

# The Use of Politeness Principles by Nigerian Politicians in their Political Campaigns to Preclude Political Crisis

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## **Abstract**

This paper examined the use or nonuse of politeness strategies by Nigerian politicians in their political campaigns. The paper employed a combination of two analytical approaches – the Close Text Analysis (CTA) and the Narrative Paradigm - to interpret and analyse the selected texts and contexts (sourced from You Tube platform) of utterances of two gubernatorial candidates in Kaduna State during their campaigns for governorship election in 2015. The paper used the Leech's framework of politeness maxims in the analysis of the sampled texts of political campaign utterances by politicians from the two prominent political parties in the country, to determine their conformity or otherwise with the politeness principles. The paper found out that, politicians do not make use of politeness principles in their campaigns; consequently, they divided the Nigerian populace along the various interests of the different political actors, and have therefore brought about conflicts within the society; which threatens the survival of democracy in the country and brings about chaos and crisis. It concluded that, a peaceful and politically developed Nigerian society is achievable only when politicians in Nigeria adjust their conduct by adhering to the maxims of politeness. Based on the findings, the article recommended that Nigerian politicians should be sensitized to develop the skills of display of socio-political expertise and competence, personal ethics and integrity, control of emotions, and development of professional image in order to produce nationalistic followership and create a balanced political atmosphere in the country.

**Keywords:** *Politeness strategies, Political campaigns and Political crisis*

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## **Background to the Study**

Throughout man's life, communication remains the most vital ingredient for coexistence. Depending on one's intention or purpose of communication such as to inform, to persuade, to convey goodwill, or to establish credibility (Quora.com, n.d.), one is required to pattern language to effectively suit one's purpose. To achieve one's purpose(s) of communication, he/she should use certain strategies to help achieve the goal of communication as well as establish and, or, maintain harmonious relationships between him/herself and co-communicator(s). Thus, to create a serene community, the place of refined interpersonal communication is fundamental. This paper examines the use or otherwise of politeness strategy by the Nigerian political actors in their campaigns in relation to the state of political conflicts between political leaders and their supporters within the ambit of the Nigerian society.

## **Statement of the Problem**

From 1999 until date, Nigeria has witnessed continuous democratic governance. During the period, different governments were brought into power through elections and electioneering campaigns. However, thus far, violence usually erupts while politicians engage in political campaigns as a result of which private and public properties are wasted, people's self-worth are compromised, long-established relationships are broken and sometimes even lives are lost. These occurred as a result of the use of provocative language that stirred violent and unlawful behaviour for political reasons.

Based on the description of the problem above, these questions are formulated.

## **Research Questions**

- i. Is there positive application of politeness principles by Nigerian politicians in their campaigns?
- ii. Do the campaign utterances of Nigerian politicians adhere to politeness principles?
- iii. Do the campaign utterances of Nigerian politicians contravene the politeness principles?

## **Conceptual Review**

### **Concept of Politeness**

Various scholars have differently treated the concept of politeness. Of these are Brown and Levinson (1987) who have defined politeness as redressive action taken to counter-balance the disruptive effect of Face-Threatening Acts (*FTAs*). They define face as “the public self-image that every member of a society wants to claim for himself”. They refer to face as a speaker's sense of social identity. Consequently, any speech act that seems to impose on one's sense of social identity (face) is regarded as a face-threatening act. In their framework, face consists of two related aspects. One is negative face referring to rights to territories, freedom of action and freedom from imposition, i.e. wanting one's actions not to be constrained or inhibited by others. The other is positive face implying consistent self-image that people have and their desire to be appreciated and approved of by at least some other people. Face-threatening acts (*FTAs*) therefore are acts that infringe on the addressees' need to maintain his/her self-esteem, and be respected. The rational actions people take to preserve both kinds of face for themselves and the people they interact with, add up to politeness.

To lessen the threat, speakers use face and politeness strategies such as positive face (positive politeness) and negative face (negative politeness). Negative face according to Yule (2010) refers to the need by an individual to be independent and free from imposition; while positive face is the need to be connected, to belong, to be a member of a group. Positive politeness signifies a speaker being complimentary and gracious to the addressee; which, however, should not be overdone, as the addressee may be alienated (core.ac.uk, n.d.); while in negative politeness, a speaker uses various ways to mitigate an imposition on his/her audience. Using these strategies to lessen the possible threat to another person's face can be described as face-saving act which comprise hedging, pessimism, indicating deference, apologising and impersonalising; all of which are used to minimise the possible threat to the listener's face (face saving). To sum up, politeness can be viewed as a social phenomenon, a means to achieve good interpersonal relationships and a norm imposed by social conventions; as it can be observed as a phenomenon in all cultures and it is recognized as a norm in all societies. To be polite, means to live up to a set of conventionalized norms of behavior. Thus, this paper seeks to measure the conduct of political campaigns by politicians in relation to politeness.

### **The Politeness Maxims**

Consequent upon the indispensability of politeness in human communication, scholars such as Leech (1983), Brown and Levinson (1987) and Yule (2010) proposed certain principles guiding (the use of) politeness in one's communication. Leech proposed a series of maxims which explain how politeness operates in conversational exchanges. Below are his maxims.

#### **The Tact Maxim**

The tact maxim is other-centred where the speaker (in directives and commissive) ensures that (s)he not only minimizes cost to his/her hearer but also maximizes benefit to the hearer, as in the following:

- i. *Peel these potatoes.*
- ii. *Hand me the newspaper.*

At some rather indeterminate point on this scale (depending on the context), the relevant value becomes 'benefit to *hearer*' rather than 'cost to *hearer*' (Leech, 1983: 107-108).

#### **The Generosity Maxim**

This maxim is self-centred as it makes the speaker to minimize benefit to self and maximise cost to self, as can be seen in the examples below.

- a) *You can lend me your car. (impolite)*
- b) *I can lend you my car. (normal, polite)*
- c) *You must come and have dinner with us. (normal)*
- d) *We must come and have dinner with you. (impolite)*

#### **The Approbation Maxim**

This maxim is observed in expressives and representatives (which Leech (1983) calls assertives) whereby the speaker minimises the dispraise of other and maximises the praise of other. That is to say, in this maxim, the speaker should 'avoid saying unpleasant things about

others and, more particularly, about the hearer'. Hence, whereas a compliment such as "*What a marvelous meal you cooked!*" is highly valued according to the Approbation Maxim, "*What an awful meal you cooked!*" is not (Leech, 1983:135).

### **The Modesty Maxim**

In this maxim, the speaker minimizes praise of self and maximises dispraise of self, as shown in the following asymmetric examples.

- (I) A: *They were so kind to us. (Polite)*  
B: *Yes, they were, weren't they? (Pertinent - Polite)*
- (ii) A: *You were so kind to us. (Polite)*  
B: *Yes, I was, wasn't I? (Boastful - Impolite)*
- (iii) *How stupid of me! (Kind - normal)*
- (iv) *Please accept this small gift as a token of our esteem. (Polite)*
- (v) *Please accept this large gift as a token of our esteem. (Boastful - Impolite)*

(Leech, 1983:136).

### **The Agreement Maxim**

In this maxim, one tends to exaggerate agreement with other people and to mitigate disagreement by expressing regret, partial disagreement etc. i.e. minimize disagreement between self and other; maximize agreement between self and other. Compare the reply in (i) and the replies in (ii) and (iii) below (where ii and iii display the agreement maxim).

- (i) A: *Referendum will satisfy everybody.*
- (ii) B: *Yes, definitely.*
- (iii) A: *English language is difficult to learn.*  
B: *True, but the grammar is quite easy.*
- (iv) A: *The book is tremendously well written.*  
B: *Yes, well written as a whole, but there are some rather boring patches, don't you think?*

### **The Sympathy Maxim**

Maxim of sympathy requires every participant to maximize sympathy and minimize antipathy to the opponent i.e. minimize antipathy between self and other; [maximize sympathy between self and other]. E.g. if someone says he finds success or happiness, hearers should give congratulations, but where others say they are getting trouble or calamity, hearers should show mourning or express condolences as a sign of sympathy. *Example:*

- (i) A: *I've passed Eng223.*  
B: *Congratulations!*
- (ii) A: *Uncle is dead.*  
B: *I'm sorry to hear that.*

Discourses (i) and (ii) show politeness because the addressees each abided by the maxim of sympathy, which is, maximizing sympathy to addressee.

It is in consideration of the politeness maxims above that this paper seeks to examine the campaign speeches of politicians in the present democratic dispensation to assess how they conform to or defy the politeness principles as reviewed above.

### **Concept of Political Campaign**

Political campaigns according to eprints.bournemouth (n.d.) are orchestrated attempts by political organisations to garner public support through persuasive communication in order to influence public policy in their favour. Also, politivos.com (n.d.) defines political campaign as a strategic effort by individuals, groups, or political parties to gain public support and secure elected positions in government. It is a structured and organized series of activities designed to influence and persuade voters to choose a particular candidate or party during an election cycle. Political campaigns can be ethical or defective. An ethical political campaign should possess five characteristics as outlined and discussed by Pagefield (n.d.). These are clarity of vision and ambition, a collaborative rather than adversarial approach, mass movements rather than mass marketing, ability to optimize new digital technologies, and great storytelling with creative flair. These characteristics clearly point to the significance of politeness strategy in the political campaign, as the second characteristic which, according to Pagefield (n.d.), leads to building firm partnerships with people and powerful coalition with organisations (which is the ultimate goal of the politician) comes next to the first only because the latter serves as the foundation.

### **Review of Empirical Studies**

Various studies have been carried out in the area of use of language by politicians. These include Bdiya (2012) who worked on Pragmatic Analysis of Political Discourse. He used Cooperative Principle to analyse the presidential campaign speech of Late Bashorun Abiola, the result of which shows that politicians do not adhere to communication principle in political conversation. Sama'ila (2015) looked at Emotionalisation, Endorsement, Rhetorical Misconstruction: Reflection on 2015 Gubernatorial Campaigns in Kaduna State. The paper found out that emotionalisation in the campaign of Muktar Ramalan Yero led to his defeat in the election. Furthermore, Daniel (2015) studied Political Language with Reference to Nigerian Politicians, Linguistic Rascality and the Security implications. She used Critical Discourse Analysis with Systemic Functional Grammar in the analysis of speech of some politicians in Nigeria and how these speeches triggered off political violence as a result of using negative lexical items by politicians. All of these differ markedly from the present paper in focus, objective and approach.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper adopted Leech's (1983) framework already discussed above, especially the tact and the approbation maxims, as according to Wikiversity (2016) not all of the maxims are equally important; *tact* influences what we say more powerfully than does *generosity*, while *approbation* is more important than *modesty*.

### **Methodology**

The paper adapted a combination of two analytical approaches – Close Text Analysis (CTA) and Narrative Paradigm - to interpret the selected texts and the contexts (sourced from YouTube platform) of utterances of two gubernatorial candidates in Kaduna State during their campaigns for governorship election in 2015. These were Alh. (Dr.) Muktar Ramalan Yero, of the People's Democratic Party (PDP); and Mal Nasiru Ahmed El-rufa'I of All Progressive



Congress (APC). This was aimed at ascertaining whether or not politicians' campaign utterances conform to politeness principles.

### **Close Textual Analysis**

Close Textual Analysis according to Browne (2009) in Kyupers (n.d.) is an interpretive practice that explains how texts operate to produce meaning, effect persuasion and activate convictions in public contexts by attending in detail to the interplay of ideas, images and arguments as they unfold within the spatial and temporal economy of the text. In this analysis, texts are considered as sites of symbolic action whereby words are regarded as verbs that perform a range of functions. This analytic procedure seeks to see that the form and context of texts that have symbiotic influence on one another in the same manner in which the “artistic density” of a rhetorical piece should be appreciated. A text can perform various types of action according to Browne (2009). It may among others: *call for, call on, call out, call in, call to, announce, create, debase, decry, deface, defer, deflect, deform, delay, demur, deny, descend, destroy, deter, direct, disabuse, disclose/camouflage, distance, dissuade, exalt, form, inaugurate, invite, lie, numb, plead, portend, promise, provoke, seduce, silence, tempt, threaten, tickle, waffle* etc.

### **Narrative Paradigm**

The narrative paradigm according to Fisher (2007) offers a universal perspective in explaining communication behaviour i.e. to interpret a text one should seek to find if there is a certain degree of coherence in terms of whether or not the story it tells hangs together. According to this approach, the narrator of the text must not leave out any important detail of the story or fail to provide plausible interpretation of what the audience already knows, i.e., it should resonate the experience of the audience which is determined by the values embedded in the message and the overlap of the values with the worldview, belief and ideal basis of social conduct of the audience.

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

Text I:

*If one is convinced that his mother really gave birth to him (repeated three times); if we go out as a party to campaign, let him by God stone us; if we go out to campaign, let him by God hit our car; if we go out to campaign, let him by God burn our cars; if we go out to campaign, let him burn our house. I swear to God, whoever does this, we shall avenge. No retreat, no surrender!*

(Alh. (Dr) Muktar Ramalan Yero, Kaduna State Governor and PDP Governorship Candidate, 2015) culled from: <http://www.bockinfo.com/docs/fourphases.htm>

Text II:

*Tell me what wrong I have done to you, I will apologise. But if you do not tell me and choose to continue to fight me, it is fine. Go and ask Umaru Musa Yar'adua or you ask Jonathan. As Nigeria's presidents either of them had a fight with me, and one has ended in the grave, the other forced*

*to return to Otuoke. I do not dread fighting with anyone.*  
(Malam Nasiru El-Rufa'I, APC Governorship Candidate, 2015)

### Analysis

1. Is there positive application of politeness principles by Nigerian politicians in their campaigns?

A close textual analysis of each of the two texts above evidently shows the actions it portends to do. Text I tends to deface, threaten, provoke, deter, dissuade, and distance the massive opposition that seemed to be geared up to cast the PDP candidate out of power. He therefore emotionalized the campaign with vulgarity and threat of vengeful violence, and uttered expressions that were face-threatening and provocative to the populace: "*If one is convinced that his mother really gave birth to him...*", (i.e. if one is not an illegitimate or a bastard), and to ensure his aim was achieved he repeated it twice. He threatened by saying that, "*I swear to God ... we shall avenge*" just to deter, distance and dissuade the populace from taking a decision that would not favour him. Text II serves to threaten specifically Comrade Shehu Sani, also a member of APC, who was vehemently opposing El-rufa'I's views as a result, El-rufa'i felt he was in a political warfare with Shehu Sani. El-rufa'i warned him of the danger he (Shehu Sani) would subject himself to as a consequence of fighting El-rufa'I, as he says:

*"... But if you do not tell me and choose to continue to fight me, it is fine. Go and ask Umaru Musa 'Yar'adua or you ask Jonathan ... either of them had a fight with me and one has ended in the grave, the other was forced to return to Otuoke".*

This implies that Umaru Musa 'Yar'adua lost his life, while Goodluck Jonathan was forced to leave Aso Rock Villa and move back to his village – Otuoke – in consequence of opposing El-rufa'I. El-rufa'i goes on to dissuade Shehu Sani as well as any other person from daring to (continue to) oppose him by saying: "*I do not dread fighting with anyone*". This implies that El-rufa'i is ready and willing to do what it takes to bring Shehu Sani or anybody else down.

Analysis of the two texts above indicates that there was no application of little or no application of the politeness principles in the campaigns of Nigerian politicians. Each of the texts sampled fails to demonstrate the application of any of the politeness maxims; rather, they are replete with utterances that are discourteous to the other (i.e. the target), and the utterances were not aimed at maintaining a harmonious relationship between the speaker and the target as evidenced below.

Text I: *If one is convinced that his mother really gave birth to him... let him by God stone us... let him by God hit our car... let him by God burn our cars... let him burn our house. I swear to God, whoever does this, we shall avenge. No retreat, no surrender!*

Text II: *"... But if you do not tell me and choose to continue to fight me, it is fine. Go and ask Umaru Musa 'Yar'adua or you ask Jonathan ...*

*either of them had a fight with me and one has ended in the grave,  
the other was forced to return to Otuoke”.*

Neither of the utterances above favour in any way the target; the act was aimed at threatening the face of the target (Face-Threatening Act), as neither of the texts contains an element of the face-saving act.

Text I claims that except the referent accepts the challenge (... stone them, hit their car, burn their house), he is not a legitimate child of his mother; the utterance that clearly says something unpleasant about the referent (hearer) and which highly maximizes the dispraise of other. Likewise, the speaker of Text II merely maximizes the dispraise of the two former presidents of whom, according to the text, one died and the other had to sorrowfully leave Aso Rock Villa for his home village in consequence of daring to oppose the speaker.

2. Do the campaign utterances of Nigerian politicians adhere to politeness principles in their campaigns?

Looking at the sampled texts analysed in this paper, it is evident that there is no adherence to either the tact maxim or the approbation maxim by both the speakers, as the tact maxim requires that a speaker should minimize cost to the hearer and maximize benefit to the hearer; while the approbation maxim advises that a speaker should avoid saying unpleasant things about others and, more particularly, about the hearer. This a speaker should do by minimising the dispraise of other and maximising the praise of other. However, both the speakers did not pay attention to tact as the texts display.

3. Do the campaign utterances of Nigerian politicians contravene the politeness principles?

From the sampled texts, it is evident that the utterances of politicians gravely contravene the politeness maxims, especially the tact and approbation maxims which are greater than all the other maxims. Also, the utterances in both the texts completely failed to make use of negative face; consequently, their utterances are often provocative, confrontational, and disdainful (See Texts I and II in 2 above)

### **Findings/Implications**

From the analyses of the two texts above, one can discern that politicians usually emotionalise their campaigns to the extent of committing rhetorical dissonance' in which they utter words/ expressions that even contradict their personal demeanor. In Text I, the utterances portray the contrary of the speaker's known personality of modesty and deference, while in Text II the speaker tactlessly made a declaration or an admission of the guilt of assassinating a highly revered president. Text I aimed at dissuading members of the opposition party (APC) and raise the spirits of speaker's own party members to harass the opposition. Such utterance generated heated arguments between the citizens of Kaduna State and far beyond; one group defending the speaker, and the other condemning him for the statement. Similarly, Text II shows how inflammatory the utterances of politicians are, as such an utterance had instigated scores of opinions across the state (and beyond) especially as the speaker attributed the death of President Umaru Musa to himself. Some concluded that certainly there is an implication that



the speaker was guilty of assassinating, or at least was an instrument to the death of, President Umaru Musa 'Yar'adua. In countries where there is strict adherence to the law and order, this statement will be taken with all the seriousness it deserves and the speaker will have faced a strong legal outcome.

Generally, there is no politeness in the campaign speeches of most contemporary Nigerian politicians as their utterances constitute face-threatening acts which are merely perceived by hearers as provocative and disrespectful thereby creating distance, resentment and division among the populace. The people are polarized along the different egocentric political conducts of their favorite politicians. However, positive application of politeness principles by a politician in his/her campaigns makes him/her more popular, makes the audience to become friendlier towards him; one is more likable, there are less chances of developing enemies, and one develops an attractive personality (and thus a peaceful, harmonious society is created), (Njuki and Ireri,2021).

### **Conclusion**

From the discussion above, it is evident that campaign utterances of Nigerian politicians (who control political discourse) are capable of breeding political atmosphere of tension, conflict and friction. To avoid the incidence of regional or even national political calamity, politicians (who are manipulators of the thoughts and behaviour of the people and therefore responsible for creating peaceful or chaotic society) must prepare to change. They should make utterances that adhere to politeness principles, especially the tact and approbation maxims. As the major goals of politics are to gain power and (ultimately) to create a healthy, peaceful, secure and economically buoyant society, it is ideal for every politician to employ politeness principles in his campaigns to successfully build firm cordial relationships with the citizens as well as effective alliance with organisations. This if done, will help him/her to become (more) popular and therefore entice more supporters to achieve actual political success without creating enemies or resentment within the people. This said, a politician develops a life-long attractive personality within the society and upholds the integrity of fellow citizens.

### **Recommendations**

From the foregoing, the following are found to be crucial:

- i. The youth, especially students at different levels of education (from secondary to tertiary level), should be trained to acquire adequate knowledge and practice on the principles of politeness in various situations to prepare them for the socio-political challenges ahead.
- ii. As every Politian desires to build credibility to self, constituted authorities, the government as well as non-governmental organisations (both local and international) should educate all politicians to appreciate the fact that factors that help an individual to build credibility to himself/herself include expertise and competence, personal ethics and integrity, control of emotions, and development of professional image; as the control of one's emotion will certainly help him/her to maintain credibility by showing that he/she acts reasonably, rationally, and respectfully in all situations. Consequently, the people will be attracted to him by the force of his personality.

- iii. The constitution of Nigeria should state clearly the genre of language to (and not to) use by politicians as they discharge their political rights and activities. The punishment to be meted out for contravening the rules should be clearly spelt out and made known to public, and there should be strict application of the law on any defaulter(s).

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