

## LANGUAGE AND POLITICAL COMMITMENT: A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF PRESIDENT MUHAMMADU BUHARI'S JUNE 12 INAUGURAL DEMOCRACY DAY SPEECH

Ogidan, Olajide Felix<sup>1\*</sup>

Kumuyi, Olubamiji Omojola<sup>2</sup>

Kumuyi, Bolanle Bukola<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1, 2&3</sup> Rufus Giwa Polytechnic, Owo, Nigeria

\*corresponding Email: olaidefelix\_ogidan@rugipo.edu.ng

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### ABSTRACT

Political discourses all over the world and among scholars have assumed different linguistic impetus. Language and political intrigues are inseparable concepts among the electorates and the elected political office holders in any society. Hence, this research work was conducted to identify the speech act features of President Muhammadu Buhari's June 12 inaugural democracy day speech. The paper explored the pragmatic functions of locution, illocution and perlocutionary acts in the speech. It adopted the theoretical framework of Speech Act as propounded by J.L. Austin (1962) and modified by John Searle in his classification, (1969). It further looked at specific illocutionary acts that were used in the speech; they include assertives (31%), directives (10%), expressives (11%), commissives (46%) and declaratives (02%). Thus, the analysis proved further that the illocutionary acts performed by Mr. President showed the preponderance use of commissive and assertives acts which were mostly used to convince, assert, explain, persuade and command the listeners to certain actions. This goes a long way in showing commitment to building a better nation. The result showed that politicians rely extensively on statements or speeches using commissive acts to achieve their political ambitions before, during and after electioneering campaigns. Needed to be said at this juncture, is the fact that illocutionary acts play significant roles in political speeches across the world

**Keywords:** linguistics, political discourse, speech acts, politics

### INTRODUCTION

It has been established among scholars that when people produce utterances or make statements, they as well perform certain actions through the utterances. Hence, these actions being performed while making utterance are called speech acts. These

communication processes permeate all strata of the society, politics inclusive. According to Stanton (2004:3), “we do not communicate in a vacuum, the art of communication always takes place within a situation or context”. Needed to be added is the review of Mey (2001:68), which states that “people talk with the intention to communicate something to somebody: this is the foundation of all linguistic communication”.

Further still, language and communication cannot be separated. Humans need to communicate, and language is one of the vital tools for such human action. The study of how humans communicate such feelings and thoughts in the society becomes inevitable in this context. No wonder, he further opines that Pragmatics is the study of the way humans use their language in communication as determined by the conditions of society (6). In his contribution, George Yule (1996:83) opines that what speakers mean or speaker’s meaning, how we recognize what is meant even when it is not actually are within the ambit of pragmatics. Thus, the need for politicians to communicate to the electorates and the tool of language is an indispensable tool among politicians and political leaders in any society.

It must be stated here that democracy as a form of government in Nigeria requires periodic elections into the office of the President as being practiced in most countries of the world. This is done every four years. Nigerian President is expected to address the nation on the 29th May, of every year. This is a norm in Nigeria and to mark the democracy day in the country. This tradition started in 1999, immediately after the swearing-in of a democratically elected President; Chief Olusegun Obasanjo. But in 2019, exactly 20 years of uninterrupted democratic dispensation in Nigeria, Mr. President, did not address the nation as expected on May 29 rather he chose a new date, (June 12). Ironically, the new date (June 12) was the day Nigerians went to the polls to elect a President in 1993. The presumed winner of the freest and fairest election in Nigerian history as declared by both local and international observers, the candidate of the Social Democratic Party SDP, Chief MKO Abiola was not declared the winner.

The election was annulled by the then military government led by General Ibrahim Babangida, who ruled between 27th August 1985 and 26th August 1993. The annulment ignited wide demonstrations, political unrest and crisis across the nation, and was widely and strongly condemned by world leaders. The presumed winner, Chief MKO Abiola, Civil Society groups, pro-democracy activists, students’ bodies, all strata of the society had challenged the annulment and the then military government, calling for official announcement of Chief MKO Abiola and the recognition of June 12 as real democracy day.

Subsequently, when the incumbent President, Muhammadu Buhari sent a bill to the National Assembly to recognize June 12 as Nigerian Democracy day, political observers, civil society groups, students’ bodies and Nigerians in general were happy and required a speedy passage of such bill. Most Nigerians saw it as a welcome development. So, June 12, 2019 became the inaugural June 12 democracy

day. And as expected, Mr. President delivered his first June 12 democracy day speech.

### Language and Politics

As pointed out early, Language is a means by which humans communicate. It is a tool in the hand of an individual the moment he or she acquires it and makes him or her function very well in the society. On this, Charles Meyer (2009:1) states that language is one of the many different systems of communication, a system that is unique to humans. It means that in the making of a society or nation, the importance of language cannot be over emphasised. And politics is basically all about struggling to gain and control power. Thus, it is expedient to state at this juncture that language and politics are inseparable concepts because they are interwoven. Politicians perform a number of activities such as campaigns, manifesto, rallies, elections, inauguration and governance through the use of language.

John Abuya (2012:8) avers that “the essence of power in governance and affairs of people can never be subject of attraction and they are as important as well as the language used by them”. In the same vein, Adrian Beard (2005:57) gives a rather insightful view that “political campaigns, speeches, written texts and broadcast are meant to inform and instruct voters about issues that are considered to be of great importance”. Needed to be emphasised here is the fact that speeches of political office holders have been studied by various scholars and linguists from different perspectives.

Adedayo Emanuel and Adebukunola Atolagbe (2011) used Speech Act Theory to unravel former President Olusegun Obasanjo’s speech, on a discourse analysis. They posit that an act is communicated as soon as the speaker’s intention is recognized by the hearers, for effective communication in socio-political relevance. They submit that the farewell speech used the instrument of expressive, assertive and commissives in communicating to Nigerians to support the administration of Yar’Adua, as the President of Nigeria. Also, Oyinkan Medubi and Fatima Amuda (2016) worked on the Socio-Pragmatic Analysis of President Buhari’s use of I belong to Everybody and I Belong to Nobody. They bring out how President Buhari used language to project his determination and commitment to transform Nigeria. They submit that President Buhari’s wish for cooperation and support from all Nigerians in the interest of the nation goes beyond party affiliation rather; it is for national development and unity of the nation.

OlubANJI Kumuyi (2016) employs Speech Act Theory to analyse the campaign speech of President Goodluck Jonathan. He argues that Language of politics, especially political speeches could be better understood through the Speech Act Theory. He opines that communication occurs for purposes which are brought to fore though analysis of the utterances. The language of campaign speech is solely assertive and expressive, because such candidate needs to say, appeal, and promise and implore the people in order to get their support and votes (32).

## Aims of the Study

Linguistics in relation to social interaction as basis for this study helped us in this paper, hence it was principally aimed to among other things identify and analyse the various acts that manifest in the democracy day speech of Mr. President. How the identified acts (language) directly and indirect project the messages of the President was also demonstrated in the analysis, using the speech Act Theory. Thus, the analysis was meant basically to show how Speech Acts are being used unknowingly by politicians to communicate their intentions to the electorate worldwide.

## THEORETICAL REVIEW

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According to George Yule (1996), Pragmatics is the study of what speakers mean or speakers' meaning". He opines further that Pragmatics is the study of invisible meaning or how we recognize what is meant even when it is not actually said. Thus, we apply the linguistic framework of Speech Act Theory (SAT) as propounded by John Langston Austin (1962). The theory is primarily categorized into three groups which are locutionary act; this is an act of saying something or the act of producing an utterance, illocutionary act is the core of the theory of speech act; the social acts performed by the speaker and the perlocutionary acts, which are the effects upon the feelings, thought, or actions of the listeners or behaviors of the addressees. He categorised illocutionary act into five classes: verdictives, executives, commissives, behabitives and expositives.

However, theorists after Austin worked and improved on his theory, hence John Searle's (1969) modification of the illocutionary forces of utterances as follows:

- i. Assertives: There are statements of fact; they describe states of affairs in the world which could be true or false. They commit a speaker to truth of the expressed proposition, e.g. stating, reporting and suggesting.
- ii. Directives: These are attempts by the speaker to get the hearers to act in such a way as to fulfil what is represented by the content of the proposition; e.g. commanding, requesting, pleading and inviting.
- iii. Commissives: These are statements that commit the speaker to certain future actions. The speaker becomes committed to act in a way requested by the propositional content; e.g. promising, vowing, warning and challenging.
- iv. Expressives: These statements indicate sincerity of the speech act. It is the expression of some psychological state, e.g. thanking, apologizing and congratulating.
- v. Declaratives: These are statements that bring out performances about the correspondence between the propositional content and reality. These statements say something and make it so. Examples are accepting, resigning and pronouncing someone guilty.

Hence, the Theory of Speech Act is applied to the data selected from a large portion of the speech. As generally believed, people perform various acts or actions when sentences or utterances are made.

### PRESENTATION OF DATA

| Illocutionary Acts    | Assertives |    | Commissives |     | Declaratives |    | Directives |     | Expressives |     | Total |
|-----------------------|------------|----|-------------|-----|--------------|----|------------|-----|-------------|-----|-------|
| <b>June 12 Speech</b> | No         | %  | No          | %   | No           | %  | No         | %   | No          | %   |       |
|                       | 31         | 31 | 46          | 46% | 02           | 2% | 10         | 10% | 11          | 11% | 100   |

### Interpretation and Discussion of Data

The table above presents a frequency distribution of Speech Acts (Illocutionary) in President Muhammadu Buhari's June 12 Inaugural Democracy Day Speech. It was observed right through the data and as presented above, the following illocutionary acts; Assertives at 31%, Directives at 10%, Commissive at 46%, Expressive at 11%, and Declaratives at 2%.

It is obvious from this painstaking presentation that commissives constitute 46%. This shows that Mr. President displays more commitment in his speech to future actions by the hearers (Nigerian). It shows more of promises to Nigerians and assuring them of better and much united Nation. These illocutionary acts (commissives) indicate commitment in terms of loyalty and undivided allegiance to the unity of Nigeria as shown by President Muhammadu Buhari. It must be pointed out as evidentially shown in the speech that Mr. President requested cooperative actions from Nigerians to lift the nation out of poverty.

Thus, he is challenging fellow Nigerians to cooperate with his government so that Nigeria will be a better and prosperous nation for all. Examples of commissive acts are; "Terrorism and insecurity are worldwide phenomena and even the best-policed countries are experiencing increasing incidents of unrest and are finding things hard to cope", "A huge responsibility, therefore, rests on this and succeeding Administration to develop, harness and fulfill our enormous potentials into a force to be reckoned with globally", "We are meeting these challenges with superior strategy, firepower and resolve", "China and Indonesia succeeded under authoritarian regimes... We can do it", "with leadership and a sense of purpose, we can lift 100 million Nigerians out of poverty in 10 years", "When economic inequality rises, insecurity rises", "As Chairman of ECOWAS, I will be hosting a regional security summit of Heads of States in the Sahel to develop a joint strategy to continue our efforts in addressing these issues", "We will continue to listen to your ideas and plans not just about how we can secure more investment, but how your plans can

help create a more equitable economy”, “Our government will continue work to reduce social and economic inequality through targeted social investment program, education, technology and improved information” and “Over the next four years, we are committed to assembling a strong team of Nigerians, and allies, to implement our transformative plans and proposals”.

The analysis of the data also shows that assertives account for 31% of the total sentences in the speech. This apparently presents Mr. President as a sincere and honest politician who does not believe in giving out orders only but also saying the truth and stating the correct affairs of the nation to Nigerians. He reports and says without mincing words that the true pictures of all the aspects of developing a nation like Nigeria. Examples are “Twenty years ago, a democratically elected government took over from the military in a historic transfer of political power for our country”, “All interested parties are agreed that the recent elections, which except for pockets of unrest, were free, fair and peaceful”, “Fellow Nigerians, I have had the privilege of free education from primary school to Staff College to War College”, “None but the most partisan will dispute that in the last four years we have made solid progress in addressing these challenges”, “We now have witnessed 8 quarters of positive growth in the economy and our GDP is expected to grow by 2.7 percent this year”, “Fellow Nigerians, Your Excellencies, Ladies & Gentlemen, we know that there exists a strong correlation between economic inequality and insecurity” and “Nation building takes time”.

The directive illocutionary acts, from the data analysis and frequency distribution accounts for 10% of the total sentences. Mr. President shows actions indicating elements of giving instructions, requesting and advising Nigerians into certain actions. He further requests and as well commands in few instances. Where necessary, he gives instructions. He as well pleads with and appeals to Nigerians to support his government to achieve his party’s programme for a better nation. Examples are; “At home, we have been successful in forging a nation from different ethnicities and language groups: our evolution and integration into one nation continue apace”, “This Administration is laying the fundamental and taking bold steps in transforming our country and liberating our people from the shackles of poverty”, “This charge is not only to Civil Servants, Ministers, Legislators, and Government functionaries but also to corporate leaders”, “Fellow Nigerians, your Highness, your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, I invite you to join me on this journey of rebuilding our nation” and “Our focus will not be to help the privileged few but to ensure that Nigeria works for Nigerians of all persuasions”.

The speech contains 11% of expressive illocutionary acts from the data analysis. The expressive sentences used by Mr. President indicate utterances which express his psychological state and his inner mind on various issues. These utterances also thank and praise Nigerians for their supports. He shows his gratitude to the people and some of such expressives include: “I thank all the people who worked for our party who campaigned and who voted for us”, “Fellow Nigerians, Your Excellencies, Ladies

Gentlemen, at this point, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the entrepreneurs, investors and venture capitalists”, “We will continue to count on your support, guidance and understanding during the next four years” and “God bless us all, and God bless the Federal Republic of Nigeria”.

The declarative illocutionary acts account for just 2% of the total utterances in the speech. President Muhammadu Buhari was careful with his choice of words. Being a democracy day speech, he did not pronounce anybody guilty rather; he only proclaimed that June 12 should be observed, henceforth, as a public holiday and a day to celebrate democracy in Nigeria. Instances of declarative utterances are; “Victory is your greatest reward; peace, unity and greater prosperity will be our collective legacy” and “Most of the instances of inter-communal and inter-religious strife and violence were and are still as a result of sponsorship”.

## CONCLUSION

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It is evidently clear from the data analysis and interpretation above that President Muhammadu Buhari used predominantly sentences that were commissive and assertive (46% and 31% respectively). Thus, he is requesting all well-meaning Nigerians to join hands with his administration in order to make Nigeria a better nation. He is obviously requesting through his choice of words and commitment by means of promises and assuring Nigerians of better and prosperous nation. As the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed forces of Nigeria, and as a democratically elected president, he used many commissive illocutionary utterances to make promises and vow on what his administration will do because of his political commitment to the Nigerian project. He, as well, assured Nigerians through his choice of words about his intentions to uphold constitutional allegiance and loyalty to the unity and progress of Nigeria.

Thus, for the reason other than that of his political commitment, a number of speech acts were inadvertently or unintentionally performed by Mr. President through his choice of words and utterances. It is obvious from the data analysis that there was preponderance use of commissive utterances which portray the personality of Mr. President as a true democrat and a committed party man. He is committed to the challenges and duties of his office.

A careful and systematic consideration of the commissive acts used by Mr. President shows that he is calling on Nigerians for future actions, promising and assuring them that the challenges ahead can be overcome, if the people of the country are all loyal to their father’s land and come together to build a better nation. What this suggests is that the high level of political commitment being exhibited through illocutionary speech acts as seen in the speech gives more credence to the inevitable roles language plays in political commitment of any political leaders all over the world.

It is instructive to note here that some of the acts performed by President Muhammadu Buhari in the course of delivering his speech to Nigerians were not intentional as we have been seen in the illocutionary acts: both intended and intended acts. To this end, typical of a political speech, we have seen how President Muhammadu Buhari has used language through illocutionary acts to express his loyalty to his party, Nigerians and his commitment and allegiance to uphold the letters of the Constitution in providing a better and united nation for all Nigerians.

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