Doing Politics with Words: a Pragmatic Analysis of News Reports on Obasanjo and Fayose’s Fracas

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Abstract

Works abound on the use of language in the Nigerian political atmosphere but sufficient attention has not been paid to the (im)polite remarks and interchange between politicians in the Nigerian political milieu. This study therefore looks at the (im)politeness strategies in the utterances of former president Olusegun Obasanjo and Governor Ayodele Fayose as reported in the Nigerian newspapers. The study adopted Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory as its theoretical guide. 12 excerpts were randomly selected from three Nigerian newspapers – The Nation, The Punch and Nigerian Tribune between July 2014 and July 2015 – to show the political rivalry between these two personalities. The wide report of the power tussle between Olusegun Obasanjo and Ayodele Fayose in Nigerian newspapers is a pointer to the fact that the language of these politicians arouses a wide audience in the Nigerian society; hence, politicians’ continuous use of language is an instrument to achieve political relevance and popularity, among many things. This study therefore submits that, politicians should not make the media a tool for political rivalry and they should not make confrontations the medium of sustaining political relevance in the polity.

Keywords: (im)politeness, face, Obasanjo, Fayose, political fracas.
1. Introduction

Language is a marker of culture and so users of language tend to use certain means while using language to communicate. A speaker might decide to be polite and might also decide to be impolite to drive across his/her message. The Media is regarded as the conscience of the society due to the important role they play in a nation building. Based on this, the language of newspaper is always meticulously used by editors, columnists, et al, in newspapers to facilitate the eagerness of readers. The readers can be likened to the audience and thus, the style of the language of newspaper is expected to be impeccable. According to Bell (1991):

The essence of style is that …speakers are often primarily responding to their audience in the language they produce …the audience are arguably the most important and certainly the most researched component of mass communication…communicators do work with an idea of the audience they are speaking to and what they want.

With reference to the political news in Nigeria, the ideology behind the language of newspaper reports is unfortunately biased. “Ideology refers to attitudes, set of beliefs, values and doctrines with reference to religious, political, social and economic life, which shapes the individual's and group's perception and through which reality is constructed and interpreted” (Taiwo, 2007).

Olowe (1993) focusing on the interplay on the language and ideology of Nigerian English-medium newspapers is of the opinion that no news report is ideologically neutral, transparent or innocent. According to him:

The editor and his reporters on the one hand and their audience constitute an ideological empire. The newspaper subjects all newsworthy events that constantly come up in social life to rigorous linguistic manipulation to make them suit the ideological expectation of the audience.

The politics played in the Nigerian society is often said to be confrontational whereby leaders battle themselves mainly for supremacy and one major tool that is always used by political leaders is the newspaper. Impolite words are exchanged freely and the newspapers are known for reporting these stories verbatim. Political leaders often exercise their prowess over a subordinate leader, in the words of Nafute (2006) “a chairman of a local government (equivalent to a Mayor in North America) holds his seat at the mercy of his state governor.”

In the Nigerian society, politics goes beyond the need and desire to serve the citizenry. It is the case that politicians are mainly peoples who set out to benefit from the country’s wealth and cut heavily what they often refer to as ‘national cake’. Politics in Nigeria is really a unique one that can only be understood by an insider. To this extent, Schaffner (1996) holds that:
In political discourse, linguists have always been interested in the linguistic structures used to get politically relevant messages across to the addresses in order to fulfill a specific function, but narrow linguistic analysis of political discourse cannot ignore the broader societal and political framework in which such discourse is embedded.

Along this line therefore, a careful follow up of the Nigerian political terrain will show that it is not only bothered on the administration of the state but it is also a platform for cold war among politicians. It is in the light of the Nigerian political terrain as being a battle field for politicians that this study hopes to investigates (im)politeness in the language of politicians, looking specifically at newspaper reports on the power tussle between former president Olusegun Obasanjo and Governor Ayo Fayose with the aim of shedding light on the kind of politics played in Nigeria.

2. Literature Review

Garcia-Pastor (2008) explores the interface between impoliteness and power in the context of political campaign debates of the 2000 US elections. In this, focus is on the interventions in which politicians principally address one another and he observed that through interchanges, debaters intend to damage and dominate the opponent, thus showing the antagonism that underlies and sharpens their relationship. Garcia-Pastor employs a second-order approach to impoliteness whereby this concept basically consists of a speaker’s intended face aggravation or attached towards the hearer. The writer concludes that politeness investigations of debates have not contemplated the issue of power seriously enough, notwithstanding the close relationship between this concept and politeness phenomena.

Odebunmi (2009) explores the concept of politeness in print media political interviews in Nigeria using a revised version of the theory of relational work. In the article, he attempts to locate face work in the expanded frame of relational work to be able to account for this discourse situation as suggested by the relational work theorists. In his data, two types of print media political interview emerge viz, the subjective or sentimental and the factual or analytical. The former often features a large quantity of politeness elements. The reason for this is that it often touches on the emotional judgement of the participants. The latter, which presents the situation as objectively as possible, often contains very few or no instances of politeness features. Three aspects of relational work were found in his data, they are, politic verbal behaviour, polite verbal behaviour and impolite verbal behaviour. The researcher shows through his analysis that much of what transpires between participants in political interviews is informed by previously or spontaneously conceived opinions which may be presented directly, using politic, polite or impolite expressions. This research is what opened the field for enquiries into politeness in print media political interviews in Nigeria where little works existed.

Previous works have showed and illustrated that there is a close connection between (im)politeness and power in political campaign debates, print media political interviews and
computer mediated communications among others, however this study aims at showing how (im)politeness is used in power relations in the Nigerian Political scene by looking at the utterances of two Nigerian politicians.

3 Methodology

The subjects of this study are two politicians: Olusegun Obasanjo and Ayodele Fayose. These personalities are popular political actors in Nigerian politics. The former was once the president of Nigeria (1976-1979, 1999-2007) and an all-time political leader after his regime. The latter is the incumbent governor of Ekiti State (a state in Nigeria). His popularity lies in having been impeached before as a governor of the same State and his most cordial relationship with the people of his State. This study therefore considers the altercations between both men as reported in Nigerian newspapers between July 2014 and July 2015.

The data for this study is the news reports of three prestigious national dailies; The Nation, The Punch and Nigerian Tribune newspapers. These dailies are preferred considering their national coverage and popularity. Their reports on the altercation of these two political actors within the period of July, 2014 and July, 2015 are subjected to a pragmatic analysis in order to understand the basis for such differences and to account for the political and social implications of such confrontations.

4 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts as its theoretical guide the Politeness Theory. According to Eelen (2001) “Lakoff could well be called the mother of modern politeness theory.” She defined politeness as “a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimising the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interchange”. Brown and Levinson’s (1978, 1987) politeness principle can be said to be one of the models of politeness principle that is influenced by the work of the sociologist Ervin Goffman (1967) on the social construction of self, and his notion of face—the public image individuals seek to project. Their work was first published in 1978 and then reissued in 1987. They defined politeness as redressive action taken to counter-balance the disruptive effect of face-threatening acts.

According to Brown and Levinson (1978:66), “face is the public image that every member of the society wants to claim for himself”. Face has two components: Positive face which represents an individual’s desire to seem worthy and deserving of approval (the desire to be well thought of that manifests in the desire to be liked, admired, approved of, respected and appreciated by others). Positive politeness tilts towards preserving the positive face of other people, when we employ positive politeness, we use speech categories that emphasizes our solidarity with others such as using informal address, shared dialects, shared expressions, nicknames, frequent use of inclusive WE, etc. The second component is the Negative face, which represents an individual’s desire to be autonomous, unimpeded by others. It is reflected in
the desire not to be imposed upon, to have freedom to choose our actions. Negative politeness is geared towards preserving the negative face of others which is likely considering the distance between the speaker and hearer. When we use negative politeness, we use speech strategies that convey our respect for the hearer. Nicknames, slang, and informal addresses are avoided. Requests tend to be more indirect and impersonal involving expressions such as could you, referring to the hearer in the third person, using litigating devices such as please, possibly, I’m sorry but…etc.

This study will be carried out using specifically, the politeness strategies identified by Brown and Levinson (1987) which are: Bald on Record, Negative Politeness, Positive Politeness and Off-the-Record or Indirect Strategy. Brown and Levinson’s strategies are preferred for this study because they show vividly the political fracas between the two subjects of this study. These devices will be explained in the analysis, giving three instances of each from the aforementioned newspapers. In all, a total of 12 excerpts will be used to convey the essence of this study.

5. Data Analysis
5.1. Bald on record

This is the strategy that does not attempt to minimize the threat to the hearer’s face. It is commonly used by speakers who know their addressees very closely. With the bald on record strategies there is a direct possibility that the audience will be shocked or embarrassed by the strategy.

Excerpt 1

I remember then as the ad hoc committee chairman, a crop of suitable, brilliant, healthy and competent northern politicians in the PDP were shortlisted by me for Obasanjo to pick from, but he overruled and asked me to contact Yar’adua because he preferred him (The Nation 2015-02-27)

Here, Fayose uses the Bald on record politeness strategy to present the former president Obasanjo as a dictator and at the same time depicts himself as a highly intelligent leader. It is a known fact that with the bald on record strategy, there is a direct possibility that the audience will be shocked or embarrassed.

For Fayose saying the shortlisted (as an ad hoc committee chairman) northern politicians who are (1) suitable, (2) brilliant, (3) healthy and (4) competent is an implication that he (Fayose) is a politician with a phenomena leadership skill. Most importantly, the bald on record politeness strategy used by Fayose here is evident in the fact that after he had shortlisted seemingly appropriate politicians for Obasanjo but then, Obasanjo overruled it which depicts a character typical of a dictator. Going by this, audience or readers will, of course be embarrassed at the attitude of the former President Obasanjo.
Excerpt 2

Former President Olusegun Obasanjo has asked Ekiti State governor, Ayo Fayose, to shut up and seek God’s forgiveness for abusing him barely two years after he begged him in a letter over previous abuse. (Nigerian Tribune 2014-12-06)

Here, Obasanjo uses the bald on record strategy to threaten the face of his opponent. Bald on record strategy is used to threaten the face of the hearer (or the receiver as the case may be) and it’s mostly used when the two interlocutors are familiar with each other to a reasonable extent. Asking Fayose to shut up can therefore be considered as a form of direct threat to his face by the former president Olusegun Obasanjo while the latter part of the excerpt exonerate Obasanjo himself as a man of a high social standard.

Excerpt 3

Fayose urged obasanjo to stop running other Nigerians down, saying “we are all stakeholders in the country. It is wrong for any Nigerian, no matter how highly placed to go about carrying himself around as the only honest and lover of the country (The Nation 2015-07-21)

In the above excerpt, the aim of Fayose is to preserve his positive face and attempt a bald on record on Obasanjo, he refers to himself as a stakeholder just as Obasanjo and goes ahead to give advice to the Obasanjo indirectly thereby making an attempt to project himself and make the audience have a positive view of him.

5.2. Negative politeness

This strategy presumes that the speaker will be imposing on the listener. It is the desire to remain autonomous. For Instance according to Brown and Levinson (1987), a speaker may request this way “I know you just paid your children’s school fees, but please can you lend me N1, 000 till the weekend?” The addressee is likely to accede to the request if he/she has the means because the request shows a respect for their ability to maintain autonomy.

Excerpt 4

In fairness to the late president, he objected on health ground but Obasanjo insisted he must be the president...I am not against the north, rather if Obasanjo has picked from the list of names submitted by my committee to him, certainly a northerner replacing Obasanjo would have ruled this country to 2015, as an insider who saw everything and who has
noticed the repeat of the episode of 2006, I must talk (The Nation 2015-02-27)

From the above report, Fayose exonerates himself and at the same time, portrays the former President as the terrible person. By mentioning the former president’s name from time to time shows that he has little or no respect for him whatsoever. It is noteworthy to assert that Fayose describing himself as an insider is an attempt to make it known to the audience that he is a high ranked leader in within the party.

Excerpt 5

Obasanjo should stop making uncomplimentary statements about the party, if he continues, we will suspend him; nobody is bigger than this party. (The Punch 2014-07-05)

This is a direct FTA to the opponent as Fayose reiterates the fact that the party (perceived to be bigger than any member) can suspend Obasanjo if he does not desist from making uncomplimentary statements. Fayose goes ahead to demand the suspension of the former president based on what he regards as indiscipline on the part of the former president. From the excerpt, it is conspicuous that Fayose tried to impose an order on former president Obasanjo.

Excerpt 6

Fayose said ...visiting Obasanjo to plead with him to rescind his decision not to participate in the party’s activities was capable of encouraging other members of the party to disrespect the President and the Commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria as done by Obasanjo. (Nigerian Tribune 2014-12-06)

The major reason for the message from Fayose is to pass a message to the audience that the former president has little or no political prowess within the party again and because of that, party members should desist from pleading with the former president again as it will only breed disrespect within the party.

5.3. Positive politeness

This strategy will attempt to minimize the threat to the hearer’s face. This strategy is most commonly used in situations where the interlocutors know each other fairly well. In many instances attempts are made to avoid conflicts. For example, a positive politeness strategy might be the request such as, “I know you are very busy now, but could you please spare me five minutes.”
Excerpt 7

I will differ a bit...my name is Ayodele Fayose, the Oshokomole, irunmole to n je jollof rice (Nigerian Punch 2014-11-29)

Here, Ayodele Fayose differs from the discussion and announces his official name to the audience, the reason for this is to institutionalise himself as a force within the party. It is expected that members of the audience already know his name but hearing him mentioning his name again is expected to give the audience some sort of expectation from Fayose. Fayose purposely announces his appellation for two possibly reasons. On the one hand, it is known that the appellation is given to him by the people of Ekiti state, the state which he is presently the governor. The appellation is borne out of the fact that Fayose is widely accepted as a leader in his country and also as a grassroots politician so sounding such appellation to the ear of the audience is expected to boost his ego and also make the audience view him as a “man of his people”. On the other hand, he is aware that some people might have a negative disposition to his name; presenting his acceptability through his appellation is therefore an attempt to redress his positive face before it is threatened.

Excerpt 8

Fayose begged obasanjo for forgiveness for what he called his actions that has caused embarrassment to the former president. The tone of the letter also asked the former president to help him facilitate his return to the PDP. (Nigerian Tribune 2014-12-06)

In the above excerpt, Fayose is reported to have begged former president Obasanjo to absorb him of all his sins. Fayose uses the positive politeness strategy to pass across his letter to Obasanjo. The positive politeness is often used when the interlocutors know each other pretty well and they try to avoid conflict. The letter written by Fayose is dated December 6, 2014 and it was pasted on the Saturday Tribune. The tone of the letter depicts an apologetic addressee (Fayose).

Excerpt 9

He (Fayose) added that he was in the position to lead PDP’s campaign...
(The Punch 2014-07-10)

From the above excerpt, Fayose does not only present himself as a leader but also enhances his own positive face with such reported utterance. Knowing full well that Obasanjo is a leader in the party (PDP), Fayose uses the indirect strategy to threaten the face of Obasanjo.
5.4. Indirect strategy

The final politeness strategy outlined by Brown and Levinson is the indirect strategy. Here the language is indirect, but the intention is usually clear from the context. For instance, a request can be made this way “Is there any eatery around the corner?” by someone who is hungry and wants to eat. This question insinuates that the speaker is hungry and would want to go and eat, but it is not put so directly.

Excerpt 10

I, Obasanjo, however, noted that if anybody or group felt offended by his continued membership of the PDP, he would offer an unreserved apology and would continue to remain in the party.
ii. He said he had a national and international standard to maintain and reputation to keep and sustain (The Punch 2014-10-13)

In the first part of the above excerpt, Obasanjo uses the indirect strategy to pass across his message. The intention of the message is crystal clear. He wants to make peace with whoever is pained by his continued membership of the PDP. The second part of the excerpt, Obasanjo is so concerned about his positive face on the national and international scene that he results not to do the Face Threatening Act at all (do not do the FTA).

Excerpt 11

The former president in his reply...accepted to forgive the Ekiti state governor
(Nigerian Tribune 2014-12-06)

Former president Olusegun Obasanjo also uses the indirect strategy to make it clear that he was ready to apologise to Fayose, thereby damaging his own negative face.

Excerpt 12

Obasanjo, however, noted that if anybody or group felt offended by his continued membership of the PDP, he would offer an unreserved apology and would to remain in the party. (The Punch 2014-10-13)

Through indirect strategy, the name of the addressee may not be declared but the intention is always clear from the context. The president makes it clear that he is ready to apologise to anyone in the party and it is also clear that the president and Fayose are not in good terms so it is only logical to assume that the former president is ready to apologise to the Ekiti state governor.

6. Conclusion

This study reveals that confrontation is one of the means through which Nigerian politicians remain in vogue and even at that, confrontation among these politicians is not mostly issue based. Rivalry in the political turf in Nigeria provokes a widespread debate among the
Nigerian audience, hence, the free and wide reportage we have on the national dailies and the Face Threatening Act (FTA) is done mainly through a blunt and appalling attack on the physical states of one another.

It is also clear that, no matter the age differences among politicians, they could go to an extreme length with the use of words and hurled insults at themselves with the aim of gaining more political influence over their opponents. This study has also showed that the relationship between politicians can be so terrible that they resort to pour invective against themselves and the newspapers appear to be the most suitable medium their messages reach the audience.

However, this study submits that, politicians should not make the media a tool for political rivalry and they should not make confrontations the medium of sustaining political relevance.
References


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