

IDEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF LANGUAGE USE IN OBASANJO'S  
OPEN LETTER TO NIGERIANS

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**Abstract**

Political language use can be ideologically invested to create awareness about the personalities of political leaders and office seekers. In most cases, the intention is to gain or withdraw support from the electorates. Equally, these intentions are rightly or wrongly interpreted when the masses respond positively or negatively to the desires of the speaker thereby leading to effective communication or communication failure. By hinging on Fairclough's model of critical discourse analysis framework, this study examined the inherent ideologies in Obasanjo's open letter, *The Way Out: A Clarion Call for Coalition for Nigeria Movement* (2018) to Nigerians. Seventeen expressions were purposively selected and subjected to descriptive qualitative analysis. The findings revealed that two dominant ideologies - persuasive and transformative - were invested in Obasanjo's language use. Through this, the consciousness of the citizens was raised about the evils prevalent in the society which are occasioned by bad governance. The study, therefore, validated the position that language remains a veritable tool which political leaders use to achieve their various individual interests. These interests are usually clothed in the specific leader's ideologies.

**Key words:** Language, Politics, Ideology, Obasanjo, Open Letter

**Introduction**

It is observable that in most cases, language use has an underlying political dimension. Language can be manipulated to achieve various individual and collective objectives. In fact language plays important roles in politics, so much so that language and politics are viewed by scholars to be inseparable. For instance, Adeyemi (533) posits that "language is the life-blood of politics". The above assertion is strengthened by Beard who notes that "the language of politics ... helps us understand how language is used by those who wish to gain power, those who wish to exercise power and those who wish to keep power" (2).

Furthermore, language use can be ideologically invested to create awareness about the personalities of political leaders and office seekers. The intention is to gain or withdraw support from the electorates. According to Akinwotu (37), in the Nigerian situation, "the language of political discourse (including speeches, manifestos and other political texts) is primarily intended to gain political and interactional advantage over opponents".

Former President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, His Excellency, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, GCFR, is one such leader who is notable for playing the role of a god father in the Nigerian political landscape. When eventually his relationship with his "political sons" becomes sour, he comes out of his sleeves to tarnish their political images and to unmake what he made. This necessitates his open letters which ordinarily could have been kept secret as normal correspondences are done. Although such open letters are presented superficially as pieces of advice to them, there are inherent hidden intentions which are encoded in them through the ideologies invested in his language use.

With particular reference to Obasanjo, researches have concentrated on his speeches rather than his open letters. This study, therefore, investigates the inherent ideologies in Obasanjo's open letter - *The Way Out: A Clarion Call for Coalition for Nigeria Movement* (2018) to Nigerians through which he

communicated his hidden intentions to the electorates. The letter was part of the build ups towards the 2019 general elections in Nigeria. Moreover, it was written at a time when the incumbent President Muhammadu Buhari was bent on being re-elected for the second term, despite the feelings of his allegedly non-performance by Nigerians. By using insights from Norman Fairclough's model of critical discourse analysis (CDA), the paper seeks to explore the inherent ideologies in the letter, thereby bringing out its communication value.

### **Conceptual Review**

It is germane, at this juncture, to discuss some operational concepts in this study so as to enhance the reader's understanding. They are language, politics and ideology.

### **Language and Politics**

The definition of politics and political discourse vary according to the interest or background of the scholar involved. It also varies "according to the situation and purposes of usage" (Adegbite 10). This, perhaps, is why Wilson (411) posits that "defining political discourse is not a straight forward matter". Nevertheless, politics embodies the means through which humans ascend to power, be it by force, (coup d'état) or various appeals (democracy). Some scholars, however, have classified politics into two major ways. For instance, Chilton (4) presents the two classes as follows:

First as a struggle for power between those who seek to assert and maintain their power, and those who seek to resist it. Secondly as co-operation in the sense of practices and institutions that a society has for resolving clashes of interest over money, influence, liberty and the like.

Mbachu (3) further encapsulates these classes by noting that politics "is concerned with both *consensus* and *conflict*". The above activities involve human behaviour and can only be undertaken by means of language. It has already been stated that language and politics are inseparable. In political communication, language is deployed by political leaders to build trust and to persuade potential electorates to accept party policies and ideologies (Kamalu and Iniworikabo 71). Therefore, political language targets to pass the intended information to the electorates in order to appeal to and convince them. Political language is greatly embedded with emotions; the effect is that they cause the electorates to change their minds on certain issues. It can also be used to project one's or others' political image, tarnish or destroy others' political image, launder one's or others' image and of course project individual's political ideologies.

Most of the achievements of politicians/political leaders and office seekers depend on how they utilise available resources to them through language. Language can be an instrument for or against enlightenment, democracy, human rights emancipation and other forms of social behaviour. Thus, a politician must be amply equipped with the knowledge of how to use language in order to whip up emotions of anger and/or pity on the masses (especially the electorates) and of course be able to face political opponents.

### **Ideology**

Ideology is a way of thinking associated with an individual, group or society. In other words, it is a set of beliefs about political, economic, social and cultural affairs held in common by an individual or a group of people in a given society. According to Eagleton (1) it is "a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group, class or society and ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power". It may be socio-political, socio-economic or socio-cultural. Karl Marx used the term to apply to "any form of thought that underpins the social structure of a society and which consequently, upholds the position of the ruling class" (Ezeifeka 158). The above implies that ideology influences the social, political, economic, moral and all other spheres of an individual or typical set of people or culture.

The term, ideology, is characterised in a variety of ways, hence Woolard observes that its meaning is not straight-forward or neutral (237). However, ideology can be taken as conceptual or ideational, having to do with consciousness, beliefs, notions or ideas. It is an intimate connection to social power and its legitimating (Woolard 238). Thompson (4) adds to the above definition as he posits that ideology

is “essentially linked to the process of sustaining asymmetrical relations of power - to maintaining domination ... by disguising, legitimating, or distorting those relations”. It must be pointed out that the major tool for sustaining, disguising, legitimating and/or distorting the relations of power is language, hence the interrelationship among ideology, language and politics.

From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), no text is ideologically neutral hence “it is not possible to ‘read-off’ ideologies from texts” (Fairclough, 71). Therefore, political texts cannot be devoid of certain ideologies, although such ideologies are hidden or subtle. The perception of ideology in this work is that it is beliefs, assumptions and opinions of political leaders and office seekers on who should mount political offices, how political offices should be contested, controlled or sustained. Thus, the ideological posture of political leaders and office seekers, to a great extent, influences the way they present their candidates or themselves to the masses (electorates), their choice of words prior to campaigns, during campaigns and their behaviour when they are in or out of office.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopted Norman Fairclough’s model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its theoretical framework. Fairclough’s approach to language study is called, in his words, “critical language study (CLS)”. This approach analyses social interactions in a way which focuses upon their linguistic elements, and shows their generally hidden determinants in the system of social relationships, as well as hidden effects which they may have upon that system (Fairclough 5). He equally explains that his main target for such a study is “to make a contribution to the general raising of consciousness of exploitative social relations through focusing upon language” (Fairclough 4).

Fairclough examines how the ways in which we communicate are constrained by the structures and forces of those social institutions within which we live and function. Thus, Fairclough (24-26) notes that there are three levels of discourse. The first is the social condition of text, and how the same factors affect interpretations. The second is the process of production and interpretations. The third is the text – the product of the two stages above.

Generally, CDA practitioners work on applied topics and social domains. This include, according to Blommaert and Bulcaen (450-451), “political discourse, ideology, racism, economic discourse, education and literacy. In all these domains, issues of power asymmetries, exploitation, manipulation, and structural inequalities are highlighted”.

In fact, critical discourse analyses assesses issues from the ideological view point, and its socio-political implications. It is equally interested in the utilitarian essence of words to the world as it moves beyond the border of formal properties of language. Moreover, in the words of Joseph (149), it “pursues the agenda of uncovering propagandistic language in centre-right political discourse”. Indeed, Fairclough’s model of CDA focuses on the place of language in social relations of power and ideology, and how language features in processes of social change. Thus, it can reasonably be applied in the analysis of the open letter referred to in this work.

### **Methodology**

The data used for this study were collected from Obasanjo’s open letter to which was published in January 2018. The letter titled *The Way Out: A Clarion Call for Coalition for Nigeria Movement* was accessed from the internet. About seventeen sample utterances were randomly selected from the letter and subjected to descriptive qualitative analysis.

### **Ideological Representations in *The Way Out: A Clarion Call for Coalition for Nigeria Movement***

The major ideologies inherent in the data are persuasion and transformation. They are discussed in what follows:

#### **Persuasive Ideology**

Persuasion can be seen as an act of changing a person’s (or group’s) attitude or behaviour towards another person, idea, belief, object or event. Diamond and Cobb (225) describe it as “an act of conversion ... convincing others, changing their views, shifting their ideal points along the imagined

line”. This is usually done through the use of words - orally or in the written form. At all times, the intention of a speaker usually manifests as the speaker strives towards achieving the above goals. The major ingredients used to project the writer’s persuasive ideology are personality development, civil rights protection, attitudinal change and youth empowerment and promotion of investments. Below are specific samples used to illustrate each of the ideas.

### **Personality Development**

In this case, Obasanjo presents himself as one who is patriotic, nationalistic, creditable and morally virtuous. He tried to correct every negative impression people (especially the electorates) might have about him, even while in and out of office as President of the country, and generally other social reservations that they may have against him. He did that to get the admiration and trust of the masses and thus to convince them to follow his line of thoughts.

Samples 1 to 3 in the data are specific examples used for illustration.

**Sample 1:** *But my letter to President Jonathan titled: “Before it is Too Late” was meant for him to act before it was too late*

**Sample 2:** *Even the horse rider then, with whom I maintain very cordial, happy and social relationship today has come to realize his mistakes and regretted it publicly...*

These samples (1-2) were used to correct the impression in the people that he unjustifiably mobilised against former President Goodluck Jonathan then and perhaps that the duo had permanently parted ways. Thus, if Jonathan had acknowledged the truth in Obasanjo’s action against him in 2015 and now “maintain very cordial, happy and social relationship” with him, the masses could for no reason think that Obasanjo wrongly “advised” them in 2015. It is therefore necessary that they continue to follow his pieces of advice especially as it affects his call to abandon President Buhari in 2019 election.

### **Sample 3:** *I believe in team work and collaborative efforts*

This sample is used to further strengthen the fact that Obasanjo is not selfish. He reposes confidence in the people with whom he could pull down mountains. This is in contrast with the disposition of the incumbent President Buhari, for which Obasanjo pleads with him to involve many other knowledgeable Nigerians to help him in solving the nagging Nigerian problems under his watch. Buhari should not detest criticism because he cannot know and do it all alone.

### **Attitudinal Change**

Having cleared the air of various forms of misgivings that the people might have against him, Obasanjo therefore advocated a change in the negative attitude (apathy) and dispositions of Nigerians towards issues that affect them and towards elections in the country. The following samples are instance of such positions.

**Sample 4:** *Today, Nigeria needs all hands on deck*

**Sample 5:** *To ask them to give more will be unrealistic and will only sentence Nigeria to a prison term of four years if not destroy it beyond the possibility of an early recovery and substantial growth*

**Sample 6:** *All hands of men and women of goodwill must be on deck*

**Sample 7:** *If leadership fails, citizens must not fail and there lies the beauty and importance of democracy*

Against the backdrop of the fact that Nigerians have suffered and are still suffering untold hardship in the hands of the previous and current administrations and in recognition of the seeming apathy on their parts to chart a better new course, Obasanjo presents to them what is required, in sample 4. The attitude of “Let’s be patient”, “wait and see” or “let’s try them again” which implies voting for President Buhari for second term is what Obasanjo condemns in sample 5, as he explained the devastating effects of any

such attempts by Nigerians. From all indications, Buhari's government has exhausted all it has for Nigerians and the assessment reveals that nothing good or better will be forth coming.

Because of the weighty nature of the dangerous effects of bringing President Buhari back to the seat in 2019, sample 6 reiterates what the people are expected to do, for indeed everybody must participate to ensure that Buhari is voted out in the 2019 presidential election. Sample 7 recognises that democracy upholds the power of the citizens through their votes. That being the case, the citizens are urged to make judicious use of their power and "must not fail" in that regard since the leadership has already failed. The people should take a new resolve to redeem the system.

### **Civil Rights Protection**

This involves acknowledging and safe-guarding the social rights of the people. Obasanjo accuses Buhari of trampling on the rights of the citizens as he is too sectional in dealing with other Nigerians, hence the lives and property of Nigerians, or seemingly those of particular groups or tribes, are not guaranteed. He presents himself as one who truly cares for ALL Nigerians and advises the President to desist from divisive acts. Samples 8 and 9 exemplify Buhari's actions of wittingly or unwittingly favouring a particular group to the detriment of others and failure to protect the lives of Nigerians.

**Sample 8: *The issue of herdsmen/crop farmers dichotomy should not be left on the political platform of blame game ...***

**Sample 9: *It would appear that national interest was being sacrificed on the alter of nepotic interest***

In the above samples, President Buhari's "inability to bring discipline to bear on errant members of his nepotic court" as well as turning blind eyes to the mayhem unleashed on Nigerians (especially crop farmers) by his kinsmen, the herdsmen, was highlighted.

### **Youth Empowerment and Promotion of Investments**

This deals with job creation for the youth and encouragement of investors for the overall development of the country.

**Sample 10: *I am involved in the issue of education in some states and generally in the issue of youth empowerment and employment***

**Sample 11: *Youth must be part of the action today and not relegated to leadership of tomorrow which may never come***

**Sample 12: *I knew President Buhari before he became President and said that he is weak in the knowledge and understanding of the economy***

**Sample 13: *Blaming the Governor of the Central Bank for devaluation of the naira by 70% or so is not accepting one's own responsibility***

From the above samples, the nagging unemployment faced by myriads of Nigerian youths appears not to bother President Buhari and his other ostensibly but offensively rich partners in government. This posture contrasts with Obasanjo's ideology which sees that and the rising illiteracy rate as factors enhancing restiveness, insurgency and general insecurity in the country. Therefore, in sample 10, Obasanjo explains his involvement in salvaging the situation by ensuring that the problems of education and unemployment are solved. He sees these and other empowerments as necessary panacea to solving the security problem in the country. Equally, it is his view that youths get involved in the political activities in the country. Thus, they are expected to identify with him at all times, especially as it concerns making the choice for who rules them thereby paving their own ways to take over the leadership of the country.

Furthermore, President Buhari's poor knowledge of necessary ideas that will grow the economy was x-rayed in samples 12 and 13. That is why, according to Obasanjo, he fails to recognise his responsibility in stabilising the economy. In fact, the above samples, 10-13, present Buhari as a failure as far as youth empowerment and well-being of the economy (by extension welfare of Nigerians) are concerned. Thus, they are used to persuade Nigerians to believe in Obasanjo's thoughts, ideas and recommendations.

### **Transformative Ideology**

Transformation entails bringing about a change in the formation, composition and structure of an object or, as in this case, a socio-political structure. This ideology manifested in the following samples, projected under poverty alleviation and economic viability.

### **Poverty Alleviation**

This tilts towards eradication of penury and provision of basic social amenities to the people.

**Sample 14:** *I have devoted quality time to the issue of zero hunger.*

**Sample 15:** *The Coalition of Nigeria will be a Movement that will drive Nigeria up and forward*

No doubt, food is one of the, if not, the most important three basic needs of humans. A family's poverty rate is first assessed by the present and quality of food in the family. Unfortunately, rural-urban migration necessitated by lack of basic infrastructures in the villages, general insecurity leading to sporadic and incessant attacks on farmers by the herdsmen, cult activities and militancy in some areas and Boko Haram menace forcing farmers to flee for their lives are major factors that lead to very low food productivity. These are ingredients of bad governance associated with incumbent President Buhari, according to Obasanjo. Thus, the poverty rate in Nigeria, even today, is quite alarming. Most Nigerians skip meals because they cannot afford three square meals.

Against the above background, in sample 14, Obasanjo commits himself as he devotes enough time to eliminating hunger in the land. His ultimate aim is to ensure Nigeria achieves a "Zero Hunger goal by 2025". Originally, he is known as an apostle of "Green Revolution" and having one of the biggest farms in Nigeria.

However, Obasanjo understands that the "zero hunger" target cannot be fully achieved alone. Therefore, in sample 15, he hinges one of the agenda of the Coalition he seeks to it. This is, perhaps, in the belief that people's survival instinct will push them to queue into the programme. In fact, according to Obasanjo, the major target of the Coalition would be "to banish poverty, insecurity and despair".

### **Economic Viability**

This concerns the improvement of the economy in terms of general development for the benefit of the masses.

**Sample 16:** *Obasanjo has wanted nothing other than the best for Nigeria and Nigerians and he will continue to want nothing less*

The above sample really summarises the overriding intentions or dreams of Obasanjo for Nigeria and Nigerians in general. It encapsulates the idea that all his appeals to Nigerians, prior to and during elections to support him against an erring leader (President) was never selfish but in their overall best interest. He dreams of a transformed Nigeria in every facets of life. This tendency in him subsists hence the same ideology runs in his open letters to Jonathan and Buhari. It was for this purpose he mobilised against Jonathan in the 2015 presidential election and is toeing the same path against Buhari in 2019. Sample 17 brings out further this dream which the Coalition he currently seeks would achieve.

**Sample 17:** *The Movement must work out the path of development and the trajectory of development in speed, quality and equality in the short-medium- and long-term for Nigeria*

Having established that Nigerians are facing untold hardship - ravaging insecurity abject poverty leading to excessive hunger, poor housing, decay in the educational sector, general lack of basic amenities and so on - and the failure of the present government to adequately cater for these needs, Obasanjo mobilises to entrench a new social order. Since the people's welfare is paramount to the Coalition, the utterance was meant to curry their favour in order to vote out the "failed" Buhari's government from its second term bid. Against the fire brigade approach to handling issues by the government, the Movement, if it succeeds in bringing in new government, will ensure immediate remedial measures and enduring policies that will transform the people's sufferings and redeem them from grass to grace, for life.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study has revealed that persuasive and transformative ideologies were predominant in the open letter. Persuasion was used to convince the Nigerian masses that Obasanjo is morally virtuous and has total commitment to the welfare of the citizens. As such, he could not fold his hands and allow evils befall Nigerians. He equally used the persuasive tool to mobilise against Buhari's presidential bid in 2019 since the latter has already been presented to Nigerians as one who is incompetent in all ramifications. This was achieved by raising the consciousness of the people to the alleged ills of the Buhari's government. These include nepotism, corruption, deception, mass unemployment cum illiteracy, lack of adequate security among others.

Similarly, the transformative ideology was used to bring to the fore a model of what good governance should incorporate. However, these were seen to be lacking in the Buhari's government. Hence, the writer hinges therein his call on the Coalition to transform Nigeria. Critical analysis of the language of former President Obasanjo's open letter to Nigerians plays major role in projecting the ideologies behind his language use.

In fact, the findings of this study validates the position that language is a veritable tool which political leaders and office seekers use to convince, woo or lure the electorates to either retain or withdraw their support from a given leader or candidate. This is noticed through their choice of words which is usually characterised by hidden ideologies and intentions that are implicitly stated and aimed at individual interests.

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