



Language of Corruption and Anti-corruption in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Human beings use language for diverse purposes primarily related to communication. These overlapping purposes or functions include informative, referential, personal, relational, regulative and creative. With these typologies, unlimited amounts of thoughts are communicated from intra-personal to social engineering. Corruption constitutes a key social subject of discussion among Nigerians from post-independence to date. The subject has taken its own vocabulary (register) and linguistic ethos which we set out to examine in this paper. We applied lexico-semantic descriptive model in examining how Nigerians refer to corruption and anti-corruption, drawing from written popular and creative literatures. Our analysis revealed a pool of gradable synonyms, collocates, metaphors, idioms, clichés and coinages used by Nigerian to x-ray corruption and engage anti-corruption functions. Our conclusion is that with the large scope of expressions used by Nigerians to engage the issues of corruption, corruption and corruption related practices are being semantically interrogated and challenged with the aim of reducing or possibly eradicating it for the enhancement of national development.

INTRODUCTION

Corruption, and its antonymous coinage, Anti-Corruption are two words that pervade formal and informal discourses in Nigeria. Writers, public speakers, leaders at different levels, parliamentarians, the judiciary, churches and others make copious references to either corruption, anti-corruption or both at different fora. Corruption is therefore inarguably a palpable subject matter and references to it can conveniently constitute a text that encompasses a dimension in the field of discourse.

Language of Corruption and Anti-corruption in Nigeria

Alo (1998:4) refers to field of discourse in relation to the subject matter or the area of activity which is being expressed in language. Subject matters which index registers can be technical (e.g. physics, aeronautics, mathematics), non-technical (e.g. cooking, games and sports) and human volition in general (e.g. habits, influences, conditions and reactions). It is a truism that the field of discourse of a text relates both to its subject matter and the linguistic features which may be associated with it especially in terms of the lexis and semantics.

The Nation, a Nigerian tabloid reported on March 10, 2013 that two universities in the nation have indicated interest in running modules and courses on corruption studies, as disclosed by the chairman of the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Commission (ICPC) Barrister. Ekpo Nta. The Source further stated that once the curriculum is developed and approved, resources and lecturers drawn from Nigerian and international organizations would be readily available to teach the course. This scenario agrees with our proposition that corruption and its related issues are key subject matters within the Nigerian public space.

The source above also proffers that when corruption becomes a course of study in our tertiary institutions, our children, our future leaders would know how to identify and tackle the malaise. The main tool by humans to identify problems, prospects, entities, concepts is communication via language. Therefore language must be seen as part of human social behaviours which operates within a wider framework of human activities. Every piece of language becomes part of a situation and has a contextual relationship between its substance and form on the one hand and the extra-linguistic circumstances on the other hand, both of which give meaning to utterances.

The formal aspect of language constitutes patterns and functions. Patterns convey meaning which implement different functions for man's diverse communication needs. The diversity of needs and the variety of patterns relate to levels of linguistic choices that are available in a language for its users. These choices are describable under different dimensions or levels such as lexis, syntax, phonology, and semantics. Halliday (1970) postulated four categories in describing the linguistic activity as follows: unit (stretches of language carrying meaningful patterns e.g. morphemes, word, group, clause and sentence), structure (the nature of the patterns and their constituents e.g. subject/predicate for the clauses), class (operative patterns and their functions e.g. word classes such as nouns and verbs) and system (possibilities or choices that fill slots in the patterns).

A sociolinguistic paradigm drawn on a descriptive model may be applied in investigating how language users communicate meaning in a particular subject matter based on the choices they make at the levels of lexis and semantics (appropriately describable as lexico-semantic analysis). The relationship between lexis and semantics is simply in the lexical patterns within larger forms (groups, clauses, sentences) function to elicit meaning.

An extensive field of lexical/semantic descriptions manifest in word classes, collocations, registers, antonyms/synonyms, idioms, clichés, metaphors, creative coinages, denotative and connotative references. These items can be found in diverse media such as creative writings, media/press literature, motivational/inspirational literature, academic writings, instructional manuals and technical texts.

What is said so far is that corruption constitutes a subject matter or topical discourse text as a social activity in Nigeria. And as a subject matter, it has acquired its register or selected expressions chosen by Nigerians to express their perception of the subject. Diverse literatures constitute the sources of data with which we are investigating the expressions through a socio-linguistic model with a lexico-semantic technique. In the following lexical template, we have outlined the English words that relate to corruption as a guide to conventional lexemes or formal items that exist in the language from where its users make choices or create new ones as the occasion demands. What will follow are two tables; one constitutes extracts from specified sources we have consulted, the other comprises words/phrases collected randomly from the Nigerian popular discourse space. Our emphasis is on words because according to Guth (1970:7).

Words tell us what we can do and what we should
as members of society. Words make us understand
the rights and obligations we have as citizens of our
country.

Guth (1980:2), also affirms that words help us understand how people think and feel. By outlining the words used by Nigerians to refer to the subject of corruption, we can provide a perception index of how the people feel about the subject as well as how much they know about it.

Lexical template of Corruption and Anti-Corruption related items

Corruption

Solicit	dirty	Tarnished
Temptation	filthy	Untidy
Seduction	septic	unwholesomeness
Bribery	polluted	Deterioration
Graft	foul	Perversion
Back-scratching	impure	Decadence
Susceptibility	tarnished	Relapse

Language of Corruption and Anti-corruption in Nigeria

Inducement	muddy	Regression
Carrot and stick	decay	Verminous
Lure	disgraceful	Mischief
Decoy	contemptible	Negligence
Tip	depraved	run-down
Forbidden fruit	vicious	Retgression
Ulterior motive	outlawed	Disobedience
Deceiver	shameful	Repulsion
Tempter	scandalous	Outlawed
Seducer	contamination	non compliance
Foul up	Disorder	Abnegation
Untidiness	Obscene	Taboo
Slovenliness	Slummy	Deviance
Stench	Heinous	Defilement

Anti-Corruption

Conformity	Robust	Vigour
Etiquette	regeneration	Vitality
Rationale	progression	Recapture
Conscience	reformation	investment
Meritorious	improvement	Diligence
Wholesomeness	Revival	Hardwork
Excellence	emendation	Tolerance
Edify	Remodel	Trust
Irreproachability	transformation	Honesty
Superiority	Upgrading	reprimand
Impeccability	refinement	Probation
Justice	purification	responsibility
Courage	socialization	patriotism
Strength	rehabilitation	Approval
Discipline	readjustment	compliance
Spotless	Retrieval	advancement
Flawless	reparation	promotion
Purgation	overhauling	due process

Sanitation	reawakening	Honour
Hygiene	strengthen	transparency
Cooperation	Security	Respect
Fairness	Love	

Source: *How to be a Nigerian*

Data analysis

The following constitutes the data randomly selected from texts related to corruption and anti-corruption.

Notation: CP- corrupt practices, ACP- anti-corrupt practices, NPE- Nigerian popular English

S/N	ITEM/PAGE	KEYWORDS/PATTERN	Descriptions/Remarks
1	“Dash” may be offered in solid cash...while “tipping” is reward; the “dash” is an incentive. P. 37	Dash, tipping	Nigerian English coinage for bribery (CP)
2	It is not the custom of taxi drivers to carry genuine driver licences. p. 53	Not...to carry genuine driving licences	Euphemism for criminality (CP)
3	Every good mammy-wagon has been carefully trained to be evasive, devious and dubious	Evasive, devious and dubious	Oxymoron expressing (CP)
4	The Nigerian is a great lover. If he has a mistress in spite of a monogamous marriage, everyone will respect it	Great lover	Ironic expression indicating adulterous acts(CP)
5	Instant coffee takes only half an hour to brew	...takes... an hour to brew	Ironic expression indicating procrastination(CP)

Source: *Service or Servitude: An Insight Into NYSC.*

6	One major problem (facing NYSC) is the unrelenting lobbying by Nigerians for their children and wards	Lobbying(gerund)	Also relates to favouritism (CP)
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Language of Corruption and Anti-corruption in Nigeria

	to serve in selected states		
7	The exposure of the corps members to open practise of nepotism by their employees dampens the zeal of service (p.48)	Nepotism (N), dampens(V) (the zeal)	“Nepotism” is the CP which “dampens” states the outcome
8	In sum, NYSC faces a decade of the evils of tribalism, religious bigotry and indiscipline. (p.49)	Tribalism(N), religious bigotry(NG) and indiscipline(N)	CP Tribalism, bigotry result in evil practices.

Source: *The Nigerian Factor*

9	“... Nigeria’s biggest enemy- corruption” p. iii	Corruption	Author uses hyperbole to describe corruption as the biggest enemy
10	“ the so-called big fishes have been made to face justice	So called big fishes	“made to face justice” is an anti-corruption effort
11	“the civil populace must reprimand, reject and explore conduct associated with criminality” P. viii	Reprimand, reject	Strong anti-corruption campaign words
12	“virtually morally bankrupt” p. ix	Morally bankrupt	Expression of corruption
13	“yahoo-yahoo boys”		Nigerian experience for cybercrime (CP)
14	“Corruption in Nigeria has been described as PANDEMIC” P. 128	Pandemic	Strong expression of corruption as a widespread incident (CP)

Source: *The IBB Option*

15	“unfathomable judicial abracadabra” p.6	Judicial abracadabra	Miscarriage of justice by the judiciary. Nigerian English expression for confused state of affairs and corruption(CP)
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16	“culture of settlement” p.10	Settlement	NPE expression for bribery (CP)
17	“mouth-watering overtures to media practitioners	Overtures	Sarcastic reference to bribery offered journalists and media people. (CP)
18	Lecturers resorted to extort money from their helpless students	Extort	Strong expression of corrupt practice

Source: *Just Before Dawn*

19	“doubtful integrity, redundancy, inefficiency, irresponsibility, poor attitude to work” p.1	Anti-social attitude	Standard expressions associated with Corrupt practices
20	“when Murtala Mohammed became head of state on 29 July 1975, he was just what the country needed to SWEEP CLEAN the cobwebs of the morally bankrupt Gowon regime” p.1	Sweep clean	Idiomatic expression meaning to stop corrupt practices (ACP)

Source: *War Against Indiscipline and Other Poems*

21	“with well guaranteed kick-backs so, lets us sign the contracts” p.100	Kick-backs	NPE for expression for inducement to influence award of contracts (CP)
22	“we show little wisdom and foresight/in our wasteful spending habits” p. 47	Wasteful	Squandering of our natural and economic resources (CP)
23	“indiscipline, the monstrous beast with human flesh and blood Indiscipline, the deadly cancer of the lungs” p.9	Monstrous beast, deadly cancer	Metaphors used in qualifying indiscipline as corrupt practices. (CP)
24	“observe the code and do your nation proud” p.7	Observe, proud	Idioms for behaving responsibly and patriotically. (ACP)
25	“let Honesty and Probity be now enthroned” p.6	Enthroned (honestly and probity)	Antonym for dethroning of corrupt practices.(ACP)

Source: *Corruption In Nigeria: The Niger Delta Experience*

26	“corruption has	Mind-boggling	A popular
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Language of Corruption and Anti-corruption in Nigeria

	become a mind-boggling phenomenon” p. iii		expression for expressing the magnitude of corruption. (CP)
27	“Few people manipulate their position to dupe the country” p. iii	Manipulate, dupe	Expression for corrupt practices
28	“...mindless looting, corruption and unprecedented thievery” p. 17	Looting, thievery	Expressions for public stealing (CP)
29	“Federal Government of Nigeria to urgently invoke the relevant statutes so that all public officers who corruptly enrich themselves would be punished” p. viii	Punished	Anti-corruption measure (ACP)
30	“...humble contributors to salvage our country” p. 22	Salvage	A popular political lexeme meaning to save the country from corrupt people. (ACP)

Source: Nigerian Quotations

31	A government of the contractors, by the contractors, and for the contractors. P. 34		A sarcastic mimicry of Abraham Lincoln’s definition of democracy as government of the people, by the people, for the people. (CP)
32	Nigeria, which pays the lowest wages in the world, paradoxically pays the highest contract fees, offices are reduced to the SSS- stealing, struggling and starving	Stealing, struggling, starving	Corrupt practices by few, while majority suffer in poverty (CP)

Source: *Eclipse In Rwanda*

33	That manna fall still but stops in the trays of few fixed high in the sky who must block its fall to us	Class segregation	Image of class struggle and exploitation of the less privileged by the leaders (CP)
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	here below. P. 18		
34	The new governor will ruin the state's economy. P. 17	Ruin	Stealing public funds through embezzlement (CP)
35	The new commissioner is greedy, corrupt and partial. P. 17	Greedy, partial	Items 34 and 35 are taken from lambs at the shrine by the same author. The keywords refer to corrupt practices (CP)

Source: *Waiting Laughters*

36	Waiting like the policeman for his bribe. P. 48	Bribe	In the Nigerian context, the police is notorious for collecting bribes at check points (CP)
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Source: *Midlife*

37	Fat and rich they shoot blind guns at tender fortunes, retire into billions at thirty years, pampered emperors on purchased thrones. P. 67	Purchased thrones	metaphor for Nigerians who pay money to be made "chiefs" (CP)
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Source: *Songs of the marketplace*

38	Madaru steals public funds and blocks the road with a sleek Mercedes. P. 34	Steals	An expression for pilfering (CP)
39	When a bride is too heavy it impoverishes the giver. P.35		A proverbial saying indicating bribery. (ACP)
40	Ayedewru empties the government treasury for a generous donation to a church building. P 37	Empties	The act of stealing massively. (CP)

Other Corruption-Related Usages in Nigeria

Chop-chop	A pidgin expression for corruption CP
Perform	A Nigerian English Semantic (bribe) to express bribery and extension CP
If you can't beat them join them	A popular Nigerian English idiom encouraging cooperation in corrupt acts CP
Wuru-wuru	A popular Nigerian English expression meaning Under-handed method, malpractices CP
Magu-magu	A popular Nigerian expression meaning illegal deals CP
Jibiti	A Yoruba word borrowed into Nigerian English to mean dishonesty CP
Agbero	A Yoruba word borrowed into Nigerian English to mean touts CP
Wayo	Pidgin word to mean tricky CP
To play-ball	To cooperate in dishonesty and fraud CP
To give or receive brown envelope	To bribe or to be bribed CP
African time	A Nigerian English expression to mean lateness or untimeliness CP
To give Kola or receive Kola	A Nigerian expression to obtain bribery CP
Sorting	A Nigerian English word created by semantic extension common among Nigerian students to express bribery and inducement to gain higher marks. CP
Man-know-man	Students for bribery or inducement for marks – A Nigerian English word for favouritism CP
Long leg	Connection/culling – A Nigerian English expression to mean favouritism CP
Chop, clean mouth	Nigerian pidgin phrase for expressing the act of stealing and covering up. CP

- Gun-toting youths
- Yahoo yahoo boys
- Public schools pass to rot
- Judiciary paralyzed by corruption
- General moral laxity
- Secret cults and academic mediocrity
- Ability to manipulate and bribe government officials
- Falsification of accounts
- Importation and sale of fake adulterated or expired drugs
- Underpayment of taxes
- Illegal foreign exchange transactions
- Falsification of age

- Self and tribe above nation
- Financial recklessness
- Execution of phoney projects
- Inflating the budget
- Extortion of money from citizens
- Unable to give a satisfactory account
- Intent to defraud or conceal a crime
- Privy to making false entry
- Use of one's office for pecuniary advantages
- Gratification
- Influence peddling
- Insincerity in advice with the aim of gaining advantage
- Less than a full day's work for a full day's pay
- Tardiness and slovenliness
- Grand corruption
- Bribery
- Making false or misleading statements
- Concealing offences relating to corruption
- Fraudulent acquisition/receipt of property
- Award/signing any contract without budget provision, approval and cash backing
- Money laundering
- Failure to declare assets
- False declaration of assets
- Conversion or disguise of property
- Financing crimes/corrupt practices
- Illicit traffic in narcotic drugs or psychotropic substance
- Terrorism
- Causing damage to public property
- Illicit activity
- Earning wealth illegally
- Violating legislators
- Embezzlement
- Looting
- Struggling
- Human trafficking
- Oil bunkering/illegal mining
- Tax evasion
- Foreign exchange malpractices
- Counterfeiting of currency
- Theft of intellectual property
- Open market abuse

Other Anti-Corruption-Related Usages in Nigeria

- War against corruption
- Combating corruption
- Crusade against corruption
- To fight corruption
- Tackle corruption head on
- To eradicate corruption
- Lay down the foundations of a moral and ethical society
- To rid our land of corruption
- Our determination to improve the wholesomeness of our nation
- Our desire to put things right
- Purifying our society
- Desire to live in a sane, just decent and progressive society
- Stop and search any vehicle
- Identification of a customer
- Amnesty programme
- Resettlement programme
- Discipline
- Loyalty
- Honesty
- Courage
- Courtesy
- Cooperation
- Tact
- Industry
- Helpfulness
- Kindness
- National consciousness
- Good image of the service
- Exercising authority
- Ethnic tolerance
- Geopolitical tolerance
- Religious tolerance
- Gender tolerance
- To nab

DISCUSSION

A few reflections on the concepts of semantics, meaning, vocabulary and culture will foreground our discussion effectively. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of how a people view the world via their language re-affirms that the verbal/linguistic categories we employ do not simply exist in the world of experience but are put there, for the purpose of communicating our meaning and evolving a culture that is depictable from what we mean. In reaction to impart of the Sapir-Whorf theory, Udofot (2011: 110) reminds us that even if we do not have a picture of the universe as speakers of other languages, we at least have a picture that can be related to and to some degree, mapped upon the picture that others have.

This capacity to impart meaning is rooted in the creativity, openness or productivity of language via its vocabulary. According to Oluwabamide (2003:49), “A human can talk about anything he likes without causing any linguistic problems to himself or the hearer. He can say what he wants when he wants”. With the above background, we can easily say that Nigerians who have perceived the concept and reality of corruption via corrupt practices and anti-corruption (efforts in fighting corruption) have deployed various creative linguistic possibilities to talk about the twin ideas. In some cases, their references are drawn directly from the English lexicon pointing to the meaning of the terms. In other cases, there are creative and inventive usages used in the references. The data revealed patterns which include vogue, common – core vocabulary, indexical markers, local coinages, calques (loan words/loan translations) and pidginized words. Jowitt (1991:126) captures the Nigerian English scenario thus:

Given the increasing complexity of Nigerian society in recent decades, the vocabulary employed by Nigerians to translate their thinking into language could also be expected to have undergone rapid expansion. One only needs to consider how far the verbalization of all kinds of specialized experience, a register is required, administration, and economic activity, professional and academic discussion, entertainment, sports, and so on (Corruption and Anti-corruption).

Our data reveals a common – core vocabulary used by Nigerians in referring to corruption and anti-corruption. This vocabulary comprises indexical markers which show an indigenization of Standard English through semantic adjustments on the one hand and stylistic appropriation on the other hand. The stylish appropriation allows for both formality and informality. Formal patterns emerge from administrative documents (e.g. Anti-corruption compendium), standard literary and non-literary works while the informal patterns appear in conversations, written dialogue in literary works, newspaper, articles, popular clichés, slangs, pidginized words and expressions in Nigeria. We noticed a common-core anti-corruption register

Language of Corruption and Anti-corruption in Nigeria

comprising “fight”, “war”, “flush out”, “stand out” “route out”, “combat”, “change” and other such infantry collocates which point to an image of Nigerians’ perception of an enemy (corruption) which must be defeated with the arsenal of war. This pattern of usages is partly derived from the prolonged military rule foisted on the nation which tends to tilt the mind-set of the citizenry towards engaging in physical combat. Also, psychologically, it indicates strongly, how Nigerians feel against the menace of corruption as an enemy that must be killed to avoid further invasion into the nation’s body-politic and social ethos.

However, whereas we found corruption and corruption related expressions across all strata of the Nigerian English communication spectrum, that is formal English and pidgin English usages, few anti-corruption expressions exist in the non-standard variants of English here. This indicator leads to the reality that, efforts at eradicating corruption is not driven at the grassroots where majority of the Nigerian citizens belong. It appears, anti-corruption operates more on paper and institutional agencies set up to manage the issue. These agencies are also known to publicize their information in largely Standard English which the non-educated grassroots are not used to.

CONCLUSION

We set to interrogate how Nigerians conceptualize or perceive the concepts of corruption and anti-corruption and how they express the contents of the concepts via a register vocabulary. To carry out the task effectively, we provided a general template of lexemes that are related to the terms in Standard English. We proceeded to collate words, patterns and usages in Nigerian publications as well as popular idioms or expressions which we have analysed using lexico-semantic descriptive procedure. Our conclusion is that Nigerians take corruption and anti-corruption seriously, and have devised diverse lexical and phrasal patterns to describe them in order to justify their awareness of the dynamics of the concepts and to condemn corrupt practices at all levels of the Nigerian society.

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