

Rethinking the Language of Politics in 21st Century Zimbabwe: A Critical Discourse Analysis Perspective

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Abstract

The struggle for political supremacy in postcolonial Zimbabwe has of late assumed a new form in which discourse contestations have taken centre-stage. The Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) politicians have engaged in discourse construction and discourse manipulation as tools of discrediting, vilifying and outmanoeuvring their perceived political opponents. This has been evident during and after the execution of the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (the *Third Chimurenga*) and the urban slums clearance exercise (*Operation Murambatsvina*). Applied propaganda techniques in the form of discourse control, semantic twists, popular appeal, word approval, semantic forgery and semantic shifts have been deployed in attempting to justify the nobility of unpopular government programmes that have been condemned both locally and internationally. The article concentrates on ZANU PF political discourse because other political players in do not have access to the state controlled media. In attempting to unravel these deep-seated political machinations of the ZANU PF government, the article uses a mixed conceptual framework of hegemony theory and critical discourse analysis, coupled with empiricism.

Introduction

Litanies of new socio-economic and political challenges that coincided with the dawn of the new millennium have forced the ZANU PF government of Zimbabwe to embrace unorthodox means of political survival. The strategy of applied propaganda in which traditional meanings and values of words have been altered and new terms serving ZANU PF perverse ideology introduced, has been prevalent in Zimbabwe since 2000. State controlled electronic and print media have become awash with ZANU PF image building terminology. This insidious and potentially deadly process has been achieved through the use of some or all of the applied propaganda techniques discussed in this article. In the famous Nazi treatise, *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler summarized the workings of the art of propaganda in the following terms:

Its [propaganda's] effect for the most part must be aimed at the emotions and only to a very limited degree at the so-called intellect... All effective propaganda must be limited to a very few points and must harp on these slogans until the last member of the public understands what you want him to understand by your slogan (Pratkanis and Aronson, 1991: 32 – 39).

In addition to the above, emotional language, creation of associations and connotations, repetition and simplification of reality constitute a set of other key elements of propaganda (Mesthrie, *et al*, 2000).

In the case of Zimbabwe, the Fast Track Land Reform Program (code-named the *Third Chimurenga*) and the controversial urban slum clearance exercise (popularised as *Operation Murambatsvina*) have turned out to be fertile ground for the propaganda sloganeering that has manifested itself in the form of term creation, semantic shifts, dysphemism, euphemism, mystification, lexical hardening, word disapproval, repetition, censorship, popular appeal as well as semantic broadening. Ordinary day-to-day expressions have been arm-twisted to assume new meanings depending on the intentions of the ZANU PF political elites. Old men and women who have been practicing subsistence agriculture for decades have suddenly turned into “new farmers.” The term “settler”, which for over a hundred years used to pejoratively refer to white colonial intruders, has suddenly ameliorated. It now refers to the “legitimate and rightful” owners of the land. People who hold alternative views that are not in consonance with the political thinking of the ruling elite regarding the unpopular policies of the ZANU PF government are variously described as “sell-outs”, “enemies of the people” and “unpatriotic traitors.” These and related expressions have been repeated several times in the printed and electronic media, in speeches at national events such as Independence and Heroes Day celebrations as well as at ZANU PF political rallies.

Conceptual issues

In attempting to unmask the deep-seated political undertones of applied propaganda techniques in Zimbabwe, this article employs the scientific orientations drawn from two theoretical frameworks, namely, hegemony theory and critical discourse analysis.

Hegemony Theory: Antonio Gramsci

Gramsci's theory is constituted by the ideas of *egemonia* (hegemony), *direzione* (consent) and *dominio* (coercion) (Hoffman, 1984, 10 – 17). Hegemony refers to that order of signs and practices, relations and distinctions, images and epistemologies – drawn from a historically situated

cultural field – that come to be taken for granted as the natural and received shape of the world and everything that inhabit it (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2003, 12). Thus, the ruling elites, with the ulterior motive of securing their power bases, embark on a rigorous exercise of habit forming, capturing popular mentality and creating common conceptions of the world. According to Gramsci (1971), the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas. That is to say, the class, which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class, which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control over the means of mental production, resulting in the suppression and subjugation of the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Hegemony works through a delicate balancing of two competing forces: that of consent (the sense of collaboration or subscription to leadership by the ruled) and coercion (the use of force to achieve dominance).

The process of hegemony involves both attaining consent among allies and using force against enemies, meaning that it is underpinned by the interdependence of force and consent. Gramsci's theory operates through the fundamental dual perspectives of force and consent, authority and hegemony, violence and civilization, of the individual moment and of the propaganda, of tactics and of strategy. Acting as a mechanism of ideological control, hegemony allows for the ruling class to guide the praxis of the ruled without directly intervening in personal affairs. In this way, the existing social order is affirmed in a manner that appears to be natural and transcendent of institutions. As a result, hegemony provides a vehicle for the constant assimilation of change and necessity in culture, appropriating the discourse of social movement while promoting the agenda of the dominant group (Gitlin, 1994 and Gerbner, 1978).

In short, hegemony assumes the role of "power", acting as a social construct that promotes the existence of the group employing it. Gramsci (1971) argues that the pragmatic and methodological premise of hegemony theory is based on the fact that the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways: as 'domination' and as 'intellectual and moral leadership'. A social group dominates antagonistic groups, which it tends to 'liquidate', or subjugate, even by armed force where necessary. Therefore, hegemony is ideally the sum total of coercion and consent.

The foregoing insights drawn from Gramsci's articulation of the operations of coercion and consent are used to critique, problematise and tease underlying meanings out of the behaviour of the ZANU PF government from year 2000 to the present. The Zimbabwe government's politics of word play that accompanied and legitimised the conduct of the *Third Chimurenga* and *Operation Murambatsvina*, is quizzed and explained in terms of hegemonic notions of engineered or ideological domination. Also, in trying to unravel what the government perceived to be the moral

justification for violent and unilateral farm seizures and indiscriminate destruction of urban slums, the article makes recourse to the above Gramscian ideas.

Critical Discourse Analysis:

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a type analytical research that primarily studies the way social power, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and inscribed in clearly defined socio-political contexts (van Dijk, 1998). CDA is concerned with the ways in which structures of discourse enact, confirm, legitimise, reproduce or challenge notions of power, hegemony and domination in society. Therefore, the main goal of the CDA program is to understand and ultimately expose the manner in which social inequality is sustained through subtle processes of word-play and language manipulation. The CDA mode of enquiry is associated with the work of Fowler (1996); Fairclough (1992, 1995); van Dijk (1996); Fairclough and Wodak (1997) as well as Caldas-Coulthard and Caldas-Coulthard (1996).

CDA attempts to go beyond merely describing discourses by adopting an interdisciplinary approach that seeks to unpack power relationships and their effects in society. To this effect, Fairclough and Wodak (1997: 271 – 280) summarize the main tenets of CDA as follows:

- CDA addresses social problems;
- Power relations are discursive;
- Discourse constitutes society and culture;
- Discourse does ideological work;
- Discourse is historical;
- The link between text and society is mediated [by discourse];
- Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory;
- Discourse is a form of social action.

What emerges from the foregoing is that from a CDA perspective, discourse is viewed as inherently part of, and influenced by social structure, and produced in social interaction. According to James Gee (1990: xix) discourses are “ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles by specific groups.” This constitutive nature of discourse is further emphasized by Fairclough (1992: 87) where he observes that “discourse constitutes the social, including ‘subjects’, and language is far more than a representational tool [because] it is a form of action and contains within it ideological elements.” This means that language is a central vehicle in the process whereby people are constituted as individuals and social subjects, and because language and ideology are closely

imbricated, a critical analysis of language has the capacity to expose some of the pervasive ways by which people are oppressed within the existing social structures.

The vitality of CDA in sociolinguistic analysis is aptly demonstrated in Norman Fairclough's (1992) book, *Language and Power*. In this book, Fairclough uses the insights of CDA to come up with a paradigm – the Critical Language Study. In an editorial preface to the book, C.N. Candlin outlines the focus of Critical Language Study as constituting of the following:

- Language, in its everyday as well as professional usages, enables us to understand issues of social concern. More specifically, it examines how the ways in which we communicate or are constrained by the structures and forces of those social institutions within which we live and function.
- Language is viewed not as an autonomous construct, but as a discourse and as an action; similarly, society is seen not as a mosaic of individual existences locked in some stratified structure but a dynamic formation of relationships and practices constituted in large measure by struggles for power.
- Two assertions: that language is a social practice and not a phenomenon external to society to be adventitiously correlated with it; and that language seen as a discourse rather than an accomplished text compels us to take account, not only of the artefacts of language, the products that we see, but also the conditions of production and interpretation.
- That access to and participation in the power forums of society is dependent on knowing the language of those forums and how using that language power enables personal and social goals to be achieved (Fairclough, 1992: vi – viii).
- It seeks to help increase consciousness of language and power, and particularly of how it contributes to the domination of some people by others. This means that it conscientizes people to see the extent to which language use does rest upon commonsense assumptions, and how these can be ideologically shaped by relations of power.
- Lastly, Critical Language Study demonstrates that one aspect of power is the capacity to impose and maintain a particular structuring of some domain or other – a particular way of dividing it into parts, of keeping the parts demarcated from each other, and a particular ordering of those parts in terms of hierarchal relations of domination and subordination (ibid.4 – 5).

Fairclough goes on to use these conceptual propositions as torch lights for teasing apart the instantiations of hegemonic domination and language politics in the British media, advertising industry as well as in language plans and policies.

The intertwined relations of language, power and ideology articulated in the preceding paragraphs constitute a solid foundation for interrogating the language of politics in 21st century Zimbabwe.

ZANU PF applied propaganda techniques

ZANU PF survival strategies in the face of waning popularity, a dwindling economy and a new political contender, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), have involved the use of numerous techniques of applied linguistics. These are discussed in the subsequent sections of this article. These include, among others, word approval, word disapproval, repetition and euphemism, popular appeal and censorship.

Word approval

This is a process whereby certain words and phrases are deliberately given special prominence and respectability by their frequent usage in influential circles and the mass media. Word approval also often results in certain profanities that are traditionally unacceptable suddenly becoming commonplace in the mass media and in everyday social discourse. For instance, all people perceived to be against the disorganised *Third Chimurenga* and *Operation Murambatsvina*, have been given all sorts of labels that are traditionally unacceptable. Officialdom in the form of the presidium, cabinet ministers and other ZANU PF officials gave themselves the leeway to use the public media as a platform of hurling insults at members of the main opposition party, the MDC and their supporters. Some of the unpalatable terms that were frequently used mainly by the ruling party's now embattled former minister of Information and Publicity, Professor Jonathan Moyo, include the following: 'sellouts', 'enemies of the people', 'neocols', 'puppets of western imperialists', 'terrorists', 'saboteurs', 'anti-government lobbyists', 'running dogs of imperialist forces', 'violent cronies of the MDC', 'political dissidents' aimed at 'undermining national interest', among others.

This kind of discourse is always used to discredit the MDC and civic organisations aligned to it – both local and international. The United Nations Special envoy, Anna Kajumulo Tibaijuka, was not spared this name-calling barrage for compiling a 'damning' report on the conduct and after effects of the urban slums clearance in Zimbabwe. She was described as a 'misguided puppet of Tony Blair' and her report labelled as 'value-laden', 'typical of neo-colonial conspiracy', 'part of the Anti-Zimbabwe Global Campaign' and full of 'diplomatic naivety' (*The Chronicle Online*, 19 September 2005 and *The Herald Online*, 17 August 2005).

It would appear anyone who holds an opinion that is contrary to ZANU PF policies automatically falls into the fold of the country's 'hostile detractors'. Such labels often get naturalized over time so much that they end up being viewed as real and commonsense. From a CDA perspective,

Naturalization is the royal road to commonsense. Ideologies come to be ideological commonsense to the extent that the discourse types which embody them become naturalized. This depends on the power of the social groupings whose ideologies and whose discourse types are at issue. In this sense, commonsense in its ideological dimension is itself an effect of power. What comes to be commonsense is thus in large measure determined by who exercises power and domination in a society or a social institution (Fairclough, 1992: 8).

Therefore, in a typical hegemonic fashion, the ZANU PF government of Zimbabwe is seen to have taken a paradigm shift from overt mechanisms of physical repression to the use of more covert strategies of ideological domination.

Word disapproval

Under this strategy, certain words or phrases that expose the user to disagreeable social reactions like personal abuse and other forms of victimization are deliberately disapproved by officialdom. In the process of trying to recover ZANU PF's glory of the yesteryears for instance, government officials, politicians as well as the state media employed this propaganda technique to vilify perceived enemies. The ruling political elite disapproved a wide array of terms popularly used by opposition parties and those who do not share the same sentiments with the Mugabe regime. Officialdom disapproved the use of the term "farm invasions" when describing the manner in which liberation war veterans and other ZANU PF sympathizers violently seized commercial farms from erstwhile 'descendants of former colonial masters'. Cabinet ministers and all other ZANU PF politicians preferred to use the term "demonstrations" instead. The situation that prevailed in Zimbabwe during the *Third Chimurenga* is akin to what Horace Campbell (2003) calls executive lawlessness. In the words of Campbell, "executive lawlessness is an appropriate way to characterize the use of state violence against the political opposition, especially against farm workers." (Campbell, 2003: 78 – 81)

Campbell further observes that executive lawlessness exists when the politics of law and order is mainly rhetorical, given the widespread disregard for the law by those who are empowered to uphold it. He argues: "the major democratic crisis in Africa is the crisis of hegemony or a situation where the ruling classes have failed consistently to win the

ideological struggle on the continent” (Campbell, 2003: 81). Indeed, the Mugabe regime resorted to these unorthodox tactics of survival following the exhaustion and bankruptcy of nationalism as an ideology of the new millennium. The quest for entrenching ZANU PF political hegemony and regime security saw the unfortunate executive lawlessness being given the respectable name ‘fast track land reform’ by the end of year 2000.

The government of Zimbabwe worked in collusion with the veterans of the 1970s liberation war to perpetrate all forms of executive lawlessness under the guise of ‘legal demonstrations.’ Under the direction of Ignatius Chombo, the minister of local government, war veterans and other ZANU PF sympathizers operated like a storm trooper force that was a law unto itself and could not be touched by the police or army. They literally attacked both farm workers and owners with impunity, under the guise of ‘reclaiming land’ yet their express purpose was the liquidation of all opposition elements ahead of the 2000 parliamentary and 2002 presidential elections. During this period the Mugabe regime can best be described as having been commandist, militarist and lawless.

The other litany of terms whose meanings were twisted in favour of ZANU PF political ideology include the following: ‘good governance’, ‘democratic principles’, ‘dictatorship’, ‘regime change’, ‘rule of law’, ‘violation of international law’, ‘human rights’, ‘subversion of democratic process’, ‘stolen election’, et cetera. The ruling political elite created the impression that both the *Third Chimurenga* and *Operation Murambatsvina* were carried out in a progressive way by ensuring that the foregoing unpalatable terminology is not frequently used in the public media. By disapproving the authenticity of labelling the actions of the ZANU PF government as being in violation of democratic principles, individual human rights, international law, as well as good governance in the conduct of the *Third Chimurenga*, the ruling elite sought to entrench its political future threatened by the emergence of a new political contender, the MDC, which commands an overwhelming support from the country’s working class, civic organisations and the generality of the Zimbabwean populace, both in the rural and urban areas.

Repetition and euphemism

In this case, a selection of words, phrases and other forms of discourse are deliberately given prominence through repetition. This propaganda technique entails disguising whatever is intrinsically ugly, repulsive, immoral or otherwise unacceptable behind more attractive, less offensive or neutral labels. At the hands of ZANU PF politicians and their social engineers, euphemism became a sinister device used to deceive and indoctrinate the public into accepting things, which are otherwise intrinsically repugnant – all in the name of regime security. The violation of property rights through violent seizures of land and the indiscriminate

destruction of houses was euphemistically referred to as ‘repossessing our cultural heritage’, ‘redressing colonial injustices’, ‘cleaning the cities’, ‘stopping economic crimes’ ‘countering economic sabotage’, ‘reorganizing small-to-medium enterprises’, ‘reducing the high crime rate’, ‘arresting such social ills as prostitution’, ‘stopping the hoarding of consumer commodities’, ‘stemming disorderly or chaotic urbanisation’, ‘minimizing the dangers of disease outbreaks’ and ‘reversing environmental damage’ (*The Herald*, 17 August 2005 and *The Financial Gazette Online*, 22 September 2005). The seemingly good intentions of the *Third Chimurenga* and *Operation Murambatsvina* that were later to be marketed in this grandiloquent terminology turned out to be mere political sloganeering as the people affected by the two programs are now even worse off – they now have no food, no shelter and no sources of income (United Nations, 2005).

The hooligan behaviour of former liberation war veterans who went about beating people and invading properties (Horace Campbell, 2003) was repeatedly and euphemistically acknowledged as the activities of ‘loyal’, ‘patriotic’, ‘truly Zimbabwean nationals’ who were seeking to ‘empower’ the landless rural people. However, as it later turned out, the so-called martyrs and champions of black economic empowerment were in fact driven by the populist, hegemonic and militaristic interests of an embattled regime whose political future was taking a nose-dive. The majority of the rural folks in whose names the farms were invaded are still crowded in the poor and unproductive pieces of land that they have been occupying for decades. This goes a long way to demonstrate that discourse manipulation by the Mugabe regime and the activities of the war veterans were no more than cheap politicking aimed at propping up grassroots support for the ruling party.

Popular appeal

Popular appeal involves a situation in which the propagandist’s message is packaged or presented in a way likely to disarm criticism. The ZANU PF government used this technique to justify the violent farm invasions that started in 2000. Popular appeal is an artful compound of bogus philanthropy, cloying sentimentality, euphemism and superficiality, all designed to help the medicine go down all those gullible throats (Gerbner, 1978).

In a bid to try and convince the people of Zimbabwe and the international community about the nobility of the *Third Chimurenga* and *Operation Murambatsvina* the ruling party’s propaganda machinery popularised the use of selected words and phrases that appealed to the sentimentality of ordinary men and women. The endless list of such terminology included the following: ‘patriotism’, ‘sovereignty’, ‘self determination’, ‘nationalism’, ‘territorial integrity’, ‘national interest’, ‘mature democracy’, ‘the will of the people’, ‘heroic sons and daughters of

Zimbabwe', et cetera. The net effect of all this manipulated jargon was the legitimisation of violating the rights and freedoms of those sections of the Zimbabwean society perceived to be against the status quo. An impression was created through the process of discourse control that in Zimbabwe there is a unique notion of village-based palaver human rights and democratic dispensation underpinned by an in-built tendency towards consensus. This unfortunately turns out to be no more than fictitious wishful thinking, for, as Gero Erdmann (2000: 32) points out, human rights and democracy are not culturally relative. Authoritarianism, for instance, be it European or African, is underpinned by one common denominator: the subjugation of the individual into a Theocratic or Natural Order of Things.

The foregoing behaviour of the ZANU PF government of Zimbabwe is comparable to the political propaganda of Nazi Germany (1933-1945). After attaining political power in 1933, the Nazi Party of Hitler embarked on a policy of literally "putting everyone in the same gear" (Ehlich, 1989). This propaganda policy, set up under the *Ministry of Information and Propaganda*, was spearheaded by Joseph Goebbels. All the mass media in German was controlled by this ministry which manipulated and arm-twisted ordinary everyday expressions into vehicles for Nazi dictatorship ideology. Ordinary terms such as the word 'worker', were subjected to the process of lexical hardening through endless repetition in the media. In Nazi Germany, the word 'worker' came to be associated with contexts of 'honesty', 'war', 'honour', 'religion' and 'national loyalty' (Mesthrie, *et al*, 2000). A similar kind of situation has been prevailing in Zimbabwe since 2000. The word 'new farmer' for example, has been repeatedly used in the media with the associated meanings of 'patriotism', 'loyalty', 'progressive', 'anti-imperialist', 'economic empowerment', among others.

Censorship

This is one of the most pervasive tools of discourse control that the Mugabe regime has persistently used to sustain its political hegemony. Censorship consists of word or phrase disapproval and suppression of certain kinds of publication and writers or speakers by officialdom. The period between 2000-2003 witnessed the closure and muzzling of more privately owned media houses in Zimbabwe than ever before. Considering that people's thoughts, speech and behaviour can be influenced by propaganda, the ZANU PF government took advantage of its parliamentary majority to enact numerous laws that muzzled or completely blocked the free flow of information in the country. Most privately owned media organisations were denied registration by the newly formed media regulatory body, the Media and Information Commission (MIC). For instance the *Daily News* and the *Daily News on Sunday* were shut down in September 2003. The *Tribune* was also closed under hazy circumstances in December of the same year. The Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and a

whole gamut of stringent accreditation requirements continue to constrain journalists from freely collecting and disseminating information.

All these overtures were expressly designed to ensure that only state owned daily and weekly publications such as the *Chronicle*, *Sunday News*, *Herald* and *Sunday Mail* remained in circulation. These publications have always been used as the mouthpieces for churning out ZANU PF propaganda aimed at undermining any dissent voices from the opposition and other civic organisations such as workers' unions, human rights groups and student movements.

Starting from 2000, the state owned media was also conspicuously awash with jingles and advertisements that sought to popularise the infamous *Third Chimurenga*. Some of the notorious jingles that were on air every thirty minutes on Zimbabwe Television (ZTV) and all radio stations include *Hondo Yeminda*, *Rambai Makashinga* and *Sendekera Mwana Wevhu*. All of them were in Shona with Ndebele translations in a few instances. The ultimate goal was to try and legitimise the lawlessness and chaos that characterized the *Third Chimurenga* by ensuring that the people of Zimbabwe are not exposed to any other source of information except the ZANU PF propaganda churned out through the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings (ZBH) and its subsidiary companies. The 75 percent local content legislation further exacerbated the plight of the Zimbabwean listener-viewers as they were deliberately denied access to information and programmes beamed by foreign stations. All this was disguised as the promotion of local 'talent' and 'our cultural heritage', yet in the final analysis, one would find that the ultimate goal was political: the perpetuation of ZANU PF political ideologies.

The few privately owned media houses that survived the onslaught of the infamous AIPPA and related pieces of legislation have remained critical of the excesses of the Mugabe regime. For instance, in a commentary in the weekly *Independent* edition of 2-8 July 2004, the editorial questioned the labelling of all anti-government organisations as hostile. The following questions were posed: "Who defines the term hostile? Is telling the truth hostile? Is laying the facts bare being hostile?" (*The Independent*, 2-8 July 2004).

Conclusion

The drive for ZANU PF political hegemony, dominance and regime security in Zimbabwe has assumed more overt forms as opposed to conventional violent, forceful and militaristic means of gaining the consent of the ruled. Perceived political opponents have been variously labelled and silenced through applied propaganda techniques that revolve around discourse control, semantic twists and the monopolization of Zimbabwe's print and electronic media. Alternative avenues of information dissemination have been banned through the enactment of draconian pieces

of legislation. In the final analysis, it can be observed that apart from the traditionally acknowledged militaristic means of ensuring regime security, autocratic governments may also resort to salient strategies such as discourse control, discourse construction, censorship as well as the deliberate alteration of traditional meanings of words. This process of manipulating language in pursuit of political expedience can be easily understood in hegemonic terms.

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