

CONNOTATION AS A RHETORICAL DEVICE IN OBASANJO'S OPEN LETTER TO JONATHAN

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Abstract

Political leaders in every society, with their power of oratory and influences, play dominant roles in shaping the political landscape of their countries or communities. This study analysed how former President Olusegun Obasanjo persuaded Nigerians to perceive former President Goodluck Jonathan in a bad light thereby paving the way for Jonathan's exit from the seat of Nigeria's presidency in 2015. The study specifically analysed the use of connotative expressions and words as a rhetorical strategy employed by Obasanjo to achieve his goals. Data were collected from the open letter – *Before It Is Too Late* – written by Obasanjo to Jonathan before the heat of the 2015 campaigns/general elections. Thirteen words/expressions used connotatively in the letter were randomly selected and analysed. The findings revealed that connotative expressions can effectively be utilised as a weapon for achieving persuasion in (especially political) speeches. Obasanjo was therefore, projected as one of the notable Nigerian politicians who have successfully employed this tool in his political speeches.

Key words: Connotation, Rhetoric, Open letter, Obasanjo, Jonathan

Introduction

The importance of language in political communication has persisted over the ages. Political leaders, in every society, leverage on the veritable instrument of language to shape the political landscape of their countries or communities. Through language, they determine who occupies what (political) position or the other in the society at any given time. As Chilton (199) posits, "At the heart of what we call 'politics' is the attempt to get others to 'share a common view' about what is useful-harmful, good-evil, just-unjust. Language is the only means for doing this". Furthermore, De Wet points out that "politicians rise to power mainly because they can talk persuasively to voters and political elites ... politicians are endlessly geared to persuading voters to their own party's point of view" (103). In fact, using their power of oratory and other influences, political leaders strive to mobilise and convince the electorates to do their whims and caprices.

Former President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Chief Olusegun Mathew Obasanjo GCFR, is one such leader who is notable for playing 'god-fatherism' in the Nigerian political space. He has anointed many political leaders of this country including, arguably, former President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan GCFR. When Obasanjo's relationship with Jonathan seemingly became sour, he came out of his sleeves to tarnish Jonathan's political image and to unmake what he made in 2011. That necessitated his open letter – *Before It Is Too Late* – which ordinarily could have been kept secret as normal correspondences are done.

While embarking on such journey of persuading the electorates cum general public to abandon Jonathan, especially in his political bids, Obasanjo employed some rhetorical strategies, among which was a veiled approach. This manifested in his preponderant use of connotative words and expressions. Such expressions were used to complain, warn, request, advise, threaten and ultimately persuade the Nigerian populace to see Jonathan in a bad light and work towards his exit from the seat of Nigeria's presidency in 2015.

It is noteworthy that studies on Obasanjo's speeches, and even on political leaders in Nigeria, have concentrated on the stylistic, pragmatic and rhetorical points of view. Even those that dwelt on

rhetorical perspective did not explore connotation as a strategy for achieving persuasion in the speeches. Moreover, more studies on Obasanjo had concentrated on his speeches than his open letters. By adopting the Aristotelian rhetoric as a framework, this study sets out to explore the extent to which Obasanjo maximally employed connotative expressions in his open letter to Jonathan to achieve persuasion, and the effects of that on the electorates.

2. Conceptual Elucidation

It is pertinent, at this juncture, to discuss two important operational concepts in this study in order to enhance the reader's understanding. These are rhetoric and connotation or connotative meaning.

2.1. Rhetoric

The term "rhetoric" is an age-long concept that is sometimes seen as an associate of both logic and politics. It is a viable weapon used to influence politics and genuine arguments. According to the father of rhetoric, Aristotle, it is "the faculty of observing, in any given case, the available means of persuasion" (Garvey 57). He further notes that rhetoric is a practical discipline which aims at "exerting a persuasive action" (Aristotle 15). In fact, rhetoric generally concerns itself with the act of using language to persuade others towards the speaker's predetermined intention. It equally concerns itself with persuasion in public and political settings.

Rhetoric is "the persuasive means of communication, which focuses on ways of bringing about a change in the thinking of the listener as desired by the persuader" (Ashipu 117). This view is equally shared by George (103) who posits that "rhetoric has the power to shape communities, form character of citizens and greatly affect civic life". More clearly, Brembeck and Hewell sum it as "a conscious attempt to modify the thoughts and actions by manipulating predetermined end" (70). Rhetoric is indeed the act of effective speaking and writing. It is concerned with what is being said as well as the method and means of communication, all targeted at swaying the listener into actions hitherto unimagined by him. The nature of politics which requires political actors and leaders to have dominant control of their nation's resources as well as those who oversee the affairs of the public constrain these actors to effectively indulge in the act of rhetoric. Thus, they constantly evolve strategies for manipulating the actions of the citizens. This method and means of communication include the use of words and expressions connotatively. That is investigated in this work.

Beer and De Landtsheer (2004), quoted in Alo (n. pg), explain that rhetoric has three dimensions: logos, ethos and pathos. Ethos looks at the speaker's ability to portray himself as being creditable and trustworthy. Pathos deals with the speaker's power of evoking the emotions of the readers i.e. the audience. Logos concentrates on the speaker's power to provide truth using rational argument. The above entails that a writer/speaker must show evidence of good character and personality with regard to the issues he raises in order to convince the audience. In fact, these three dimensions of rhetoric must be combined and applied by any good orator to achieve the needed persuasion aimed at making the audience toe the line of the speaker in a given matter. Indeed, these features of rhetoric were prominent in Obasanjo's "open letter" and are investigated in this work.

2.2. Connotation

Connotation is the secondary, implied or extended meaning of a word. It is the feelings and set of associations which a word arouses. According to Kirsner and Mandell (559-60), "a word's connotations are the emotional, social, and political associations it has in addition to its denotative meaning". In other words, when words are used connotatively, they carry wider meanings than would ordinarily be attributed to them. This "hidden" meaning is, of course, determined by the context of the word's usage.

It is noteworthy that the further meaning attached to a word comes from its reference or other things in the real world. Thus, Ndimele posits that "connotative meaning can be described as that type of meaning which an expression has by virtue of what it refers to over and above its purely conceptual context" (36). Indeed, connotative expressions are used mainly in propaganda (political) and subjective writings. When writers employ connotation in their writings, they intend to evoke specific

emotions in their readers without explicitly telling them what to feel. It is in this light that Obasanjo strategically uses it in his “open letter” to Jonathan to paint clearly his perceived picture of the latter to the Nigerian populace and beyond. The target, thus, is to persuade the masses towards imbibing Obasanjo’s predetermined intention of ensuring Jonathan’s exit from the seat of Nigeria’s presidency.

3. Analysis of Connotative Expressions in *Before It Is Too Late*

The data used for this analysis were drawn from Obasanjo’s open letter titled *Before It Is Too Late* (2013) to then incumbent President Jonathan. The researcher identifies words and expressions used connotatively and for rhetorical effects in the letter. For want of space, however, seventeen of such expressions were randomly selected and discussed. Their rhetorical imports were as well pointed out.

Sample 1: *Open letter*

This phrase connotes the perception of public information as against confidential information. The expression entails a letter that is available to everybody – the press, Nigerians and even in social media. The rhetorical essence of referring to it as an “open letter” is to draw attention to the fact of intended public outcry and criticism. As an open letter, therefore, open responses are also solicited; hence the privacy of the content should not be bothered about.

Sample 2: *Abacha era*

This is an allusion meant to rhetorically recall a past or historic event. The fact is that history is very important for contemporary decision. “Abacha era” connotes unpalatable circumstances or historical period of national pains, chaos, anarchy, dictatorship, underdevelopment, austerity and mutual suspicion. Reference to Abacha era constitutes warning against repetition of unpalatable history. The import of the allusion is the recollection of the past for sustenance of informed decision at the present.

Sample 3: *What you will want to hear*

This clausal expression is of vitality to the speech and the speech maker. It is an expression that connotes frankness from the speaker. It addresses the owner of the letter and connotes the idea of superiority of the writer over the recipient. The expression is preceded with negation, “not”, which portends the idea of deception that comes from Jonathan’s “selfish aides”. It, therefore, connotes denial of correct and genuine information from Jonathan by the “self-centred” aides. It is further a warning to the recipient to be cautious with pieces of information that come to him from his aides.

Sample 4: *The signs and the measures on the ground*

This phrasal expression exemplifies observable facts. It is meant to tell the recipient and indeed the reading public that beyond immediate and verbal denial, Jonathan is towing the dishonourable path of re-contesting for President in the 2015 elections. The rhetorical implication is to emphasise the needlessness of denial of provable facts. It also, rhetorically, connotes the contradictory realities found in the denial. The pluralised “signs” and “measures” explicate the multiplicity of the evidence which nullify the denial. The populace is, by implication, informed that Jonathan would contest the 2015 general elections of which Obasanjo disapproves.

Sample 5: *More credible and more honourable path*

The use of comparative adjective “more” to modify “credible” and “honourable” is to create rhetorical emphasis. Qualifying “credible” and “honourable” with the word “more” connotes the impression of higher expectations i.e. going beyond superficial understanding of “credible” and “honourable” to another level of responsibility. The connotative implication is that Jonathan should live up to expectations by upholding the earlier “agreement” with Obasanjo to leave office after one term.

Sample 6: *Sacrifices*

This is a religious terminology or register. The use of it here is basically for rhetorical essence. As used in the letter, it connotes giving up something important or valuable in order to get or do something that seems more important. Rhetorically, the word emphasises the valuables such as time, money, lives, property etc. some citizens, like Obasanjo, have given up. “Sacrifice” deepens the understanding of other succeeding expressions like “giving up their lives”, “shedding their blood” and

“going to prison”. These expressions are the summit of the word “sacrifice”. It, not only suggests supremacy of loss, but also provides an onomatopoeic sense and feeling of suffering and loss. The rhetorical essence is ultimately to magnify the extent of Obasanjo’s commitment to the sustenance of one Nigeria and well-being of Nigerians thereby persuading the electorates to buy into Obasanjo’s political leadership which includes heeding his call for them to abandon Jonathan in his 2015 presidential bid.

Sample 7: *My country I hold dear*

This is more of poetic expression which portrays deep reverence and utmost regard for one’s country. Rhetorically, it signifies higher sense of patriotism, civism and nationalism. The expression connotatively reflects the extent to which Obasanjo is espoused to the country. It is a country that he can die for, or do anything within his physical and spiritual strength to protect. The expression is targeted at arousing sympathy for Obasanjo and to make people feel his impulse and sense of devotion to his country. In fact, the entirety of the content of this letter is prompted by this expression.

Sample 8: *Trust and honour*

These words are not only ingredients of character but also virtues that prompt patriotism and nationalism. “Trust” is confidence in or reliance on some person or quality. It is synonymous with faith and so has integral association with patriotism. “Honour”, on its part implies favourable reputation, dignity and sense of self-worth. “Trust” and “honour” are not synonymous but share commonality in their orientation and target objectifications. They, thus, connote the highest virtues expected of any person at the exalted position of president. The use of “trust” and “honour” here constitutes and streamlines the expectancy level and demand of Nigerians from Jonathan in terms of moral rectitude.

Sample 9: *Game of denial*

The expression is idiomatic and has rhetorical implications. It is a systematic way of calling somebody a liar. It is also a rhetorical way of expressing doubt about a person’s character. It, therefore, connotes insincerity, untrustworthiness, unreliability and loss of confidence. It sounds as a warning but that which is advice oriented. In fact, Obasanjo used this expression to portray that Jonathan does not mean well for Nigeria and so must be shown the way out.

Sample 10: *... altar of your personal and political interest*

This is an affront on the personality of the recipient of the letter. It is a direct allegation with some degree of surety. The use of “your” indicates direct taunt; it signifies a statement from a superior to the subordinate or elder to younger. The expression opens up a vista of hidden aspects of Jonathan and therefore creates a questionable and negative impression against him, from the public. The expression reflects bitterness and anger from Obasanjo and broadens hatred for Jonathan. The use of “personal” rhetorically highlights Jonathan’s vice of selfishness; “altar” denotes highest sacred place for worship but in the context of its use here, it connotes self made ambitious decision that affects the general or popular interest. On the whole, the expression decimates all the virtuous character of Jonathan and presents him in a bad light.

Sample 11: *Nigeria is bleeding*

This is a hyperbolic expression which underscores the extent of suffering Nigerians are passing through. First, “Nigeria” is personified and allegorical image of the citizens is created. Second, “bleeding” is used to underline the degree of the pains. The word “bleeding” relates to blood, and blood here is associated with human beings. “Bleed” is biological and relates to loss of blood through an injured blood vessel. As a rhetorical strategy, “Nigeria is bleeding” connotes the exceeding loss of human and natural resources as effects of Boko Haram and other products of the Jonathan’s poor governance. Given such gravity of loss, the writer advocates an urgent need to manage the haemorrhage which is by ensuring the perpetrator of the “bleeding”, Jonathan, exits the presidential office.

Sample 12: *Where were they when God used others to achieve his will in your life*

This is a rhetorical question that is subject to varying interpretations. “They” refers to the President’s “satanic” aides and collaborators who merely benefit despite the fact that they did not actually contribute in making Jonathan President. From the expression, the researcher deduces that Obasanjo re-asserts his involvement in political god-fatherism. But he clothed it in the manner that he was the instrument God used to make Jonathan rise to his political height. Rhetorically, the expression projects Jonathan as being ungrateful, unappreciative and perhaps divisive. In essence, it actually kept the President silhouetted from the public and made him almost stand alone in his second term bid. This expression is a powerful rhetorical strategy of warning/advising important personalities and bourgeoisie who would have wanted to support Jonathan to stay away from him in his next political bid. It informs them that Jonathan would ever go for those who never contributed when the chips are down.

Sample 13: *After my prison experience ... alive and well*

This is a recollection of Obasanjo’s personal history. The essence of this memoir is to portray Obasanjo as fearless and daring. Furthermore, it is to emphasise his commitments for well being of Nigeria. On the other hand, as a rhetorical strategy, it arouses sympathy for Obasanjo and possibly a genuine need for citizens to do his bid. His experience in prison is compared with the experiences of Nigerians who are unnecessarily silenced by Jonathan and who inadvertently accept quietude for fear of prison experience.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The analyses in this work have shown that language can be used to make or unmake, build or destroy, depending on how one uses it. Ogwumike, Ndimele and Innocent explain that “the role of the communicator is to inject his ideas into the hearer’s brain” (683). Since language is seen as an action, using it to achieve the speaker’s intention, i.e. persuading the listener to accept the speaker’s ideas or point of view, and making the listener to act accordingly require oratory (rhetoric) power. One such skill that has proved to be viable in this regard, as this study has revealed, is the use of words and expressions connotatively. Obasanjo employed this rhetorical tool effectively to mobilise against Jonathan’s perceived interest in retaining the seat of Nigeria’s presidency in 2015.

Through the use of connotative language instrument, Obasanjo ably projected himself as one who is morally upright, cares for Nigeria and holds it to the highest esteem. He equally used this tool to appeal to the emotions of the Nigerian electorates and to offer genuine reasons why the electorates should abandon Jonathan in his second term presidential bid. That being the case, Nigerians could but heed his advice, hence majority of the electorates voted against Jonathan in the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. This confirms the position that “a successful orator was necessarily morally virtuous and could persuade if his behavior met with social approval” (Alo n. pg). By taking the above posture, Obasanjo used connotative expressions to proclaim and x-ray his allegations of mass corruption, dictatorship, deception, political insecurity, ethnicism and other vices inherent in the Jonathan’s government. Such choice of veiled approach portrayed Obasanjo as a master rhetorical strategist who knows how to communicate serious issues and intentions in a subtle way. This study, therefore, reveals an important tool of rhetoric/persuasion, connotation, in political and general discourses which requires necessary attention.

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