

HATE SPEECH AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE: A STUDY OF SELECTED SPEECHES OF NNAMDI KANU

Chinwe Theresa Eze

Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
Email: ezetessy16@gmail.com

Abstract

Speeches are written with clear intents and purposes to explain, persuade, amuse, inform, or to influence ideas. Language and politics are intimately related as they influence each other. The language of politics is usually persuasive. Politicians are aware of the power of language to influence thoughts, persuade, and control people's behaviour, so, they choose language strategies that would help them achieve their aim. Political activists most often resort to hate speeches and threats while addressing the public. In the course of the use of hate language, there might be problems of misinterpretation. The paper investigated the extent hate language in political discourse could help politicians in persuading their audience to adopt their political ideology. The research derived its theoretical framework from Persuasion Theory. The research studies the political speeches of Mazi Nnamdi Kanu – the IPOB leader. Data for the study comprises Kanu's three political speeches. Textual analysis is employed to answer the research questions and evaluate the data. The result of the analysis proved that Nnamdi Kanu used hate speeches to incite hatred in the hearts of his followers. He equally uses hate speech to enact power, dominance, inequality and bias in the minds and lives of his audience.

Keywords: Hate Speech, Persuasive Theory, Political Ideology

Introduction

Many countries, like Nigeria practice democracy and in the democratic nations, freedom of speech is allowed. A speech is an expression of thoughts and ideas through spoken discourse. It can also come in the form of a written text. Public speakers always strive to appeal to their audience. The speaker could also aim at persuading, motivating and informing the audience. But when the speech includes demeaning, offensive and hurtful language which is aimed at stigmatizing a group of people, it is called hate speech. According to Wolfsin, hate speech generally includes offensive speech directed at minorities. In its most vulgar form, it includes the racial and sexist epithet such as 'kike' and 'fag'. At more subtle level, or so it is argued, it includes books, cinema and television images that demean a minority' (1). Tsesis argues that hate speech 'antisocial oratory that is intended to incite

persecution against people because of their race, colour, religion, ethnic group or nationality and has a substantial likelihood of causing ...harm' (211). Simpson defines hate speech thus:

Hate speech is a term of art in legal or political theory that is used to refer to verbal conduct – and other symbolic, communicative action – which willfully expresses intense antipathy towards some group or towards an individual on the basis of membership in some group [...] Hate speech thus includes things like identity – prejudicial abuse and harassment, certain uses of slurs and epithets, some extremist political and religious speech (e.g statements to the effect that all Muslims are terrorists or that gay people are second-class human beings), and certain displays of hate symbols (e.g swastikas or burning crosses). (211)

Hate speech stems from tolerance and indifference. It is an exhibition of indifference to a group of people's different ideologies on social, political and religious issues like ethnicity, race, religion, politics, sex and gender. Papanikolatos gives a varying definition of hate speech as 'a moment in the process of forming national identities and intensity varies depending on its historical, social and political circumstances which may provide conditions for establishing a more or less inflated national self as against others' (10). S/he further defines it thus:

Hate speech in its most explicit manifestation and at its most intense level, is the denial of the very existence of others as such within the borders of particular state, that is, the negation of the existence of the minorities be they religious, cultural or ethnic ones. In this case, the media attempt to stress the imaginary concept of a fully homogenous society. The negation of the existence of others may also go beyond the borders of a particular state, which brings forth the denial of the existence of certain ethnic identities (12). These definitions unanimously agree that hate speech covers expressions that instigate, elevate or upgrade religious, social, political or racial hatred due to intolerance.

This intolerance is usually manifested through discrimination and hostility against a group of who have different ideas, beliefs and ideologies. Intolerance to a people's sexual orientation, gender and national origin can also lead to hate speech. Hate speech can take the form of identity-prejudicial verbal abuse and harassment online, aspersion, slurs, epithets, graffiti's and extremist political and religious discourse. For instance, due to the issue of terrorism and Boko Haram insurgency in the Northern part of Nigeria where Muslims are ubiquitous, Nigerians seem to view every northerner as a terrorist.

When people employ hate speech, they want their voices to be heard. They want to promote their ideas, identities and ideologies to the detriment of other people's identities and ideologies. Hate speech infringes on people's dignity. In Nigeria, hate speech is a crime. The Hate Speech bill tries to 'eliminate' hate speech and discourage ethnic, religious or racial intolerance. The bill states stiff penalties for offences like ethnic hatred. It states that: A person who uses, publishes, presents, produces, plays, provides, distributes and/or directs the performance of any material, written and/or visual, which is threatening, abusive or insulting or involves the use of threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour, commits an offence, if such person intends thereby to stir up ethnic hatred, or having regard to all the circumstances, ethnic hatred is likely to be stirred up against any person or persons from such an ethnic group in Nigeria. A person subjects another to harassment on the basis of ethnic for the purposes of this section where, on ethnic grounds, he unjustifiably engages in a conduct which has the purpose or effect of (a) violating that other person's dignity or (b) creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for the person subjected to the harassment. (Godwin par. 4&5) The bill goes ahead to stipulate a minimum of a five-year jail term and/or a fine of not less than ten million naira for culprits. Ultimately, the death penalty awaits anyone who causes another to die through hate speech. This bill encourages respect for different forms of diversity in a pluralistic society.

Political Discourse

Political discourse has to do with discourse in politics. Discourse represents analysis of written, verbal or non-verbal language. Political discourse focuses on discourse in political meetings like campaigns, manifestoes, debates, presidential speeches, but it may not be limited to discourse practices in these political gatherings or by politicians. TongtaoZheng says: "Political discourse should not be restricted only to settings such as parliamentary proclamations, speeches and election campaigns but also apply to all linguistic manifestations that may be considered political" (1). According to Teun Van Dijk; Political discourse is identified by its actors or authors, viz., politicians. Indeed, the vast bulk of studies of political discourse are about the text and talk of professional politicians or political institutions such as presidents and prime ministers and other members of government, parliament or political parties both at the local, national and international levels (12).

Political discourse means different things to different discourse analysts. The definition of political discourse has been problematic. It has been delineated to cover issues of control, power, conflict and influence. According to John Wilson:

...one needs at the outset to consider the reflexive and potentially ambiguous nature of the term *political discourse*. The term is

suggestive of at least two possibilities: first, a discourse which is itself political; and second, an analysis of political discourse as simply an example discourse type, without explicit reference to political content or political context. But things may be even more confusing. Given that for some definitions almost all discourse may be considered political..., then all analyses of discourse are potentially political, and, on one level, all discourse analysis is political discourse. (398)

Although these definitions have a slight difference between them, they agree that political discourse deals with discourse practices by politicians. They also agree that political discourse ought to have political context; whether formal or informal. Political discourse is usually employed by politicians and political supporters whose aim is to achieve political goals. Chilton and Schaffner conclude:

If 'politics' is confined to institutional politics – parliamentary debates, party conference speeches and the likes and generally more overtly linked to ideology, then the objects of study for political discourse analysis can be easily circumscribed. But everyday conflicts – say between men and women, workers and managers, policemen and black youths, even schoolchildren and teachers – are sometimes by some people characterized as 'political'. However, it is probably useful to maintain a distinction between institutional politics and everyday politics. (6)

In political discourse, the political language employed is the focus. Political language is 'who speaks to whom, as what, on what occasions and in what goals' (Van Dijk 225).

Politicians use certain linguistic strategies in their texts and talk. They use language to 'manipulate' the public to believe in them. 'Political language is concerned with presenting and selling a positive image to others. The success of this merchandizing depends on the linguistic skills employed, which ... may include persuasion, seduction, conviction, pledging or pretence, among other actions' (Salem 82).

Nnamdi Kanu and IPOB

Nnamdi Kanu is a political activist who is of British – Nigerian nationality. He is the known leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and also the director of Radio Biafra a London-based radio station. Nnamdi was born in September, 1967, in Isiama Abia State, Nigeria to the family of the Royal Highness Eze Israel Kanu.

IPOB has only one weapon with which to fight Nigeria and that is civil disobedience not armed conflict. The main agenda of IPOB is to separate the South-East and some South-South regions from the rest of Nigeria. IPOB hopes to achieve this separation through referendum. He had a strong feeling that Igbos are seriously marginalized and relegated to the background in terms of development. Wanting to be a 'saviour' that would lift the South-South out of their pains plunge them into utopia as he advocates change and a Republic of Biafra. The struggle for Biafra did not start in the 20th century, however, reignited this fight in 2012 when he formed the IPOB organization to champion the quest of the Igbo people to have their own nation outside Nigeria.

Persuasion Theory

Persuasion theory is a mass communication theory that can be applied in politics, advertising and conflict resolution. 'Persuasion...is central to public relations: in that it is able to influence target public' (Smith 1). Daniel O'Keefe defines persuasion as 'a successful intentional effort at influencing another's mental state through communication in a circumstance in which the persuaded has some measure of freedom' (5). These definitions agree that the primary purpose of persuasion is the intent to influence.

Persuasion Theory deals with messages directed at surreptitiously changing the attitudes and mindset of listeners. The idea is to influence the listener without employing any kind of force. The audience is persuaded and not manipulated. In this theory, emphasis is laid on the most desirable persuasive effects of propaganda. Speeches are delivered with the clear intent of persuasion, instead of just stringing words together to form sentences. In political discourse, political leaders deliver persuasive messages which they believe would sway the voters.

Research Question

To what extent does hate speech in political speeches reflect social power abuse?

Social power is the extent of influence an organization or a person has over its members or even society at large. Generally, social power is the ability to influence other people. A person or organization that wields power has a large amount of influence over people. Social power is usually located in politics and society at large. Unlike physical power, force is not used to get people to act the way they do.

Gershaw agrees:

Coercive power influences others through threats and punishment. Coercive power is frequently used, because it gets quick results and is relatively easy to use. Unfortunately, it has several important drawbacks. First, the low-power person dislikes the high-power

person. If this is the only source of power, the low-power person will get out of the relationship as soon as possible. (Does anyone ever want to associate with a bully?). Second, the low-power person has to be constantly watched so they cannot avoid the demand behaviour or get away from the high-power person. Third, if the power scales tip the other way, the former low-power people are likely to retaliate for the punishments they have received. In addition, if you rely almost exclusively on this power as a parent, children obey a coercive only because of fear – not because they think they are doing the right thing. (58)

However, people cannot be socially powerful without the consent and support of others. Most people have power because others give it to them, so people cannot be powerful without the endorsement of human beings. When one is armed with social power, one can bring about a change in the beliefs, attitudes, behaviour and values of someone because of their actions or expertise. This means that social power gives rise to social influence. Because ‘power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely’ (Dalberg 21), in a social relationship, the person that wields the power might tend to abuse it. And social power abuses that power.

Analysis of the Selected Speeches

Excerpts from the speeches of NnamdiKanu:

- a. I’m a Biafran and we are going to crumble the zoo. Some idiots who are not educated said they’ll arrest me, and I ask them to come. I’m in Biafra land. If any of them leaves Biafra land alive, know that this is not IPOB (Kanu 10 – 12).**
- b. The plans of our enemies are not going to be actualized. The enemies are planning, but we are formidable. We are going to boycott Anambra state election. After Anambra 2017, in 2019, there’ll be no elections in Biafra land (26 – 29).**

This speech is tee aftermath of the massacre of the members of the secessionist separatist group IPOB. In his speech, Kanu continuously refers to Nigeria as ‘the zoo’. He equally influences his audience to change their beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviour towards their own country, Nigeria. After all, it is a zoo and they will ‘crumble the zoo’. Kanu, as the supreme leader, wields social power over other members of the separatist group. This means that he has social influence over them. By calling Nigeria a zoo, Kanu leads his people into believing that Nigeria lacks law and order, and that they can go about flouting the laws of the country/zoo.

With his social influence over them, Kanu persuades them to boycott the then oncoming Anambra gubernatorial election and the 2019 presidential and

gubernatorial elections in Nigeria. According to INEC's reports, which have been quoted earlier, only twenty-two percent of registered voters took part in the election. So, Kanu was able to influence IPOB members to boycott the election. Kanu's participation in the election report is palpable. He abused power that was vested on him as the IPOB supreme leader by leading his members into not exercising their franchise. Also, Kanu uses hate speech to garner solidarity from IPOB members. Kanu usually constructs his political discourse to reflect asymmetrical power relations between him and his audience as he always manipulates and dominates them to do his wishes. Kanu employs hate speech to show his discrimination, hatred and bias against Nigeria. His hatred for Nigerians drives his discourse and he constantly reproduces that hate in his political talks. He uses it to influence IPOB members to do things that are against their own nation.

'Every right-thinking human being knows that the slogan 'One Nigeria' is a ruse. Nigeria was not a united country and will NEVER be a united country even in the foreseeable future' (38-39). To refresh our memories, Nigeria is a country made up of three distinct nations with mutually exclusive and diametrically opposed and irreconcilable value systems. Among these nations, BIAFRA is the only one with a distinct and internationally accepted Republican value system predicated upon the twin philosophy of (1) "Egbebere, ugbere" the principle of natural justice, fairness, equity, equality before the spiritual and temporal laws and (2) "Eziokwubundu" which is the weaving of the irreducibility of truth into the day to day discourse of life, in essence, a life of nobility predicated on honesty' (Kanu 38 – 41).

That Nigeria is perpetually in doldrums politically, economically and socially is of no surprise to any discerning mind and keen followers of the miserable history of Nigeria. After all, is it not why we found ourselves in far flung lands like the USA and many more countries around the world?" (Kanu 44) The general aim of this speech is to persuade the Igbos at this conference to join and support IPOB in their struggle for the restoration of Biafra. His social power over them as the leader of the secessionist separatist group would have sufficed in influencing the audience to support IPOB in the restoration of Biafra. But Kanu goes on to display his discrimination against Nigeria in order to persuade his audience. He disparages Nigeria, yet extols Biafra which is a part of Nigeria.

Kanu adopts hate speech to disparage Nigeria and then form a kind of social relationship with his audience against their perceived enemy, Nigeria. Hate speech, as a discursive strategy, enables Kanu to form the identity of Biafra; the nation to be identified with and loved. Ultimately, he employs hate speech in displaying his inequality and bias against Nigeria. Hate speech is illegal in

Nigeria, so, Kanu abuses his social power, and uses it to lead his members into indulging in illegal linguistic exercise.

Discussion of Findings and Conclusion

Language is primarily used for communication. Language possesses persuasive tendencies. Words are usually structured to have certain effects on their hearers or readers. Human beings do things with words. Words persuade; among other things. Some words have been termed power words because the psychological response they elicit from their hearers or readers.

Language plays a pivotal role in politics. Language and politics are inseparable. Political speeches are usually geared towards persuading, motivating and influencing people to join political struggles. Politicians also make use of the first person pronoun 'I' to show themselves worthy of the cause, and the third person pronoun 'we' to show inclusion and participation in the struggle of their people. Political activists understand that there are certain persuasive strategies that influence people to change their attitudes, beliefs, behaviour, values and mindset and they copiously employ these persuasive strategies in their discourse. They do not apply violence. Hate speech can be employed by a politician as a discursive strategy to promote tribalism and hatred. It can be used to enact social power abuse, bias, dominance and inequality. Hate speech can achieve dominance over an audience using social cognition. A politician can employ hate speech to implicitly display power, control and dominance over his members. On the other hand, a politician can equally persuade his audience using hate speech.

Social power abuse can be enacted in a political speech. The politician can use manipulation and dominance as tools of influence and persuasion. These tools can be employed by a speaker to achieve discursive control over his target audience.

When a political speech contains hate speech, it drives the audience in the wrong direction. Hate speech drives an audience to enact inequality and bias in their hearts against another group of people .it also drives an audience to do things that are inimical to the laws of the nation.

Politicians should desist from using hate speech. Although hate speech can assist in forming the identity of a political group, it is illegal in most countries of the world including Nigeria. Political discourse should focus on persuading the target audience to join in the political struggle. It should not redirect its focus on the other party thereby inciting hatred and making disparaging statements about the other group of people. Political speeches, albeit persuasive, can also be geared towards educating the audience on its aims and aspirations, especially if the separatist group has not been popularized. Casting aspersions on another group of people can lead to hatred and political

wars because hate speech serves as a threat to the opposition group who in turn can decide to act on the threats.

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