Innocent Chiluwa

Language in the News
Mediating Sociopolitical Crises in Nigeria

EXTRACT

PETER LANG
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1 Political and sociolinguistic contexts of the Nigerian press

1.1 About this book

The analysis of ‘language in the news’ (cf. Fowler 1991) in this book highlights the discursive functions of news stories in the Nigerian press from 1996 to 2002. These years are significant in Nigeria’s political history as they witnessed the height of military dictatorship and the beginning of democratic government in the country. During this period, the roles of the popular press – in the context of this book, newsmagazines, namely *Newswatch*, *Tell*, and *TheNews* – are considered very significant in two ways. Firstly, the magazines doggedly confronted military dictatorship despite constant harassments of their editors and news writers. The eventual expulsion of military dictatorship in Nigeria is in part due to the important contributions of this vibrant press. Secondly, the press met the enormous challenge of nurturing Nigeria’s nascent civil rule from the start, especially in the peculiar circumstances of social crises, political scandals, and recorded assassinations in the civilian era more than ever before.

The analytical approaches to news discourse applied in this book are pragmatics and critical discourse analysis (CDA), with the aim of studying peculiar features of written media language in Nigeria and, more importantly, their pragmatic functions. Thus, ‘discourse’ in this book refers to language use in written news texts. This approach to media discourse analysis combines the analysis of language in the Nigerian press with the analysis of social structure and cultural practices; the critical approach adopted seeks not only to show ideological functions of language in news texts but also examines in whose interests and with what effects that is constructed linguistically (cf. Coupland and Jaworski 2001b, Matheson 2005). The CDA dimension of the analysis particularly examines how corruption and political power abuse are resisted in the selected news headlines and lead stories. This critical position therefore, shows how CDA with its contribution to social research ‘aims to contribute to addressing the social ‘wrongs’ of the day (in a broad sense – injustice, inequality, lack of freedom etc.) by analysing their sources, and causes, resistance to them and possibilities of overcoming them’ (Fairclough, 2009:163). While this book is neither a political science textbook, nor a social assessment of media performance during Nigeria’s crisis years per se, students and practitioners of political science, sociology, linguistics and mass communication will benefit immensely from insights to social research from the linguistic and discourse analytical perspectives.
The book begins with the assumption that ‘speech acts’ such as those proposed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) and pragmatic ‘tact’ (Leech 1983, Adegbija 1988) may be applied to study discursive implications of news headlines and their overlines, thus, revealing their critical functions and ideological contents. It is also hypothesized that discourse strategies such as metaphor, hyperbole, personification, and idiom as well as creative ‘local colour’ use of language in the Nigerian press are encoded to reveal, expose or conceal corruption and political power abuse. They also function as ideological strategies to mould the perception of the reading public’s assumption of and attitude towards political office holders. Choice of particular lexical items in the headlines is discursive and functions pragmatically to incite public action and garner supports against corruption, injustice, human rights violations, and abuse of political power.\(^1\)

1.2 Language, society and discourse

Society presupposes language and language presupposes society (cf. Teubert 2007). Thus, language and human society are inextricable (cf. Matheson 2005). Whether as verbal interaction or written text, language comes alive only in the context of its natural but complex relationship with society. As a body of “learned social behaviour,” it plays a “central role as a fundamental vehicle of transmission of cultural traits within and across social groups” (Greenberg 1971: 274). For example, when people speak, they consciously or unconsciously give some general clue about their social background. This often guides us to possibly provide some social explanation for the kind of linguistic structures they have used. Whenever we use language our accent and our speech generally show what part of the country we come from and what sort of background we have. We may even give some indications of certain ideas and attitudes, and all of this information can be used by people to formulate an opinion about us (Trudgill, 1974:14). Conboy, (2007) further adds that our names, our ethnicity, our work, all identify us through a language which we hold in common with other members of the society. These functions of language confirm that some sociolinguistic findings about the relationship between language and society are relevant to the theory of language structure, especially in relation to the nature of meaning (Hudson 1980). Language goes beyond providing the means of transmitting cultures and communicating

\(^1\)This issue has been explored in previous versions of parts of this book. Cf. e.g. “Media Construction of Socio-political Crises in Nigeria.” *Journal of Language and Politics* 10(1), 2011, or “News Headlines as Pragmatic Strategy in Nigerian Press Discourse.” *International Journal of Language Society and Culture* 27, 2009
information; it also helps in establishing and maintaining social relationships, as well as “confirming our common sense realities” (Montgomery 1986: 17). This explains why people often demonstrate their commitment to linguistic and cultural identity through some particular social behaviours; thus, social groups exist not just as geographical entities but also as speech communities. Therefore, it is clear that social variables such as status, tribe, class or profession are usually deducible from the language we use. In the critical study of language and society, interest is often focused on those factors of society that place constraints on language use, as well as on elements of the context that influence linguistic choices.

Interest in the study of language in relation to society became widespread in the late 1960s and early 1970s in order to evolve a comprehensive methodology to the study of language and to explain its true nature as a social phenomenon. Most of the studies were actually reacting to the formal approach of structural linguistics, especially the transformational-generative linguistics that is based on the ideal native speaker’s competence and performance (cf. Chomsky 1957; 75). The Chomskyan approach did not emphasize the inextricable relationship between language and society. However, the “description of linguistic forms alone without reference to the purposes and functions which these forms are designed to serve in human affairs” (Brown & Yule 1983: 46) is similar to what Hudson (1990: 2) describes as “studying courtship behaviour without relating the behaviour of one partner to the other.” According to Fairclough (1989: 23), “language is a part of society, linguistic phenomena are social phenomena of special sort, and social phenomena are in part linguistic phenomena.” These reactions form the various analytical positions of sociolinguistics, ethnolinguistics, dialectology, pragmatics, discourse analysis etc. These approaches have one thing in common, namely the recognition that language has to be studied with reference to its socio-cultural context. Hymes (1974), for instance, extended the notion of Chomsky’s ‘competence’ and ‘performance’ to ‘communicative competence’ which he defined as “the knowledge of the abstract rules of a language required to produce social/meaning correspondence and the ability to use these correspondences between sound, meaning and form to socially and culturally appropriate ways” (Hymes 1972, quoted in Blakemore 1988: 40).

Studies of discourse show that people’s thoughts and actions cannot be separated from the communicative resources they involve in performing them (cf. Billig, 2001). As individuals interact with each other, they communicate their thoughts and intentions within a given social context. The sharing and exchanging of verbalized thoughts and intentions take place in the discourse (cf. Teubert, 2007). The ways in which interactions occurring in a group are discussed, commented and negotiated in the texts, constructs the society as an
object of this discourse (cf. Teubert, 2007:58). This view of discourse as text based is opposed to the view of discourse as social practice (cf. Wodak, 1988; Fairclough, 2003), which propose that social practices are external to discourse, as a form of action (cf. Jones and Norris, 2005). This view which is built on the ideas of Michael Foucault (e.g. Foucault, 1972), identified discourse with reality. Hence, discourses (the plural reflecting social realities) are defined as “socially constructed ways of knowing some aspect of reality, which can be drawn upon when that aspect of reality has to be represented” (Leeuwen 2009: 144). However, according to Teubert, social practices are part of social structure so far as they are symbolic, as they are talked about and interpreted in texts. “A social practice that is not talked about cannot be part of a discursively constructed reality” (Teubert 2007: 59). Matheson (2005: 3) further argues that context denotes more than mere linguistic or textual forms, viewing language in relation to wider notions such as sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and other disciplines. Hence, language is being situated within wider frameworks on the nature of thought, experience, knowledge and society (Matheson, 2005). The work of a discourse analyst is, however, often contested among scholars of difference discourse analytical orientations. Billig (2000), for instance, argues that a discourse analyst should help us understand social practice by showing how social practice is mediated in language (cf. also Teubert 2007). Language for these scholars is part of social practice. Others argue (as noted above) that even an anti-social practice such as war can only happen because it is surrounded and structured by statements of justification and glorification. In this view language becomes a store of values and ideas about war (Matheson, 2005).

1.3 Context

A discourse analysis of media language will enable the analyst to assess and describe how the media (in our case, the press) construct people and cultures at a particular time and place, especially the ways of living and shared meanings and purposes that make up a particular culture (Matheson 2005). Media representations of people, institutions, and cultures, and of events and situations are established through particular ways of using language. Media professionals are able to speak and write authoritatively about events in the world and make claims to know about people in ways that suggest that there is indeed the “authoritative power of journalism” (Matheson 2005: 2). Critical discourse analysts are interested in this authoritative power and what it portends for language use in the context of social life. Matheson argues that one of the strengths of discourse (or pragmatic) analysis of media texts is that it allows us to study media discourse in a way that further illuminates our understanding about how the media is connected to other parts of social and cultural life. Because this kind of study deals with language as situated within a wider