*I belong to everybody and I belong to nobody.*

This paradoxical declarative statement is very emphatic. The president uses it to achieve certain ideological goals. First, it has become common place in Nigeria for top politicians to have ‘god-fathers’ who stay behind the scene to dictate what the person in power should or should not do. ‘I belong to nobody’ is a warning to such ‘god-fathers’ not to interfere with his administration as he intends to be ‘president for all Nigerians’. Thus, all rooms to ‘god-fatherism’ are closed. Second, ‘I belong to everybody’, he shows his preparedness to listen to everybody and treat everyone with equity.

In response to those who have ‘voiced their fear that the president would go after them’ he says:

*There will be no paying back of old scores.*

*The past is prologue.*

This in form is paradoxical. At the surface level, the president seems to be saying: I forgive you. There will be no visiting the past or paying old scores. But figuratively, a prologue is a device used by writers of plays and prose to tell readers what to expect from the story which helps them in understanding the events as they unfold. So, stylistically/linguistically speaking, ‘the past is prologue’ would mean ‘let’s see what happens,’ “we will see how your past actions will be treated as we continue in our governance.” The past is prologue could also mean “the past will dictate how we are going to act and treat you in the future. Stylistically, the president has not informed those people that he has forgiven them neither did he offer to forgive them, rather, he promises/informs them that their future actions will determine whether the past is history (no payment of old scores) or prologue (payment dependent on future actions/events).

Moreover, the president uses offers to solicit the support of the masses. He tactfully and covertly states some of his political ideologies through some offers.

*We shall rebuild and reform the public service.*

This is an offer aimed at encouraging the civil servants to make them feel at home with the new government since they are regarded as part and parcel of the policy makers. The pronoun we is used to achieve this.

The president being aware of what is obtainable in the judiciary at the time and what is expected of the judiciary, by the citizens uses the speech act model of offer to show his readiness to bring the expected to play, thus:

*...the judicial system needs reform to cleanse itself  
from its immediate past.*

In addition, in order to relief the fear of the electorate with regard to accountability and reliable government that will bring about development, good life and economic buoyancy to the people, he says,

*I will ensure there is responsible and accountable  
governance at all levels of government.*

The president did not forget the role and place of Nigeria in Africa. He therefore uses offer to inform the African continent his readiness to lead and ensure that peace and inter country relationship is maintained.

*Nigeria under our administration will be ready to  
play any leadership role that Africa expects of it.*

Boko Haram terroristic activities have been a source of worry to the government and the citizens alike. The president is not ignorant of this. He thus offers to do everything possible to ensure that they are conquered and that those held captive are released and peace restored to the hitherto areas devoid of peace.

*The military command centre will be relocated to  
Maiduguri until Boko Haram is completely  
subdued.*

In his speech, the president shows sportsmanship and statesman qualities by offering to forgive those who have hurt him in one way or the other thus;

*There will be no paying of old scores.*

These are instances of request in the speech. The president uses this as he seeks to enlist the cooperation of the electorate. He realizes that he cannot do it alone and thus resorts to implore different arms of government, organisations and indeed the citizens to join him in order to achieve good governance. Thus, he appeals to employers and workers alike to unite in raising production.

*...we must not succumb to hopeless and defeatism.*

*...the law enforcement authorities will be charged to operate within the constitution.*

*The legislative arm must keep to their brief of making laws.*

The underlined phrasal verbs are used by the president to request the cooperation of the above aforementioned.

Request model is also used to remind Nigerians of their great inheritance, thus

*...we as Nigerians must remind ourselves that we are heirs to great civilization.*

The president is not ignorant of the power of the media. He enlists their cooperation thus,

*My appeal to the media...is to exercise its considerable powers with responsibility and patriotism.*

As touching combating Boko Haram, he requests that people in the affected areas join in the war against terrorism by cooperating with the state and federal leadership to ensure that victory is achieved.

*I call on the leadership and the people in these areas to cooperate with the State and Federal government ....*

*We have an opportunity, let us take it.*

This study will not be complete if we fail to consider some of the cohesive devices used as they have great stylistic effect in the speech. Cohesion is all the linguistic ways in which words of a passage, across sentences, cross-refer or link up (Toolan). Cohesion can also mean the way sentences in a text are connected which helps it to achieve a logical meaning.

There are different types of cohesion such as reference, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesions. In this study, we will be considering only reference cohesion as it is the most prominent cohesive device used in the speech by the president. Reference cohesion is an instance where we use a grammatical word in one sentence with or to refer to a word or phrase in a separate sentence. Examples of reference cohesion are pronouns and comparative adjectives. We will be considering the use of pronoun in the text to determine the stylistic effect it has on the text.

Pronouns are cohesive elements that have grammatical effects in texts. Brown and Gilman opine that pronouns are “elements which indicate ideological,

pragmatic and social values”. Moreover, pronouns have encoded values in various aspects of language. Pronouns are used in a text to substitute a noun in order to avoid redundancy and unnecessary repetition in speech. In political speeches, they are used to either foreground or obscure certain ideologies by the political actor. The text has diverse use of pronouns. The most prominent used pronoun in the text is WE. Stylistically, this cohesive device has been used to achieve various effects in the text. First, it expresses a strong sense of solidarity with the audience. This presupposes an inclusiveness, togetherness and oneness. This pronoun is used by the president as a strategy to create or give the audience a sense of belonging. He stylistically uses it to create a ‘space’ for the electorate in the political affairs of the country.

It also has the effect of awakening people’s consciousness and group identity towards nation building. He also uses it to share some values with the audience (electorate), values such as national unity, joint effort in combating corruption and Boko Haram terroristic activities, etc. Instances of the use of this cohesion device include:

*We can fix our problems.*

*We have to improve the standard of our education.*

*We have to upgrade our dilapidated physical structure.*

*We shall rebuild and reform the Public Service.*

The pronoun I is next on the most frequently used in the text. The president uses it to express personal opinions, feelings and responsibility. The pronoun "I" helps reveal the action plan and beliefs of the president. Instances are:

I belong to everybody. I belong to nobody.

I intend to keep my oath and serve as president to all Nigerians.

I will ensure there is responsible and accountable governance at all levels of government.

I am ready to listen to the grievances of my fellow Nigerians.

Below is a table showing the pronouns used and their frequency.

<u>Pronoun</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
We	26
Our	24



Us	9
I	23
You	1
Them	3
It	6
They	4
Ourselves	1
Themselves	1
Itself	1
Me	1
This	1

From the above, it is clear that the president stylistically used different pronouns to achieve his aim which is to communicate his feelings, values, ideologies and to create a sense of belonging in the audience. The pronouns were also used to make some offers and requests to the electorate.

### **Conclusion**

This study has examined the stylistic relevance of President Muhammadu Buhari's May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015 inaugural speech. We have discussed in detail how speech act models of offer, request and inform are used by the president to achieve his goal. It is also discovered that the president made use of some cohesive devices in order to achieve cohesion and thus enlist the support and cooperation of the electorate.

The president used the different speech act model to inform (communicate) his ideologies, action plans and expectations to the audience.

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