

A Comparative Study of the Discursive Strategies in the Media Interviews of Participants in the January 2012 Fuel Subsidy Removal Crisis in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Even though the debate on the deregulation of the downstream sector of Nigerian economy has been on for a while, scholarly works have excluded a comparative study of the media utterances of actors in the eco-political discourse. This paper compares the discursive strategies in the media interviews of participants in the January 2012 crisis on the removal of fuel subsidy in Nigeria with a view to characterising the discourse strategies. The study which draws extensively from the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examines a total of ten media interviews of government spokespersons and protesters on the rationality, or otherwise, of government's action. The study shows that government spokespersons deploy opinionation and defensive rhetorics, while protesters utterances are characterised by combat and condemnatory rhetorics. Both parties make use of manipulative persuasion strategies of solidarity and framing. However, blackmail is peculiar to government spokespersons, while threat is common to the protesters.

1. Introduction

Over the years, the media, often referred to as the fourth estate of the realm, has proved to be an organ of the society that cannot be dispensed with. As an agency for social mobilization, it has continued to exert so much influence on virtually every aspect of the society. It has also functioned not only as the voice of the oppressed and the suppressed masses but also as a veritable instrument of influence and control. Language use in the mass media revolves around the social interaction between journalists and the mass public in which language serves as a medium. This explains why media discourse has continued to attract research interests from a wide range of perspectives. So far, scholarly perspectives include Osisanwo (2001) which examines textuality and Nigerian newspaper editorials, Taiwo (2001) which studies thematic structure of English-medium Nigerian newspaper reports and Opeibi (2004) which concentrates on the appropriation of language as a political resource in political campaigns and adverts. Others are Van Dijk (2005) and Fairclough (2005) which critically examine the speeches of politicians; Chiluwa (2006) which accounts for language variation and ideological differences in media discourse in Nigeria; Taiwo (2007) which examines language, ideology and power relations in Nigerian newspaper headlines and Odebunmi (2008) which focuses on the ideological value of tracking in political news reporting.

Media discourse has also engaged the social constructionist theory to examine political action particularly with regard to the utility of group consciousness as a platform for mass mobilization (See Jenkins 1986, Giddes 1991, Stryker1980). The 21st Century has witnessed many conflicts that threaten the entire fabric of human existence. In Nigeria, there has been explosion of conflicts that threaten the very existence of the nation state. At the very heart of these crises are identity and ideological issues that resulted in socio-economic fragmentation of the polity. One major socio-political issue that has always attracted media attention in Nigeria is the oil reform.

The debate on the deregulation of the downstream sector of the petroleum sector of Nigerian economy has been on for a while and it has been a major issue in the media and academic discourse. Scholarly perspectives on this eco-political discourse include, Braide (2004) 'modes of deregulation in the downstream sector of the Nigerian petroleum industry'; Etekpe, (2007) 'the politics and conflicts over oil and gas in the Niger Delta region: the Bayelsa State experience 1990-2006'; Adedipe, (2004) 'the impact of oil on Nigeria's economic policy formulation'; Innocent and Charles (2011) 'the political economy of deregulation policy in Nigeria' and

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Salami & Ayoola (2010) 'the war of appropriate pricing of petroleum products: the discourse of Nigeria's reform agenda'. Others include Nenpominyi (2012) 'the political economy of oil deregulation in Nigeria's fourth republic: prospects and challenges'; Onyishi, Eme and Emeh, (2012) 'the domestic and international implications of fuel subsidy removal crisis in Nigeria'; Simon & Akpan (2012) 'the politics of fuel subsidy, populist resistance and its socio-economic implications for Nigeria' and Balogun (2012) 'removal of subsidy: a question of trust'. None of these works has examined the discursive strategies in the media interviews of participants in the eco-political discourse on the deregulation of the downstream sector of the petroleum industry in Nigeria. This paper fills this gap.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the theoretical orientation of Critical Discourse Analysis (*henceforth CDA*). CDA is an approach to language study which considers language as a form of social practice in which context plays important role. The theory contends that, there exists a dialectal relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s) that frame it. This implies that discourse is not only socially constitutive but also socially conditioned i.e. discourse is constitutive of situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities and relationships which exist between people and group of people (Wodak 2002). The position of CDA is that a proper analysis of discourse should take into account not only the social function of language in society, but also the context under which discourse was produced. According to Fairclough (1992:135); CDA is concerned with the systematic examination of:

the relationship of causality and determination between discursive practices, events and texts, and wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes: to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggle over power, and to explore how the capacity of these relationship between discourse and society is itself a factor in securing power and hegemony.

Dijk (1996) has also argued that CDA does not have a unitary theoretical framework, perhaps, because it is not a specific direction of research. However, most kinds of CDA will ask questions about the way specific discourse structures are deployed in the reproduction of social dominance, whether they are part of a conversation or a news report or other genres and contexts. Thus, CDA is concerned with social issues of power, dominance, hegemony, ideology, class, gender, race, discrimination and so on. Dijk posits further that a central notion in most critical work on discourse is that of power, and more specifically the social power of groups or institutions. Language can be used not only to influence people's thoughts and beliefs but also as a control device. It can also be used to create and reinforce certain value systems and in shaping the beliefs which impact on people's behaviour, motivations, desires and fears. (Jones/Peccei 2004: 36) Groups have power if they are able to control the acts and minds of (members of) other groups. This ability presupposes a power base of privileged access to scarce social resources, such as force, money, status, fame, knowledge, information. With regard to the fundamental issue of discursive power, CDA seeks answers to how powerful groups control public discourse; how such discourse control mind and action of (less) powerful groups, and what the social consequences of such control are (see Agbede and Akaan 2011). For instance, labour unions, organized civil societies and politicians control public discourses and influence public opinions.

CDA sees language in use as performing simultaneously the three ideational, interpersonal and textual functions (Halliday, 1970, 1978). Hence, it is associated with M.A.K. Halliday Systemic Functional Theory (SFT) for its focus on linguistic functions. (see Fowler, Kress, Trew and Hodge 1979; Wodak, 2001). Thus, when people use language, their language acts are the expression of meaning and the grammar becomes a study of how meanings are built up through the use of words, and other linguistic forms such as tone and emphasis. (Bloor and Bloor, 1995; Halliday and Hassan, 1991; Morley, 1985; Halliday, 1985). According to Halliday and Hassan (1991) SFG is a semantically driven grammar that seeks to consider, and identify the role of various linguistic items in any text in terms of their function in building meaning, and it is for this reason that its practices for interpreting and labelling various linguistic items and groupings are functionally based, and not syntactically based. Accordingly, Eggins (2004:2) contends that the emphasis of SFG 'has always been with the meanings of language in use in the textual processes of social life, or the sociosemantics of text'. It is, therefore, relevant to the analysis in this study.

3. The Petroleum Subsidy Crisis in Nigeria

When the debate on the full deregulation of the downstream sector of the Nigerian economy resurfaced again towards the end of year 2011, the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) hinged its argument on the need to revamp the ailing economy. Before this time, there have been several attempts by successive administrations in Nigeria to remove the subsidy on petroleum products. Each time the debate came up; government has been of the opinion that it is a major step that must be taken to put the economy back on track. The argument was that in order to address the issue of corruption and lopsided economic policies that is skewed in favour of the rich against the poor; the oil sector of the economy must be fully deregulated. Government was of the opinion that the removal of the subsidy on petroleum products would encourage competition which will drive business in the oil sector and in turn put a stop to the practice of borrowing money to fund our infrastructural facilities. Government also believes that the removal of oil subsidy will curb the fraudulent acts being perpetrated by some shady oil dealers (cabals) who allegedly are the sole beneficiaries of the subsidy on petroleum product.

Fantastic as the proposal was, there were diverse opinions on the issue. While some people have argued that going by government's argument, there appears to be no subsidy in the first place; some have also argued that it is just a conduit pipe to siphon funds by some government officials and their cronies; yet, some agree that indeed there was subsidy but are of the opinion that the removal was uncalled for. Hence, the announcement of its removal was greeted by rejection and resistance by the people on the grounds that it is capable of causing untold hardship on the masses. All attempts to convince the masses to accept the proposal by government spokespersons, including the Hon. Minister of Petroleum, Mrs. Diazeni Alison-Madueke, Hon. Minister of Finance, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala and the Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, yielded no positive result. A critical issue at the background of the resistance is the question of trust. The fierce opposition to the economic policy of removal of oil subsidy can be attributed to the loss of trust in government's competence and supposed goodwill by Nigerian masses'. This is a product of the masses' accumulated unpleasant experience of incessant promise and fail syndrome by successive administrations.

At the forefront of the protests were the labour unions -the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) and the Civil Society Coalition. They accused government of complicity in the case as a result of its failure to expose those it refers to as 'cabal' masquerading behind the corruption in the sector; and called for a full scale investigation of the sector with a view to bringing to book anyone found guilty. Expectedly, government engages all forms of discourse tactics to convince the public to accept the proposal in the interest of the state. The debate went on even as the president promised that he was not in a hurry to implement it. However, in a sudden twist and in a manner that shocks everyone, on the 1st of January 2012, the FGN announced the commencement of the deregulation of the downstream sector of the oil industry. Following this decision, petrol stations, sold PMS (petrol) between N150 and N250. Consequently, there was a hike in cost of transport and a general inflation in the economy. In a swift reaction to this, the labour unions and the civil society coalition declared an indefinite strike to protest against the removal and to force government to revert to the old pump price of N65 per litre. There were protests and mass rallies in all parts of the country and economic activities were brought to a halt.

This study examines the media statements and utterances of government spokespersons and the protesters (The civil society coalition and the labour unions) in the course of this crisis. Participants on both sides of the divides resorted to the use of mass mobilization resources to argue in favour of, and against the policy. This paper seeks to examine the discursive strategies of the participants in the crisis with a view to identifying the purposes and their motivations.

4. The Data

The data for this study were mainly drawn from the media interviews of some key actors on the eco-political discourse on the fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria. The interviews were carefully selected to represent the two sides to the discourse i.e. government (represented by government spokespersons) and the protesters (represented by the labour unions and the civil society coalition). Altogether, ten interviews were selected (five for each side) and all were examined. The interviews were sourced from two national dailies (The Guardian and Sun) and an electronic media (Africa Independent Television). The electronically recorded

interview was transcribed into the written form for easy analysis. Although there are numerous sources available from which the data could be collected but the researcher has chosen from the ones available to him. The data were subjected to critical discourse analysis.

5. Data Analysis and Findings

The analysis of data for this study has revealed that participants deploy opinionation, defensive, combat and condemnatory rhetorics in their utterances. Other discursive strategies employed include manipulative persuasion and discursive strategy of protest such as solidarity, framing, blackmail and threat, intended to construct and deconstruct each other's identity and ideological stance; and to categorize and portray each other in order to win public sympathy. **Solidarity** is used to achieve oneness and to establish rapport and alignment with the masses. Participants on both sides of the divide employ solidarity to gain the sympathy of the public. This is often achieved through the pro-forms (we and our). In **framing**, participants employ linguistic elements to negatively portray and categorise each other. **Blackmail** has to do with criticisms, allegations or accusations that are meant to discredit an opponent in a discourse and **threat** is an expression of intention to cause harm or pain; an indication that something unpleasant or dangerous is going to happen either in form of a fight or mass action. Section 5.1 below accounts for the strategies employed by government officials while 5.2 examines the strategies deployed by the protesters.

5.1 Federal Government's Opinionation and Defensive Rhetorics and Manipulative Persuasion Strategies

The media utterances of Federal Government officials and agents are characterised by opinionation and defensive rhetorics, solidarity, framing and blackmail. Opinionation and defensive rhetorics are strategies used to legitimise government's position and to defend their ideological stance. In the first place, government is the proponent of the discourse on the deregulation of the downstream sector of the nation's economy. The media utterances of its spokespersons are pieces of information to the entire citizenry and in defence of government's position on the issue. Expectedly, the people are bound to respond to these utterances or proposal either by accepting or rejecting the proposal. It is therefore important for government to rise in defense of the proposal. The following utterances illuminate our understanding.

Extract i

*We cannot just continue like that. We cannot run away from it.
We cannot continue to subsidize a clique of few Nigerians at the expense of the majority. We have to let it go.*

Extract ii

If we want to catch up with the other developed countries, especially in infrastructures our spending priorities must change.

Extract iii

We must make hard decisions, sacrifices and get the rich to truly fund their lifestyles. We must deal with the issue of high recurrent spending of government

The extracts above represent government's opinions or positions with regard to the removal of fuel subsidy. The utterances are undoubtedly in defense of the removal of the subsidy. Government officials and their agents deliberately chose words that effectively communicate and legitimize government's position. For example, the choice of the negative structure - *We cannot...* (3times) in extract i shows the determination of government in implementing the proposal. Also of note is the finality in the tone of the last sentence - *We have to let it go*. Consider also the import of the conditional clause - *If we want...developed countries* in extract ii and the imperative structures, - *We must...* (2 times) in extract iii. They reveal the mind of government in their attempt to justify their position.

In a bid to influence the mass public to accept its proposal that the removal of the fuel subsidy is in the interest of the nation, the Federal Government through its spokespersons engages in the strategies of manipulative persuasion. In this paper, manipulative persuasion is defined as a social or ideological control mechanism often achieved through the use of unethical strategies such as solidarity, framing and blackmail with the intention to persuade individuals or groups to conform to the wishes of the manipulator(s) often to the detriment of the person being manipulated. Thus, manipulative persuasion is a mind control process which

is the process by which the freedom of choice and action of an individual or group is compromised by stage-managing behavioral outcomes. This could be achieved by distorting perception or cognition and by manipulative motivation. (See Zimbardo 1971 cited in Ofshe, 2003)

One of the discursive strategies of manipulative persuasion employed by government spokespersons in their media utterances is solidarity. Solidarity is used to obtain public sympathy and alignment. The media utterances of government officials as can be seen in extracts i-iii above are in defence of government action of removing the fuel subsidy. The pro-forms 'we' and 'our' in these extracts refer unambiguously to the masses (Nigerians) including the speakers. They are used to create a sense of oneness with the listeners. Government officials use this strategy to defend government's position that the removal of the subsidy is in the best interest of the nation, hence the need to support them.

Since the polarity of the opinions is between the leader (government) and the led (public), the situation can also be interpreted in terms of power struggle between the powerful (government) and the less powerful (masses/public). For example, in an attempt to legitimize power, government officials make use of utterances with tone of finality intended to control the mind of the masses. For example, the modal auxiliaries *cannot*, *have* and *must* in extracts i-iii are employed to legitimise government's position and this shows that government was only keeping the people informed after a decision has been reached.

Another strategy deployed by government in communicating their intentions is framing. Indeed the media utterances of the Finance Minister, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo Iweala and the Central Bank Governor, Sanusi Lamido reveal this. Sanusi framed the Nigerian public by shifting the blame of the socio-economic failures on them. Consider these extracts.

Extract iv

***AIT:* Why is the government finding it difficult to cut cost in order to fund the subsidy in the meantime before the refineries are fixed?**

SANUSI: Cutting cost is not something you do overnight. Look at the U.S, battling with fiscal deficit. Look at other European countries. You have structural costs in Nigerian that even the government can't do anything about. You have a constitution which says, you have 36 states in Nigeria and a minister must come from each. Nobody can reduce the number of states. Every state has a governor, governors have commissioners, we have aides, you have 778 local governments and you have ward counselors. Each of these is on the country's payroll. The constitution says you must have a minister from every state including the FCT which brings their number of 37 ministers. So, we have a structure and a constitution that necessarily gives us a high cost of governance, and I have always said this. Do we need a bi-cameral legislature? Do we need 500 legislators? Do we need 36 states in Nigeria? But these are not questions that can be answered by the Finance Minister or by the Governor of Central Bank; these are questions that Nigerians have to talk about. You must talk about these things.

Extract v

***AIT:* But these are not economic questions, or are you looking at them holistically?**

SANUSI: But no! They are political questions that have serious economic implications. If you say you have to have a minister from every state, then you must fund him, get him accommodation, and you have to give him work to do, and to do that work, he needs a staff. Look, the president does not have the right to have 12 ministers. Some people say, oh! You've got only 8 ministers in America, the Nigerian President cannot have less than 37 ministers constitutionally. So, amend the constitution first, and let the government now decide, you need no more than 12 ministries and ministers. Now that is not a decision that is taken by one person, but by Nigerians. Now, considering the revenue expenditure, if I remember correctly, the entire recurrent expenditure disbursed to the executive arms of government is 1.8 trillion. Out of this, 1.6 is managed by the Finance Minister. Now, you have a number of reforms that are happening. Ok. There is an improving tariff so as to manage cost and provide more services. If at the same time you now start talking about downsizing the labour force or reducing salary by cutting the government expenditure, you will have problems. So, when people say take a knife and cut the expenditure, they must know the political consequences of bunching all of these things up, and what is the wisdom of facing them, one after the other. You cannot be

retrenching workers, reducing subsidy, improving tariff. Fine, people are ready to take a short term pain for a long term benefit, but there is a limit... you don't kill people.

The questions of the journalist in the extracts above threaten the face of the central Bank Governor, Sanusi Lamido. He makes frantic effort to deconstruct this threat by attributing government's handicap to constitutional provisions. This is an ideological device to shift the blame on the people thereby neutralizing the threat posed by the question. Indeed, in the latter part of his response (underlined), he shifted the blame on Nigerians thereby absolving government of any blame in the problem.

Do we need 500 legislators? Do we need 36 states in Nigeria? But these are not questions that can be answered by the Finance Minister or by the Governor of Central Bank; these are questions that Nigerians have to talk about. You must talk about these things. (Extract iv)

Government spokespersons also make use of specialized terms laced with statistical details to defend government's position and to defend their ideological stance. For instance, in extract v, when the journalist points out that the issue of fuel subsidy removal is an economic issue, the CBN governor was vehement in trying to defend his stance by building an argument to support government stance. His argument was that rather than blaming government, the people should be blamed, because it is the structure provided for by the constitution that government has to maintain. In the process, he employs a discursive strategy of presenting facts about the country's financial management in order to blame the ineptitude in the country's eco-political structure on the people who are the source of the constitution and the source from which government derives its legitimacy. In other words, his argument is that the people own the constitution, and they are the only one who can change or amend it. Government must act in consonance with the constitution. Let us examine the extract below:

Extract vi

AIT: Okay, let me take you back to the issue of the deregulation of diesel for instance, you will remember correctly that diesel was deregulated some years back and one of the questions that was asked is: what has been the gains 'if any' been applied? What is the guarantee that the gain of the deregulation of petrol now will not go the way of other such funds as in the past which brings us back to the issue of trust between the people and government.

OKONJO: Certainly, at least I don't remember what happened then, and I wasn't privy that administration's details. But I think diesel is used more by manufacturers, but I think PMS is used more by more people...We will have some numbers where people can text their opinions of what is happening. If we say that we are repairing Lagos - Ore Road, and you go and find out that nothing is happening, then you will know that this government is not telling the truth, and is not to be trusted. You are going to have all these information, because this money must be used in a way that will benefit all Nigerians. You will see this independent oversight committee that the president has set up which will also account for how the fund is being spent to all Nigerians. We are going to have private groups who will go into the government ministries and investigate if reforms are being carried out as promised. If you are saying the custom task force in Apapa has been disbanded are still there, is it truth or falsehood? You know, that is the way to re-build that trust. Getting Nigerians involved in monitoring what is going on.

Extract vii

AIT: I was going to ask this question about the NEEDS and SEEDS documents which far back then was touted as what will turn around the Nigerian economy at all levels. How does SURE fall in line with these documents. Because here, many people believe that Dr. Okonjo Ngozi Eweala is putting all her reputation on the line supporting the removal of fuel subsidy. In fact, they believe that you are importing IMF policies to Nigeria.

OKONJO: Before I go to the issue of SEEDS and NEEDS, you have brought this up. And I want to say, once and for all, that people should be fair. Six months before I got here, it was in the newspapers (I read it myself and people who care could go and verify) that government wanted to remove the subsidy and the discussion was going on. *(In a raised voice)* This subsidy thing has been going on in Nigeria for years! So, I was not here. Why at that time did they not say Okonjo Iweala and IMF World bank? Six months ago, it was written in the paper about the governors arguing the subsidy, supporting subsidy removal. Was I there?

Extract viii

AIT: Because the governors wanted the money!

OKONJO: No! No!! Excuse me! Let me explain. I was not there. Now that it is happening, and people are saying it is IMF Okonjo Iweala, is it fair? No, people should admit the truth. Now, I also want to say that when we take decisions about what is happening here, we should, like as 20 years back, talk about institution that have no hand in what is happening in the country. Now you know that for sometimes, governors and finance commissioners did not collect allocation because they said if you deduct a single kobo for subsidy, they would not collect, was that IMF World Bank? How is that IMF World Bank? People should be very, very fair. This is not about me. This is about something that was debated in this country before I set foot here. Now those who don't want me here in the first place have seen a chance to tie this and hold it around, saying it is Okonjo Iweala. It is not, and I will argue for myself.

In extract vi, the journalist tactically deploys the discursive strategy of intertextual reference to the deregulation of diesel that has failed to yield the expected dividends. The finance minister however veiled her honest intent by being tactically informal in her response which is laced with hedging: 'I don't remember'; 'I wasn't privy'; 'but I think'. (*Hedging is a discursive strategy used by a speaker/writer to avoid committing oneself to a proposition or to avoid giving direct answer to a question. (Osisamwo 2003:96)*) Rather than answering the question directly, she decides to engage in a number of commisive acts of promising (a diversionary tactic) - *we will have some numbers...; you are going to have these information...; we are going to have private group...* - to enlist the trust of the people. The minister was obviously trying to avoid tactical flaws in her response to this question. Unfortunately, she is caught in the web of self and official or professional ethics in the process. What more can she say in defence of the perennial failure of government in which she has served at one time or the other in the past? She, therefore, could not answer the question directly and that accounts for the initial hedging to allow her to maintain balance and still be able to save her face while giving a professional but diplomatic response to the question. This is an ideological discursive strategy of career/professionals and government officials who should not betray their personal biases and their emotions in a public discourse of this nature. When she (finance minister) was confronted with a question that threatens her face by the journalist, she finally betrays her emotions (extract vii and viii: underlined). She betrays her pent up anger at what she termed to be 'unfair' of the people in trying to undermine her patriotism and career reputation.

Blackmail is another strategy identified in the discourse of protest on the removal of fuel subsidy. In this case, blackmail is defined as criticisms, allegations or accusations that are meant to discredit an opponent in a discourse. Government officials and their agents engage in the use of blackmail to water down the seriousness of a group of participants in the protest. The national publicity secretary of Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), Professor Rufai Alkali, accuses some people of exploiting the situation. According to him, such persons cannot be taken serious because they are politicians who contested and lost elections and whose concern in this matter cannot be regarded as legitimate but political. Here are some of his utterances

Extract ix

...it is very possible that while there are legitimate fears and concerns by our people, it is obvious that there are people that are exploiting the situation.

Extract x

I saw Tunde Bakare on television. He was a vice-presidential candidate of the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) that was defeated in the last general elections. If people like Bakare are now calling for mass action, you cannot look at him from the perspective of religion or from the Save Nigeria Group (SNG), where he claims to be, but from the point of view of partisan politics. He is a voice of CPC.

Extract xi

I have also listened to BBC, I have heard of people belonging to other political parties saying they are going to join mass action. What does it tell us? Does it only speak of the legitimate concern of the labour movement for its members? No! Political interest has also come in, in full force.

The allegations or criticisms above are quite logical and, therefore, believable. However, it is a clear case of the kettle calling the pot black. The speaker is not only a politician but the mouthpiece of the ruling party (PDP). Hence, his statements, criticisms and interests are not less political. His intention is to discredit his political opponents who are Nigerians and who have every right in this matter to hold and express their opinions and participate in the protest. There is no evidence to prove that the interests of those he accuses are illegitimate. Alkali's utterances betray the political ideology of the winner (common among politicians in Nigeria) who sees the criticism of his opponent as that of an enemy.

5.2 Protesters' Combat and Condemnatory Rhetorics and Discursive Strategy of Protest

The analysis of the media utterances of the protesters shows that they deploy combative and condemnatory rhetorics in communicating their intentions. Combative and condemnatory rhetorics dominate their language use. Indeed the eco-political discourse is a war of words and the utterances of the protesters show that they are combat ready as they not only oppose but they also condemn government's positions. It is very clear that the relationship between government and labour has broken down and their choice of words reveals that they are poised for mass action to force government to change its position.

In the first place, language is not just a means of communication; it serves the purpose of the construction and interpretation of identities and ideologies. The combat posture of the labour unions and civil society coalition is revealed in the way they use language to condemn, categorise and portray government in bad light. Their media utterances are characterised by framing, threat and solidarity. Government is framed as the people's enemy by the negative semantic profile of the linguistic elements used by the protesters. For example, government is framed (constructed) as; *prodigal, wasteful, liar, corrupt, insensitive, insincere, deceitful, unreliable and inept*. The following extracts from our data will suffice.

- Extract xii. A *prodigal* and *wasteful* government.
- Extract xiii. A government that *cannot protect* its citizens.
- Extract xiv. This government is *not sincere* in its actions.
- Extract xv. Why Nigerians should be punished for the *inability* of the Federal Government to fight corruption.
- Extract xvi. This shows the *deceit*. The government is showing how *unreliable and insensitive* it is.
- Extract xvii. Certainly, the fuel subsidy is *uncalled for*. By government's argument, *there appears to be no subsidy in the first place that was said to have been removed*. The figure government had been mentioning is a *product of corruption, a clear concoction* by a group of people for their own *selfish interests*.

This strategy (framing) is an ideological device to construct the Federal Government as corrupt, deceitful, unreliable and indeed insensitive to the plight of the common man and therefore, should not be trusted.

Protesters also engage in ideological manipulation by influencing the public to support them against the Federal Government. Thus, they attempt to establish oneness (solidarity) and to establish alignment to gain public sympathy. Solidarity is established with the people by the pro-forms ('we' and 'our'). Let us examine the following extracts from the data:

- Extract xviii
 We want good governance in *our* country. *We* want responsible and responsive leadership. *We* want transparency and accountability in governance.
- Extract xix
 What *we* make out of this is that *we* have realized that *we* have been funding nothing but rot, inefficiency, corruption, fraud and waste in *our* petroleum sector.

In the extracts above, the pro-forms are used to achieve solidarity by creating a feeling of oneness with public and to show them that they are protecting their interests.

The media utterances of the labour unions and the civil society coalition is also characterised by discursive strategy of the protest. In this regard, protest is interpreted as an ideological war of words. Threat is the discursive strategy of protests identified in the verbal utterances of the protesters. Here language is used to communicate acts of protests which may turn out to be mass action whether peaceful or violent. Verbal utterances reflecting these are as follows:

Extract xx.

We will *fight* with the NLC and the people of this country to stop Jonathan and his government of anti-peoples policy.

Extract xxi.

The union *has resolved to fight* with its last pint of blood to stop the fuel subsidy removal.

Extract xxii.

This government has taken the people for a ride, but *we will show* them that this nation belongs to all of us.

Extract xxiii.

This action is bond to engineer *social crises* that *will spiral* to unprecedented level.

Extract xxiv.

We have not reacted to the killings because we want to be peaceful. No revenge, no resentment, no rage and no reprisal.

The italicised linguistic elements in extracts xx-xxiv show that the labour unions and the civil society coalition are battle ready. These utterances constitute acts of threat of mass action. They, however, are willing to follow the path of peace as much as possible as shown in extract xxii.

6. Summary and Conclusion.

This study has investigated the discourse strategies deployed by actors in the eco- political crisis on the removal of fuel subsidy in Nigeria in January 2012. It identified and compared the strategies employed by participants with a view to accounting for the similarities and the differences in the strategies employed by the participants on both sides of the divide. The study has revealed that the media utterances of government spokespersons are characterised by opinionation and defensive rhetorics while the protesters engage in combative and condemnatory rhetorics. Government spokespersons and the protesters make use of manipulative persuasion strategies of solidarity and framing. However, blackmail is peculiar to government spokespersons while threat is significant only in the utterances of the protesters. Significantly, both sides engage in the use of negative semantic profile to categorize and portray each other in the discourse. The protesters categorised government as inept, wasteful, corrupt, insensitive, and unreliable; while government categorised protesters as unserious, partisan, biased, and selfish.

It is also noted that sometimes government officials are caught in the web of veiling their honest intent while defending government's positions. In such cases, they either engage in shifting of blame to the masses (Nigerians), or sometimes, by 'hedging' to maintain their balance when faced with difficult questions. Sometimes, they betray their emotions by showing their pent-up anger when faced with questions that undermine their career reputation and patriotism. This is not so with the protesters. The significance of this work lays in the usefulness of its findings not only to the literary and language academics but more importantly to politicians, socio-political and media analysts.

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