

Unrestrained Use of Invective at Political Rallies in Nigeria: An Explanatory Critique

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Abstract

Politicians have penchant for abusive, aggressive, hate diction. The practice arguably is more rampant in Nigeria than the advanced democracies of the world, and is a major cause of the disparities in national development between a developed country and its underdeveloped counterpart. The study employed the method of critical appraisal of extant literature, including samples of such hate speeches from Nigeria and abroad. It establishes the fact a politician's choice of words is found to be one of the surest indicators of his/her character and therefore a predictor of the politician's performance in office. The moral imbalance of an electorate that enjoys abusive words from a politician during campaigns but turns around to condemn the same politician's abuse of office after being elected was emphasised. It then called on Nigerians to start the process of screening people aspiring to political offices from such politicians' preferred linguistic expressions. It is only then that the journey towards sustainable national development through good governance can be said to have commenced in Nigeria. Among the measures recommended is aggressive public enlightenment so that heightened political and morality literacy may guide people's assessment of political aspirants in order to have irresponsible people screened out of political contests.

Introduction

It is a common saying that people get the type of government they deserve. If this is true, the countries of the world that are bedeviled with bad governance have to look critically inwards to detect where they err in their political practices beginning from the processes that produce candidates for political offices, the campaign, the elections proper and post-election activities. Based on the educated assumption that a person's true character can be detected through a critical examination of such a person's linguistic behaviours, among other traits, it stands to reason that the utterances and non-verbal communication behaviours of politicians during political rallies can be reliable pointers to the types of characters they are and what could be logically expected from them if elected into the offices of their desire. This places a moral duty on the electorate to commence the process of screening of aspiring political office holders from their speech behaviours to determine

who holds a satisfactory degree of prospects in terms of respect for citizens' rights and delivery of the dividends of democracy.

It is obvious that Nigeria does not have a monopoly of use of polemics and invective during political rallies. Fully developed democracies too have a long history of abusive and hot words during political campaigns. However, a close study of the utterances and songs that most characterize political rallies in Nigeria would show penchant for abuse on opponents rather than pre-occupation with discourses on how to improve the lot of the citizenry. It is thus pertinent to trace the fact that ignoble behaviours like hooliganism in the parliament, disregard for the rule of law and other abnormal practices in which Nigerian political office holders far exceed their counterparts anywhere else in the world to the behaviours manifested by such politicians pre-election.

The first major focus of the current study is to critically determine the level of prevalence of the use of hate words during campaigns by politicians with particular emphasis on Nigeria. It also seeks to find the relationship between politicians' preference for abusive expressions during political rallies and their abuse of office after elections. It further seeks to make necessary recommendations that may be relevant fallouts from its findings.

Theoretical Framework

The current discourse is premised on the Decorum Theory that emanated from a principle of classical rhetoric, poetry and theatrical practices. Decorum simply means "right" or "proper". Though initially propounded for assessing the appropriateness of any style to theatrical issues, its application has now been extended to issues of acceptable behaviours in all social settings. The vanguards of decorum in poetry include Aristotle in his *Poetics* (335 BCE) and Horace in his *Ars Poetica* (19 BCE). In *Ars Poetica*, Horace advises playwrights to demonstrate decorum by avoiding scenes that could shock their audience as a result of cruelty or incredibility. The postmodernist theorists attacked this notion by placing creativity, innovation and aesthetics above decorum. But thanks to Christianity's interest in the use of the theatre for the propagation of their doctrines. The church employed all means and advocacy to reinforce the sustenance of decorum.

Social decorum stipulates acceptable social behaviours and propriety linked with etiquette and manners. Etiquette and manners cover both overt and covert social behaviours, they include verbal and non-verbal communication. Applied as a political theory, Kapust (2011) argues that

decorum stipulates the moral knowledge between orator and audience which sets a standard that supersedes mere taste or aesthetic preferences. So, even when both political orator and audience are prone to indecorous linguistic behaviours for whatever reason, the application of the principle of decorum should override their base interest. Decorum thus performs the function of an external moral check rooted in human rational nature on speech as well as actions of the campaigning politicians.

Gillam (n.d.), however, points out in her review of a book on Rhetoric and Kairos that Cicero explores the dilemma between decorum (prepon) and timeliness (kairos connoting chromos). Cicero's observation is that an otherwise indecorous speech may be spoken at a time that makes it proper and that at such a time the timeliness of such a speech overrides its natural offensiveness. One may then ask if this kind of explanation or excuse for the use of polemics and invective by politicians aspiring to political offices also takes away the truism of the saying that from the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks and that a bad tree cannot produce a good fruit and vice versa. Does it also absolve the electorate that votes an abusive politician into office of the moral responsibility of accepting a part of the blame for such a politician's moral lax in office?

Invective at Political Rallies as a Predictor of Behaviour and Performance in Offices

Kamalu and Agangan (2011) identify persuasive talks as the major means an aspiring political office holder employs to get to the heart of the electorate. Political campaigners use rhetoric to "construct a positive face for themselves" (p.33). If what one aims at is to paint a positive picture of oneself, it is expected that one would concentrate on one's real and perceived lofty qualities. Even if one is pathologically abusive and aggressive, one would be compelled to demonstrate lady-like or gentlemanly qualities, whether fake or genuine.

Since a person's character and identity can be easily identified by the type of linguistic codes employed by such a person (Oduori, 2002), critical analyses of politicians' linguistic behaviours are supposed to be employed as parts of the strategies to identify decently bred campaigners that have the potentials to deliver good administration if elected into political offices. Kalle's (2002) assertion that a speaker's speech reveals some personal characteristics as well as some socially shared features can be really instructive here in predicting a political campaigner's likely performance in office.

Kamalu & Agangan (2011), however, do not fail to recognise the fact that politicians also language as “the bullet employed” that could be effectively used “to bring down the other or diminish their relevance” (p.33). Thus, Adurodola & Ojukwu (2013) describe linguistic choices of politicians during campaigns as motivated by the desire to make the electorate view the campaigners as better candidates than others, Omozuwa & Ezejideaku (2008), too, find the components of political propaganda to include exaggeration, rhetorical questions, and abusive utterances. The data analysis in a study carried out by Ademilokun (2015) also reveals that the linguistic choices of political discourse participants included strategies such as propagandistic language and provocative language.

Linguistic choices reveal the identity of a writer or speaker along the line of gender and age (Kallel, 2002; Dooga, 2009), sexual orientation (Fiscus, 2011) and other attributes. Some marks of personal subjectivity or objectivity of locution can be observed in a locutor’s linguistic choices because they are his/her preferences (Da Costa, 2012). Dönges (2009) too asserts that a person’s choice of words in speech or writing is undoubtedly an expression of the person’s personality.

If Krauss and Chiu’s (2010) conclusion that there is good evidence that speakers take their addressees’ perspectives into account in formulating their messages is true, it then could be inferred that the politicians that pour out invective at campaign rallies are confident that the electorate is comfortable with such abusive expressions. This is a pointer to widespread rot in the society that produces both abusive politicians and the hailing audience. If the politicians are morally bankrupt but know that unruly comments of fellow humans would be most unwelcome to the electorate, such politicians would imbibe decorum by all means.

Where the electorate is serious about getting the best of politicians into offices, both implicit and explicit notions in campaigning politicians’ verbal and non-verbal communication would be keenly watched and taken into consideration in deciding whom to vote into offices. The logicity of this can be seen in Habwe’s (1999) observation that a good politician can be differentiated from a bad one through their respective linguistic preferences alone, pointing out that it was language use that portrayed Dr Martin Luther Junior as the civil right advocate that he was.

Perhaps the following words from Shafer (2015:1) can give some clue to the reason politicians’ sometimes uncultured words are encouraged by the electorate covertly by ignoring such or overtly by hailing them:

It's obvious that Trump's verbal deficit, as grating as it may be on the ears of the educated class, has not caused him much political pain. The media has noted the opposite: Trump's overreliance on sports and war metaphors in his public utterances, his reductionist, one-dimensional policy prescriptions—including nuanced geopolitical arguments such as *get tough with China and Mexico, which are killing us!*—inspire trust in many rather than distrust. Trump's rejection of “convoluted nuance” and “politically correct norms,” mark him as authentic in certain corners and advance his cred as a plainspoken guardian of the American way. By not conforming to the standard oratorical style, he distinguishes himself from the pompous politician. Less is more when you're speaking Trumpspeak.

One would, however, be right in demanding that even in a campaigner's non-hypocritical and authentic speeches, there should be undisguised authentic decorum, humility, courtesy and respectfulness indicative of someone who has imbibed good manners. No wonder Mercieca (2015:1) quizzes, “Trump possesses an arrogance and volatility that makes most voters recoil. So how has he maintained a grip on a segment of the Republican base that – at least, for now – seems unshakable?”

But like Shafer (2015), Mercieca (2015) too has an answer to the question of Trump's “profound and persistent appeal” despite his constant “abuse of rhetorical strategy in public discourse”. He publicly derides whoever tries to curb his excesses as “dummies,” “weak” or “boring”. At a point, he claims that Carly Fiorina's face is too unattractive to be that of the next American president. Yet, his admirers applaud him. Donald Trump appeals to the people's myth of American exceptionalism and claims to be the only candidate who is not weak to uphold it in the face of outside pressures.

Mercieca (2015) observes that earlier campaigners have employed aggressive and threatening words during rallies before and still maintained enough supports and acceptance of a good number of voters. Among such identified is George Wallace who threatened, “If any demonstrator ever lays down in front of my car, it'll be the last car he'll ever lay down in front of”. But Donald Trump has surpassed all in such uncouth outbursts.

If a politician that articulated decorum and civility in campaign speeches and is therefore seen as a ‘folk hero’ and enjoys ‘folk hero fame’ pre-election can be thrown into “folk devil infamy” and post-election “demonization” when the bubble of “moral euphoria” is bust by the stark realities of “inflated expectations” (Wood and Flinders, 2012:3), what becomes of a politician who

starts out campaigning on the tone of aggressive and abusive words carelessly uttered without remorse? It should not be surprising that a person voted into a political office after lavishing contemptuous, abusive and aggressive insults on fellow politicians becomes arrogant and unreachable to the electorate that gave loud ovations at the time of campaign rather than correct such character flaw.

Wood and Flinders (2012) have, however, pointed out that a Guardian/ICM poll conducted in five European countries in 2011 indicates that only 9% of the public thought that politicians acted with honesty and integrity. This is quite revealing. It means most people just vote politicians without expecting them to be truthful. It can then be inferred that the moral demand placed on the politicians by the electorate is somehow weak. Therefore, unruly utterances may be one of the least noticeable weaknesses. Or such utterances can even be seen as comic relief.

If, as asserted by Kennedy (1987), a speaker's linguistic choices are determined by the character and preferences of the audience, it may then mean that the use of polemics by politicians during their rallies is primarily what the audience asks for, and this poses a moral question to the audience and their expectation from such politicians when they are eventually elected into the desired offices. Does an electorate that chooses unruly politicians that excel in the use of abusive words have any moral right to expect such political office holders to act positively as responsible people in offices?

Outpouring of Invective in Politics: The Nigerian Spectacle

Use of abusive or hate speeches in politics, it has been established, cuts across developed, developing and underdeveloped countries. It, however, seems to be much more unrestrained in developing countries, Nigeria inclusive. While politicians in the developed countries sometimes only "flavour" discussions of cogent issues with such unbecoming expressions, their counterparts in developing countries fail to address issues but make excellence in innovation of abusive language their goals. The following excerpt from Imoh (2014:2) aptly captures the Nigerian spectacle:

Give a Nigerian a political party and a politician, he has become a mad dog who listens to no one, tolerates no one and bites everything that passes his face that is not dancing to his political party....

No technicality, no common sense, no issues raised, no facts except in instances where it can be used at the other group. Just a ton of bile, cursive, tantrums and glibness of fanaticism they exude in

their political attitude and discussions. “Buhari till I die”, “GEJ whether they like it or not”, “Haters go and die”, etc you hear them chorus. Their Nigerian fanaticism will fart out creativity in the mad dog, barking caustic clauses and tags on their opponents and fan clubs- “Nebutians”, “Bokohari”, “Jonathanians”, “Buharists”, etc.

It is unfortunate that as partisan politicians and their supporters become too much pre-occupied with unproductive arguments that are not issue-based but full of abuse, they do not have any time and energy left to collectively address developmental issues. This is also pointed out by Imoh (2014:2) thus:

Neither party supporters can discuss their candidate or party without using curse words, threat of violence, ethnic and religious tone of bigotry. No discussion of issues, no engagement of idea, just ad hominem and vague rhetorics (sic). And we say we do not deserve those who preside over us?

The answer to Imoh’s question is obvious. Nigerians do deserve the caliber of people that preside over them because the politicians do not bother to hide their true characters through their choices of words. But the citizens encourage them and go ahead to cast our votes for them. Yet, the electorate expects them to perform excellently as cool headed people in office.

Adebayo (2015) provides a catalogue of such hate speeches of which the culprits include Dr Goodluck Jonathan (Former Nigerian president), Alhaji Namadi Sambo (his Vice), Senator Ahmadu Ali who called Senator Labaran Maku an “ungrateful animal”, Chief Rotimi Amaechi who had to be issued a stern warning by the Directorate of State Security for making inflammatory statements, Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu who declared during an APC rally in Lagos, “If you are an agent of PDP here and you are sent to disrupt this rally, we will roast you”. The list can be elongated to include many others. The terrible scenarios became so endemic in 2015 that the Centre for Information Technology and Development (CITAD) collaborated with the MacArthur Foundation and Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme,(NSRP) and held an international meeting on “Dangerous Speech” at the Yar’ Adua Centre, Abuja.

The seriousness of this issue of hate speeches at political rallies is underscored by the fact that section 227 of the 1999 constitution (as amended) and sections 94 and 95 of the Electoral Act as well as sections 5 - 8 of the Public Order Act and Article 3 of the Political Parties Code of conduct commonly agreed to and adopted by all political parties forbids it. If so many legislations

are put in place at different fora to prohibit a practice, it is obvious that its negative effects on the overall stability and development of the country are really grave.

Mbamara (2002) exemplifies one of the likely consequences of such unguarded utterances by political leaders with the case of a former Deputy Governor who once said that the terrible insults and physical assault perpetrated on the then Attorney-General and Minister for Justice of the Federation (Late Chief Ajibola Ige) were too mild for what he deserved. This hate speech, though not enough evidence to sentence the concerned Deputy Governor, makes him a suspect in the case of the gruesome murder of Chief Bola Ige that happened shortly afterwards.

The following utterances credited to one of the most respected fathers of the modern day Nigeria, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, would show that reckless utterances seem to have become a culture that transcends age and social status boundaries in Nigerian politics:

“Later I made Segun Mimiko Minister without the knowledge of Agagu. What I am hearing now is that he said I am the one that urged him to go and contest in another party. *He is a liar*, I did not say any such thing. When he told me that he wanted to resign as Minister to go and contest, I begged him not to go, *I don't know whether his mother's rival cursed him...*”

(Omozuwa & Ezejideaku, 2008:45)

It is unarguable that the message in the above excerpt could have still been effectively communicated without resort to the offensive words in italics. But trust Nigerians, majority of the opponents of the victim of the vitriol would hail the speaker for being apt, blunt and fearless.

Ogbeidi (2012) and Awofeso and Odeyemi (2014) have observed an intricate relationship between political leadership and national development and further assert that the significant difference between the socio-political and economic development of the developed democracies of the world on one hand and Nigeria on the other can be summarized as differences in leadership types and qualities, which disfavor Nigeria. It is the submission of the current study that one of the trademarks of competent leaders is profound wisdom demonstrated through carefully thought-out discussions of issues but not mere character assassination perpetrated on others. The less concentration on attacking persons while addressing issues the greater the likelihood that politicians are great thinkers that would promote the growth and development of their nations with sublime ideas. The corollary is also pathetically true.

Conclusion

Findings from the review of related literature have shown that Nigerian politicians' penchant for abusive language during rallies and other political discourses defy chronological age and national prestige status barriers. Also, the encouraging reactions from the electorate play a major role in increasing the rate of employing such invective by the politicians. An electorate that praises politicians who freely and carelessly use abusive language lacks the moral right to condemn the same politicians' abuse of public offices. If the Nigerian electorate begins screening politicians from this seemingly unimportant but truly highly pertinent angle, there is hope for the country's democracy that seems not in a hurry to outgrow her teething problems after over fifty-five years of statehood.

Recommendations

Arising from the findings from this critique are the following recommendations:

1. The federal government should give more power and authority through clearly stated legislation to the different agencies saddled with the responsibility of ensuring the use of decent diction during political rallies to prosecute offenders whether they belong to the ruling parties or not. For example, the National Broadcasting Commission should be empowered to prosecute any broadcasting station that airs a hate-speech-laden political programme;
2. The various enlightenment and orientation agencies that have been established to educate Nigerians about proper exercise of democratic rights should be well funded to carry out their responsibilities.
3. The different school subjects at all levels of education must include topics that seriously address courtesy, democratic literacy and other themes related to decorous behaviours before, during and after elections

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