A STUDY OF THE LANGUAGE OF STUDENTS' POLITICAL POSTERS IN FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY OWERRI, IMO STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of language in students' political posters in Federal University of Technology Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria. It is with a view to ascertaining to what extent the techniques of the English language have been manipulated in the creation of the selected posters. This is against the background that language yields to influences from contexts of use. The study takes as its population, the political posters used by student politicians in the 2015 Student Union Elections in the university. However, the samples for the study are ten randomly selected posters. The method of selecting the samples analyzed in the paper is purposive, as only samples that contain evidence of linguistic manipulations are selected. The paper adopted stylistics as its theoretical framework. This is against the background that stylistics offers instruments for the analysis of style in language use, where style refers to the correspondence between language as medium and message as content. In this manner, describing the extent to which such messages that derive from the students' political interest motivate the manner of language use forms the purpose of the study. The conclusions of the paper include that both the political interests and the technological orientations of the students play vital roles in forming the mode of language use in the selected samples. The paper contends also that the manner of creativity in language use in the samples suggests a strong need for interdisciplinary tolerance in teaching and learning. Thus, it suggests the need for descriptive approach in the teaching of language, especially at the tertiary level, because it encourages creativity as opposed to prescriptivism that sticks to rigid rules, hence, evolving monotony and consequently loss of interest.

Keywords: Language, Student, Politics, Poster

Introduction

Language is basically a medium of communication. It is a social instrument that is collectively owned but individually used for communal cohesion. Ferdinand de Saussure in describing language distinguished among *langue*, *la langue* and *la parole*. According to him, while *langue* refers to the general human linguistic activity, *la langue* involves language activity as used within a speech community. Furthermore, *la parole* refers to an individual's activity involving the use of language. For instance, while English, French, Igbo etc. belong *to la langue,* the way an individual uses any of these belongs to *la parole.* No doubt, Saussure's distinctions confirm modern discourses under dialect and idiolect. They suggest that no language remains the same in the hands of different users and under different contexts.

Context is a very important factor in linguistic discourse. Its supposition is that situation of use determines the nature which a language takes. Different contexts expect and even motivate different shapes of language. Although communally owned and conditioned by basic rules, language often yields to context pressure, either from the field, the mode or the tenor. Register for instance, is an outcome of field influence. It is a professionally motivated *colour* which a language assumes. In every field, there are possibilities of unique phraseology (technical jargons) that help in locating a text within its subject matter. Again, one's profession often times shapes one's thought pattern so much so that the person's language which is the vehicle that conveys such thought is also affected. A lawyer thinks law just as a pharmacist thinks medicine and a linguist thinks language. The way one thinks reflects in his language. The popular Sapir Whorf hypothesis lends credence to this assertion, that ones environment to a great extent affects one's use of language.

This paper focuses on language use within the domain of students' politics in a university of technology. Essentially, it has been delineated to the manipulation of the resources of the English language by student politicians in Federal University Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria. It is with a view to assessing how such manipulations could be analyzed within the context of the overriding technological consciousness of the environment.

Review of Concepts

For a better appreciation of the thrust the paper, some basic concepts that form the core of the study need to be reviewed. The major concepts are language and politics. Considering the nature and space of the study, the reviews are not exhaustive, but aimed at defining their relevance within the domain of the paper.

Language

Different scholars have variously defined what language is or what they believe it is. Alegeo and Pyles (2004:2) for instance, define it as "a system of conventional vocal signs by means of which human beings communicate". Fromkin and Rodman (2003:3) on their part see language as "a conventional system of habitual vocal behaviour by which members of a community communicate with one another". Anyanwu (2002:138) also, defines it as "a system composed of symbols, signs and vocal acts arbitrarily created and

conventionally used in communication". These and other related definitions have emphasized some of the basic features of language like human specie specificity, arbitrary but conventional in the use of symbols vis-à-vis what such symbols represent, and the social function in communication.

To underscore communication as an important feature of language, Yule (1997:19) argues that "what we can do as part of an investigation of language is concentrate on those properties which differentiate human language from all other forms of signaling and which make it a unique type of communication". This paper admits that communication is not the only feature of language. It contends that communication forms the prime essence of language. Again, the paper admits that language is not the only medium of human communication. Other modes like body movement, body contact or touch, proxemic space, facial expression, cultural and social symbols and signs, and many others are open to man in the process of communication. However, the concern of the paper is on language as used in the communication of thoughts and ideas.

Human beings are confronted with various forms of thoughts and experiences, and each experience or thought tends to be unique to some extent. Therefore, each unique experience or thought results in a corresponding unique expression. Man has the ability to manipulate the systems of his or her language resources to capture each unique experience. Unlike the animal specie that produces unstructured and stereotyped sounds to represent every situation, man has the capability to vary linguistic forms at his or her disposal to give every situation its deserved expression. This act of representing experiences in symbols is a complex one. It involves drawing a link between the inward and the outward symbols (phonic or graphic symbols), that is between stimulus and speech sound or graphic writing. The interest of this paper is on how student politicians in Federal University of Technology Owerri manipulate the resources of the English language in the expression of their political thoughts in writing through posters.

Politics Like many other concepts, politics has received various definitions and interpretations. Mclean and Mcmillan (2003:422) define it as "the practice of the act or science of directing and administrating states or other political units". They further explain that though this definition focuses on state governance, there could also be a broader interpretation that may incorporate other forms of relationship. To feminism and the concept of sexual politics for instance, the relationship between man and woman connotes strong politics. Furthermore, biologists and environmentalists also locate politics in non-humans, like insects, in their quest for individual survival.

The focus of this paper is on politics as it affects governance and interest protection. Human beings do not hold the same opinion about theories and principles of governance. Each person or group struggles to propagate his or her own. Thus, Mclean and Mcmillan (2003:300) argue that "the essence of politics is argument between principles and theories of society". Each person's political perception is usually embedded in language in the form of ideological catch phrases, manifestos and so on.

Language is central to the operations of politics. Often times, political successes are attributed to good rhetoric. Great speeches by notable politicians have formed major reference points in discourses. Speeches of Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincon, John F .

Kennedy in America; Nnamdi Azikiwe and Nelson Mandela in Africa, as well as others, have continued to spice, as classical allusions, the speeches of very many contemporary speakers and writers. Even the fictional political actors like MacAnthony of Shakespeare's *Julius Ceaser* and Nwaka in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* exemplify the power of rhetoric in politics. Thus, Mclean and Mcmillan (2003:300) posit that "language is to politics as oxygen is to air, its vital and distinct ingredient. Perception of the realities of politics is shaped by the structure and emotional power of language".

The choice of any word, structure or any linguistic technique over other possible alternatives is motivated by the interest of the user and its appropriateness to the context. In politics, such choice is in itself part of the political act since argument and effort to convince forms the major domain of politics.

Mey (2006:306) draws a link between power politics and language. Using sexual politics and literary metaphor as a case, she states that authors "see the society in terms of power: men on top, women at the bottom of a metaphorical power pyramid". The argument is that the way one sees the world helps one to deal with the world. It forms a metaphor for setting problems and solving problems. Thus, politics bears a profound dialectics of word to world relationship, where language is not only viewed a medium or vehicle that carries ideas and realities but forms part of the realities. It bears the constructor's context, representing aspects of his social perceptions.

Scientists and technologists perceive most phenomena as objects that are tangible, and have shapes that are describable. In place of story telling, narrative techniques and figurative manipulations that characterize the arts and humanities, science and technology prefer formulaic descriptions anchored on empirical laws and theories. Most phenomena in science and technology are often reduced to graphs, charts and other forms of pictorial representation. This form of brevity and precision also characterize language use in these fields. Thus, to what extent the indices of science and technology could be read from the selected posters forms the major thrust of this paper.

Methodology
The paper adopted the Purposive Method in selecting the posters studied. In this regard, only posters that contain peculiar linguistic manipulations have been selected. This agrees with the purpose of the study which is to assess to what extent and the manner in which the student politicians in the selected university manipulate language to suit their political interests within the context of their science and technological orientation.

Posters used by the student politicians in the 2015 Student Union Elections in Federal University of Technology Owerri constitute the population of the study. However, a sample population of ten posters was selected for study. In collecting the data, personal information about the candidates like their names and photographs were not included. This is to ensure anonymity. Thus, only the relevant sections of the posters to the study have been used.

The paper also adopted stylistics as its theoretical framework. The choice was motivated by the fact that stylistics is the linguistic study of style. Though it is popularly assumed to be the linguistic study of language in literature, current studies have shown that

stylistics can also be applied in the study of the language of other fields. According to Leech (2008: 54),

In the broadest sense, stylistics is the study of style, of how language use varies according to varying circumstances: e.g. circumstances of period, discourse situation or authorship…But Traditionally and predominantly, stylistics has focused on texts which are considered artistic value, and therefore begin by distinguishing *general stylistics,* the study of style in texts of all kinds from *literary stylistics*, which is the study of style in literary texts. Toolan (2009: ix-x) in support of the expansion of the domain of stylistics has argued that stylistics is crucially concerned with excellence of technique, traditionally, its domain has been directed to such excellence of craft in works of literature, but clearly there is no intrinsic reason why it cannot be used in the study of excellence of craft (and conversely, of mediocrity of craft) in other fields such as advertising, political discourse, legal pleading and pop-music lyrics.

The expansion of the domain of stylistics has led to the evolution of such sub-fields as literary stylistics, linguistic stylistics, stylo-linguistics etc. Without being so critical about the assumed slim boundaries of these sub-fields, the paper is convinced that the manipulation of linguistic techniques in the selected posters could be accounted for by the principles conformity to norms and intentional deviation which are central to stylistics. The selected posters contain language use that conform as well as deviate from the norms of the English language.

To stylistics, any deviation from the norm which is intentional according to the demands of the context of use is stylistic. Thus, it is not every deviation that constitutes style. It is only those that are intentionally and contextually motivated. This paper has earlier aligned to the scholarly view that language use is a function of context. It is context that separates style from error. Error is not contextually induced but style is. The paper, therefore, has examined both conformity and deviation in the selected posters within the context of politically motivated intentions. It has also studied the extent to which the environment, with her technological orientation, has motivated the linguistic choices of the posters.

The analyses in the paper recognize the following levels of linguistic description: morphology, syntax semantics and graphology. Graphology has been given a separate level because stylistics recognizes multi-modal means of communication; and in the data collected, graphology has played significant role. Thus, the paper assumes that significant level of manipulation in the selected posters could be accounted for through the examination of the graphological techniques involved.

Analyses of Texts
Sample 1. This sample has been extracted from the poster of a candidate aspiring for the post of a Financial Secretary. The poster reads:

Let us adjust ourselves in order to reach our desired destination. *Vote for… for fI# $Ec.* (italics mine, for emphasis)
First, notice the use of a multi-modal technique in the linguistic choices of this poster. There is a combination of conventional English language symbols and other symbols such

as the Nigerian Naira (#) and the American Dollar ($) symbols. This smacks of graphological deviation, but when considered within the context of the office which the candidate is aspiring for, the choice is read as a foregrounding technique. The currency symbols suggest the office in view. Thus, the message is communicated through both the conventional form of the language and a pictorial representation of some aspects of the message.

Sample 2. This sample is extracted the poster of a candidate interested in the office of the Director of Socials. The poster reads:

Displaying Our Shakara
There is also the case of graphological foregrounding in this sample. But unlike in **Sample 1** where there is a play on symbols, this candidate has played on the use of capitalization. Note that the use of the initial capitals (D O S) in the words realizes the abbreviation for Director of Socials. Another unique linguistic feature is the careful selection of words that suit the office in view. **Sample 1** used symbols to contextualize the candidate's dream office,

Sample 2 on the other hand used lexical selection. Consider the choice of the word *displaying* within the context of social activity. It may have as synonyms, words like *exhibiting, showcasing* etc. Again, consider within the same context, the choice of *shakara* (a slang suggesting social code-switching). *Shakara* is a pidgin expression used in Nigeria for pretentious pride. It is common among the Yoruba language speaking part of the country. Encouraging the students to display their pretentious pride collocates with the duties of the office that the candidate is aspiring for.
Sample 3. This is a sample is extracted from the poster of one who is aspiring to be the Director of Transport (D.O.T)

Driving Out Traffic
Like in sample two, this candidate foregrounds the initial letters of the words to correlate with the abbreviation of the expression (D.O.T). Other samples that exist in this paradigm include:

Sample 4
Deliver Our Social service
This was used by someone interested in being the Director of Socials (D.O.S). Notice that the initial "s" in the word social is written in the lower case because it does not stand for any relevant word that is significant to the office.

Sample 5
Very Prestigious change
This sample is from an aspirant for the Vice Presidential office (V.P). As in Sample 5, the letter "c" in the word "change" is written in the lower case because it does not stand for a crucial word in the expression.

Sample 6
Visible Prudence
This also comes from one of the aspirants for the Vice Presidential seat

Sample 7. This sample is from a candidate for the post of the Director of Socials

Demonstration Of Skills
Notice that in this sample, the preposition "of" begins with a capital letter contrary to the conventions of the English language. Prepositions, even in titles of texts always begin in lower case letters. The implication therefore is that in the context of this poster, "of" has been used beyond the boundaries of ordinary preposition.
Notice that **samples 2-7** follow similar patterns of linguistic manipulation, where the candidates choose words that embody inferences and references that are recoverable within the context of the office being aspired for.

Sample 8. This is from the candidate for the post of Assistant Secretary General.

AsSiGnable
As in **Samples 2-7,** this candidate has manipulated the use of capital letters to realise the abbreviation for his dream post (ASS. SEC. GEN or ASG). However, **Sample 7** is unique because the manipulation has created a word. Graphologically, the abbreviation foregrounds some capitalised middle letters "S" and "G". Again, notice that the choice of the word, (assign), is in consonance with the expected duty of an assistant who would always make himself or herself available for any duty that may be assigned to him or her by the substantive officer.

Sample 9
…at your SeRviCe
This sample is got from a candidate for the Student Representative Council (SRC)

Sample 8 is similar to **Sample 7.** Both have made use of capitalization as a foregrounding technique in a word. The method of capitalization, no doubt, deviates from the conventional pattern in the English language. English expects a capital beginning in words that initiate sentences or in proper nouns. But in the affected samples, they neither begin a sentence nor is any of the words a proper noun. Again, the capitalization is found in the middle of word. However, it is through these deviations that the attention of the reader is drawn to the message of the posters. Writing the phrase in its conventional form wouldn't have captivated the attention of the reader as much.

Sample 10
Prosper and inspire you
This sample was used by someone aspiring to be a Public Relation Officer (PRO). It also plays on the use of unconventional capitalization of letters in conventional words.

Pedagogic Implications

The purpose of this study is to assess the manner of manipulation in the language used in the political posters of the students in the selected university. The results of the analyses suggest that the selected posters exhibit knowledge of the importance of catch phrases in the language of politics by the students. Also, these catch phrases which bear the major messages of the posters exhibit relative consistency of patterns, which could also be used to characterize the language of political posters as a domain of language use. Furthermore, the patterns are more of deviation than consistency with the norms of the English language. However, the deviations, it has been observed, have not impeded communication, but rather, have brought out significant creativity in the students.

First, notice that the samples, even in their deviations, are still interpretable within the context of the intentions of their users. This illustrates the fact that meaning exists in relating language to context, and not necessarily in the well formedness of language structures. The view of this paper is not that obedience to the rules of a language is not important. Rather, it is that, context determines the manner in which language is used and interpreted. The students have used language in a manner that communicates both their political intentions, as well as in a manner that suits their social environment. This further suggests that language use yields to flexibility, and such flexibility must be occasioned by the context. It is the flexibility that brings out the creative potential of the language user.

Again, from the analyses, it is obvious that major linguistic manipulations in the posters are graphological. It is, therefore, apt to draw a link between this and the technical orientation of the students as science and technology students who are inclined to drawing and representing phenomena in graphs, charts and other pictorial forms. This aligns with major sociolinguistic views that environment affects and influences one's perception and language use. The mode of perception of the students, no doubt, reflects in their mode of language use. Instead of stretches of verbose phrases and cants that characterize political posters in other environments, these students capture their ideas and ideologies in single words and short phrases. These words analogously function as statistical graphs, charts, maps and other instruments of precise representation that characterize expressions in science and technology fields.

Recommendations

The paper is of the opinion that teachers of language should be more descriptive than prescriptive in their teaching especially at the tertiary level. At this level, it is expected that students have developed appreciable cognition and other skills in language which help them to represent their various experiences and phenomena that they encounter. Descriptive approach encourages creativity and variation in language. Emphasis on prescriptive rules sometimes introduces monotony and loss of interest, thus, discourages creativity. The data of this paper have shown how creative the students can be, both in language and formulation of concepts. Such data that are commonplace on campus could, therefore, serve as ready descriptive teaching tools.

The paper also suggests interdisciplinary tolerance. The data of the paper have shown evidences of possible interdisciplinary influences. No field is

an island, each facilitates the other. Language facilitates technology as its major medium of transfer, and technology also facilitates language by encouraging possibilities of creativity which makes language a living phenomenon.

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