

Ideological Depictions in the 2023 Presidential Election Campaign in Nigeria

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Abstract

Electoral campaigns the world over are captured in persuasive communicative strategies to woo the electorate. The intention is to convince the electorate to vote in a particular direction. Since the enthronement of democracy in Nigeria in 1999 till date, politicians have devised various means of winning elections by touching at the core of perceived social problems. There seems to be a paradigm shift in the mode of campaigning in the build-up to the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. Before this time, there were two dominant political parties in the country: the Peoples' Democratic Party, PDP, and the All-Progressive Congress, APC. However, the entry of the Labour Party LP presidential candidate into the race has changed the dynamics of the game. The LP candidate has deployed linguistic resources in such a manner that he has endeared himself to the youth who constitute most of the population that cuts across all ethnic groups in the country. The support for the LP candidate keeps growing daily. Therefore, the focus of this paper is to examine the ideological representation of the campaign speeches of the LP candidate and explicate how he has effectively managed the resources of language to get himself endeared to the teeming youthful voting population. Data for the study were elicited from newspaper reports of the speeches and YouTube.

Keywords: Ideology, Depictions, LP, Presidential Election Campaign, Nigeria

1. Introduction

This study is built on the assumption that the choice of words used by an individual is a form of depiction in a general sense; because "naming and lexical choices are value-laden and ideologically charged" (Kress, 1983; van Dijk 1995; Clark 1998). Ideological representation is anchored on the fact that "the naming choice is based on the ideology of those who name". we should note that in ideological discourses, "special attention should be given to studying words and phrases because labels often carry unavoidable connotations", Fowler (1999: 84), "lexical choices have always been seen as very crucial in the construction of meaning by marking off socially and ideologically distinct areas of experience". The idea of "marking off" indicates a categorization process where *labellers* divide the world into *Us* and *Them* forms of ideological polarization.

Ebim (2020:14) opined that "whenever there is a major political development or policy adoption in

any clime, there would be reactions which could be positive or negative. In other words, political moves and development necessarily engender criticism, whether constructive or destructive. More often than not, criticism from an opposing or opposition party is considered as distractive, if not destructive, by those from the ruling party, while the reactions from the ruling party amongst its members are viewed as constructive".

This could decipher how reference to participants in an event can cognitively and socially categorize in-group and out-group identities (Fowler et. al., 1979: 200).

Operating within these parameters, Norman Fairclough identifies two aspects of representation: "The first has to do with structuring, the second with sequencing, (1995b: 104). This, therefore, means that the choice of words used in the nomination and characterization of social actors are of particular significance in an analysis where critical analytical model is however useful in the context of analyzing labels because of the

evaluative role of lexicalization in the context of news reporting. Taking a critical look at our data from the angle of CDA, we highlight how personal relationships exist in a text, (qtd in Ebim 2017).

This approach is concerned with lexical items that carry or can be interpreted to carry a positive or negative assessment of people, places, happenings, things, states of affairs, etc. It also includes items that trigger positive or negative assessments of people, places, things, happenings, and states of affairs in the reader's cognition (or the listener's, in the case of verbal utterances).

Our analysis of ideological depiction draws mainly from the Judgment subsystem as it is concerned with the textual realizations that most likely occur in speeches. Judgment here can be taken to mean, "the institutionalization of feeling, in the context of proposals (norms about how people should and shouldn't behave)" (Martin 2000:155).

In a political discourse of this nature, we have two types of Judgment: positive Judgment and negative Judgment. The social actors and their behaviour thus may be judged as acceptable or unacceptable, moral or immoral, legal or illegal, etc. However, Jovanovic-Krstic stresses that "Judgment is highly determined by cultural and ideological values, and as such what is viewed as appropriate in one culture may not be viewed in the same light in another" (2000: 75). The study, therefore, draws on what is acceptable or acceptable in the Nigerian context while taking extracts from the data as case studies. In the analysis, we consider the way participants are referred to and their responses (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001; van Dijk, 1993).

2. Theoretical Underpinning and Conceptual Framework

Following Van Dijk's ideological square, one can say that the discursive construction of *Us* and *Them* dichotomy often combines the depiction of others with us (van Dijk, 1998), especially in the discourses of 'group conflict or competition' (van Dijk 1998: 275). Van Dijk's (1998) theoretical postulation of the ideological square uncovers the discursive reproduction of the ideology of positive us and negative them. Using sub-categorization of the ideological square, van Dijk (1998: 276) cited 'the distribution of agency, responsibility or blame'. Using responsibility as blame has been widely

applied in politics-related discourses to construct and normalize the negative. Wodak, 2001) echoes the third element of the ideological square where accountable actors are seen to possess a developed moral sense and a fair idea of social conventions and moral principles.

According to van Dijk (1998a), the concept of ideology is "one of the most elusive notions in the social sciences" (1998: 23). Ideology has been defined by various schools of thought and by many scholars who have worked on ideology, power relations, hegemonic trends, and discourse studies. Consequently, therefore, there are multifarious definitions, interpretations, and connotations of the term ideology. Contemporary theoretical approaches to ideology focus on dominant groups, political economy, gender, and culture, "ideas and beliefs which help to legitimize the interest of a ruling group or class by distortion or dissimulation" (van Dijk 1998:30, as cited in Calzada Perez, 2003:4).

2. Ideology and Politics

According to van Dijk (2006a), as soon as ideologies acquire political functions in the field of politics in addition to their general social functions, they become "political ideologies." The concept of political ideology, or the idea that political opinions and attitudes are connected and linked together in a coherent system, has been theorized as particularly important for a well-functioning democracy (Carmines and D'Amico, 2015). It is widely recognized that the field of politics is highly ideological because when there are opposing elements, conflict is bound to occur. This means that political discourses and many phenomena in the political field such as elections, political campaigns, propaganda, etc. are potentially ideological (van Dijk, 2006b).

A vast amount of literature on political discourse shows that explicitly, formulated, ideological issues abound in electioneering campaigns, where van Dijk (2006a) proposed a mental model of the political situation, which defines how participants experience, interpret, and represent aspects of the political situation that are relevant for them. A detailed explanation of the question of how context models control political discourse and what cognitive processes are involved is beyond the

scope of this paper. However, it is first important to mention that pragmatic context models control political speeches; consequently, statements and their intentions can be interpreted differently, (van Dijk, 2006a). for example, overall party program, layout party advertisement, conversational structure, political interview, political discourse etc constitute forms of ideological demonstrations.

3. Data Analysis

The data used in this study were elicited from political interviews, campaigns and speeches rendered by politicians during the 2023 elections in Nigeria. The data were subjected to an analytical model based on the van Dijk ideological square. This process enabled us to critically explore the manipulative strategies of the speaker to win votes from the teeming masses, especially the youthful population. Our focus was based on three key strands of ideology as presented below:

4. Ideology of Persuasion

The ideology of Persuasion is rooted in particular linguistic choices that aim at changing or affecting the behaviour of others or strengthening the existing beliefs and behaviours of those who already agree, the beliefs and behaviours of persuaders included (Kinneavy 1980: 211; Jucker 1997:122). It is part of the more general notion of argumentation which covers the whole range of discourse that aims at and conviction, whatever the audience addressed and whatever the subject matter" (1982:5). The Labour Party presidential candidate in the 2023 election, Mr Peter Obi effectively utilizes the ideology of persuasion to convince the electorate to vote for him. In flagging off his presidential campaign in Jos, the Plateau state capital, Peter Obi admonishes his supporters thus:

"If you elect me as your president, I will provide security at all levels so that our people can go to the farm and by so doing, the issue of food insecurity and hunger will be a thing of the past".

Here the LP candidate deploys the conditional argumentative topoi "if" to lay the foundation for his projected plans for the liberation of the people who have been held hostage as a result of the ravaging insecurity in the country. In recent times, herdsmen have held sway in preventing farmers

from cultivating their crops thus plunging the nation into a state of hunger. For this presidential candidate, therefore, the first point of call will be the provision of security and the protection of lives and property. With insecurity comes unemployment. As a means of touching the minds of the millions of unemployed youths, the next utterance of the LP presidential candidate is the promise of alleviation of poverty, provision of job opportunities, a functional educational system, and the supply of electricity. In his words:

"we will create jobs for our teeming unemployed youth and end poverty. We will make our educational system functional and improve electricity supply".

In this promise, there is the policy of inclusiveness or inclusion. The use of the royal "we" portrays the candidate as an all-inclusive presidential candidate whose government will be built on a diplomatic approach to tackling issues. In his quest for a new brand of politicking devoid of criminal tendencies, the LP candidate reflecting on the level of corruption that has ravaged the country and the need for a better society for the teeming youth, advocates a new Nigeria as he asserts:

"we want a new Nigeria, and we are determined to make Nigerians happy again"

For him, the present state of the country leaves no smile on the faces of the masses and for that change to come, it must be through the ballot. Every politician must utilize the opportunity provided at every stage. The crises in the opposition PDP provided an opportunity for the LP candidate to have an in-road into one of the major states in the country. On the occasion of the commissioning projects in Port Harcourt the Rivers state capital and on the invitation of the sitting governor who is at loggerheads with his party presidential candidate, the LP candidate used the occasion to persuasively appeal for votes in the state. He notes: "We will not quarrel with you. Please give us this one (centre) and collect the other one (state). I will accommodate them (Rivers state) in the other one." Remember this agreement today. I'm kneeling down and begging, take this one (state) give me this one (centre). I assure you the one I will take; I will use it to make sure Rivers State becomes better and better."

Here the LP candidate asks for the “exchange” or “swopping” of positions if you like. He asks the people of Rivers state to vote for him while his followers will vote for the opposition PDP gubernatorial candidate in the state. For some, it marks the politics of betrayal of his {Obi’s} governorship candidate as a negotiating tool for the realization of his {Obi’s} “selfish” ambition. Whichever way one looks at it, the LP candidate has the manipulative strength to effectively utilize the resources of language in navigating a “rough” political terrain. He confirms this by saying: *“I will talk to my people, and we will negotiate. If we leave the state for him (Wike) he will leave the centre for us. We will negotiate it”*. In the strength of “negotiation” lies the ability to creatively utilise the resources of language to achieve a political ambition. Through this process, the political atmosphere is charged even as members of the Labour Party in Rivers state begin to grow to mix feelings.

On the part of the APC presidential candidate, Bola Tinubu while speaking at the rally described himself as one of “a few” presidential candidates still in the race, according to him, *“As I stand before you, there are a few of us left running. One says he is Atiku. How many times has he been running? He is always on the run and he is tired. Tell him to go and sit down. Enough is enough,”* he had bragged that it is a “disgrace” to mention the name of the Labour Party’s presidential candidate, Peter Obi, in his presence. He claimed that the statistics the Labour Party candidate dished out every time was not what Nigerians were going to eat. Making mockery of his LP opponent, the former Lagos governor said that all the statistics Peter Obi dished out were wrong, *“The other one, that one; he thinks that it is statistics we will chop; in line with arithmetics that no Indian can solve. To mention his name is a disgrace to me self. I won't mention his name; wrong arithmetics, wrong statistics, warehouse economy; that is not what Nigeria needs.”* He (Tinubu) has a record of making mockery of political opponents, despite having a bag of controversies around his neck – chief among them being that he was allegedly a former drugs baron. It was earlier reported that Tinubu said it was disrespectful to mention the name of the deputy governorship

candidate of the People’s Democratic Party in Lagos, Funke Akindele, in his presence.

Tinubu had made this known at a political outing, where his supporters sang a campaign song, describing Funke Akindele as a political “ant” compared to the incumbent governor of Lagos and candidate of the APC in the 2023 election, Babajide Sanwo-Olu. He however cautioned his supporters against mentioning Akindele’s name in his presence, describing it as disrespectful and an insult. *“Don’t even bother to mention her name in my presence. It is an insult. It is disrespectful,”* the former Lagos governor had said.

5. Ideology of Polarization “Us” “Them”

Ideological polarization refers to the extent to which the electorate has divergent beliefs on ideological issues or beliefs that are consistently conservative or liberal across a range of issues. It is divided into two forms: Partisan sorting which refers to the extent to which the electorate “sorts” or identifies with a party based on their ideological, racial, religious, gender, or other demographic characteristics while Affective polarization refers to the extent to which the electorate “dislikes” or “distrusts” those from other parties.

These two are made manifest by the oratorical power of the candidate who is in a position to “inject” such ideologies into the electorate. The LP candidate effectively utilizes this form of ideology to press home his message for the electorate to vote for him. In his presidential flag-off speech, he opines: *“We will block all leakages and end corruption at all levels; our government will be a responsible one. We will not fail Nigerians”*. In the above text, he presents the sitting government as “corrupt”, “irresponsible”, “criminals” and a “failure”. In the recent past, there have been outcries for outright criminality in the Niger Delta region through the illegal lifting of crude oil, bunkering, and the sponsorship of criminal activities in the region. The LP candidate had blamed the FG for all of these and in his opening campaign speech, he promises to “block” all leakages thus placing the blame on the federal government. In this case, the ideology of polarization manifests in the speech thus presenting the federal government as “bad” while the LP candidate is “good”. The FG is also portrayed

as “irresponsible” thus giving the LP candidate the posture of a “responsible” person.

6. The ideology of Negative Other-Presentation

The main concern of this strategy is to investigate participants as social groups rather than mere individuals and present the participants in terms of Us versus Them (Van Dijk, 2015b). About the core of the present study, Van Dijk (2006a, p. 373) has made a statement about the operation of these two complementary strategies in terms of the ideological square and how they influence the structure of the various levels of a discourse.

On the occasion of the commissioning of projects in Port Harcourt, the Rivers State capital, the LP candidate used the opportunity to massage the ego of the governor as a way of getting votes from the electorate in that state. He portrays the governor as a man of character, integrity, and moral standing. Addressing the governor of Rivers state, Nyesom Wike, the LP candidate says, “What is lacking in our country today is character, competence, and capacity, and you have all of these”. For him, the governor has “an unblemished character” unlike other politicians in the country thus portraying him as being “good” because of the proposed alliance to exchange votes. This positive portrayal influences the direction of the voting pattern in the elections. Further eulogizing the governor and placing him on a positive pedestal, the LP candidate says:

“Nobody in this country can doubt your performance. Anybody who does so does not admit what is good. You have worked for your people; you have worked for Nigeria, and you have done everything anybody could achieve. Most importantly, you have remained consistently consistent in the positions you have taken”.

Here Wike is positively depicted as an unblemished character based on his “performance” thus creatively manipulating language to suit the political ambition of the presidential candidate. The choice of words markedly places the speaker in a position of a “judge” whose sole aim is to win the hearts of the electorate in that state and garner votes for him in the elections. Here again, political use of language plays a significant role in the campaigns of ensuring success at the polls.

7. Findings and Conclusion

The analysis reveals ideological inclinations in the campaign speeches of the LP candidate in the build-up to the election. Such instances of ideology include Ideology of Persuasion, the Ideology of Polarization “Us” and “Them”, and the ideology of Negative Other-Presentation. In the ideology of Persuasion, we notice that it is found in the linguistic choices to change or affect the behaviour of the electorate to strengthen the existing beliefs and behaviours of the candidate. This strand of ideological belief is part of the more general notion of argumentation which covers the whole range of discourse that aims at conviction, whatever the audience addressed and whatever the subject matter. The Labour Party presidential candidate effectively utilizes this ideology to convince the electorate to vote for him. The candidate deploys the conditional argumentative *topoi* to lay the foundation for his projected plans for the liberation of the people who have been held hostage because of the ravaging insecurity in the country. This is also applicable to the use of inclusivity to harness votes. In the Ideology of Polarization “Us” and “Them”. The candidate uses ideological polarization refers to the extent to which the electorate has divergent beliefs on ideological issues or beliefs that are consistently conservative or liberal across a range of issues. It is divided into two forms: Partisan sorting which refers to the extent to which the electorate “sorts” or identifies with a party based on their ideological, racial, religious, gender, or other demographic characteristics while Affective polarization refers to the extent to which the electorate “dislikes” or “distrusts” those from other parties. These two are made manifest by the oratorical power of the candidate who is able to “inject” such ideologies into the electorate. He deployed this form of ideology to press home his message for the electorate to vote for him. Finally, the study uncovered the ideology of Negative Other-Presentation to investigate participants as social groups rather than being mere individuals and presenting the participants in terms of Us versus Them. The use of the operation of these two complementary strategies in terms of the ideological square according to van Dijk (1998) influences the structure of the various levels of discourse.

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