



The Language of Political Cartoons in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study was focused on the political cartoons selected from some Nigerian tabloids at the eve of the 2003 general elections. We set out to analyze the language of the inscriptions, dialogues, monologues, labels and songs used alongside the pictures in the cartoons with emphasis on the layers of meaning such as register, denotation, connotation and creativity. We found out a preponderance of political terms and phraseologies in both standard and non-standard varieties of English in Nigeria as well as special neologistic coinages used in creating political awareness as well as castigating erring political actors. The study concludes that the language of political cartoons in Nigeria is brief, Nigerian English lexified, creative and artistic to attract the various segments of the citizenry into political participation.

Keywords: Inscriptions, Register, Denotation, Connotation, Neologism, Varieties of English, Nominal groups, Electorate and Politicians.

BACKGROUND

Communication is as important to man as respiration. Communicationists say that man 'cannot not' communicate, an axiom signifying the indispensability of communication to man. Akpan (1987:1) asserts that communication is central to the nature of man, the development of the person/community and the functioning of the multifaceted institutions. Owing to its multidimensional nature, communication comes in different forms and serves different purposes, central to which are the linguistic form of communication and the need to share meaning.

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Pixton (2008:130) asserts that communication could be verbal or non-verbal, spoken or unspoken, written or unwritten. Verbal form of communication includes all meaningful spoken utterances based on the word while non-verbal aspects of communication are non-spoken human responses such as word-signs, gestures, drawings/carvings and bodily expressions.

In modern usage, a cartoon is a piece of art, a form of communication, usually humorous in intent and content, crafted in irony and cast in metaphorical representation. A cartoon as an artistic expression is a combination of linguistic and non-linguistic signs and symbolic representations. Modern single panel cartoons or gag cartoons are found in magazines and tabloids in Nigerian cities and other places in the world.

A cartoon consists of a single drawing or a group of related drawings with a typeset caption or inscription positioned beneath or in a speech balloon. As a form of media communication or linguistic art, the cartoon serves as a visual metaphor to illustrate a point of view on social, cultural or political topics. The language of political cartoon is primarily anchored on contents related to political issues such as electioneering, campaigns, lobbying and the commissions/omissions of political actors. Semantically, Hawkers (1977:130) affirms the role of context in linguistic communication when reference is made to the relationship between the signifier and the signified (the referent and the reference), the symbol and its symbolic value or represented idea. The relationship though not of equality is of equivalence. The relationship between an artistic portrayal is not in the sequential ordering whereby one term leads to the other, but the correlation which unites them. Thus the composer of the political cartoon uses linguistic and non-linguistic signs to communicate messages to the society or the electorate.

Presentation and Description of Data

Our data comprise ten (10) cartoon clips from two newspapers viz *Vanguard* and *Punch*; specifically from editions published during the eve of electioneering campaigns in Nigeria in 2003. We have classified and categorized the items serially, putting together under specific item identification, sub-items within the same input but sometimes different typology. For example, serial No. 1 conveys item A which is sub-divided into Ai and Aii labeled conversational proposition and conversational reply respectively. Similar specifications are carried out on all other items.

There are 32 items in all drawn from 10 cartoon pieces. The breakdown shows two conversational spots, six labels, one imperative statement (admonition), three soliloquies, one song, twelve inscriptions, one rhetorical question and one exclamation amongst others. The following table bears our data.

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s/n	Item	Input	Type
1	Ai	How are you going to do it? This is your constituency which you abandon for three years. Now, how are you going to participate in your father's burial ceremony	Conversational (proposition)
2	Aii	Don't worry if I can survive on the floor of the house, I will survive this one.	Conversation (reply)
3	B i ii iii iv v vi vii	2003 RE-ELECTION BID POLITICIAN ELECTORATE 4 TH REPUBLIC UN FULFILLED PROMISES Politicksian! Or what do you call ya sef? Remember the saying... Every day is for the thief... 2003 is for the owner	Label Label Label Label Label Imperative admonition
4	C	(SOB)... OH LORD REVEAL TO ME WHETHER THESE CONTENDING DOCTORS ARE HERE TO SAVE OR TO KILL.	Soliloque
5	Di Dii Diii	I'M SURE OF PICKING MY PARTY'S NOMINATION FOR THE NEXT ELECTION... I'VE VISITED THE GENERALS IN MINNA! I PITY YOU... REAL POWER LIES AT THE GRASS-ROOTS NOT IN MINNA! PRESIDENTIAL SCREENING COMMITTEE	Conversation (Proposition) Conversation (Reply) Label
6	Ei Eii Eiii Eiv Fi Fii Fiii	IT MUST BE PERMANENT ... WHAT DEMOCRACY HAS DONE FOR US, IT MUST BE PERMANENT 2 ND TERM POWER PLAY BAD ROADS, BAD ECONOMY, INSECURITY, NIGER DELTA WAHALA WORLD PRESS LET ME SEE WHO'LL RIG THE FORTHCOMING ELECTION NOW THAT I'VE ADDED TWO WATCHFUL EYES TO MY PARTY'S MASSES PARTY OF NIGERIA PAINT	Song Banner inscription Signpost inscriptions Media identity Soliloque Banner inscription Inscription on can
8	Gi Gii Giii	NIGERIAN ECONOMY 1998 NIGERIAN ECONOMY 2001 EXCEPT FOR THE AT THERE, I DON'T SEE ANY OTHER CHANGE... BOTH IN SIZE AND MOOD	Card inscription Card inscription Soliloque
9	Hi Hii Hiii Ii Iii Iiii Iiv Iv Ivi	NA NOW YOU KNOW SAY I GET POWER? VOTERS CARD POLITICIANS I'VE GOT THE POWER! VOTER'S CARD MONEY BAG POLITICS MASSES TOWARD APRIL 19 INEC	Rhetorical question Inscription on card Inscription on a dog Exclamation Inscription Inscription on dress Inscription on dress Inscription on signpost Identification

ANALYSIS OF DATA AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Our data reveal that most of the expressions in the cartoons are inscriptions of diverse forms made on different items such as banners, signposts, cans, cards, animal pictorials and dresses. This is justifiable by the fact that cartoons are strong aspect of public or mass communication and therefore flourish more on inscriptions made on items that meet the eyes more often than the lined-pages of written texts. The fact that most of the cartoons were done at the eve of the 2003 electioneering period in Nigeria justifies the preponderance of political axioms, innuendoes, insinuations, slogans and overtures. The cartoons portray the language of politics in the Nigerian Pidgin English, Standard English and neologistic words aimed at communicating urgent messages that border on political awareness, indirect attack on erring politicians amongst others.

Since the primary aim of language is to communicate meaning via the spoken and written symbols, we have focused here on two aspects of meaning elucidation viz the register of the subject matter and the different layers of meaning (denotation, connotation and creativity). But mention must be made of the aspect of thematic meaning, though not explored here, which is conveyed in the manner the cartoonist organizes his message in terms of ordering, focus and distribution of the linguistic and non-linguistic elements on the page. This kind of communication prominence or dynamism proceeds partly from the picto-grammatic dimension (where pictures and images are exaggerated) for lexical manipulation.

We shall now deal with the actual linguistic matters relating to the sharing of meaning in the cartoons under these sub-headings.

Registers

Registers indicate a variety of language based on discipline, subject matter or the area of human endeavour under discussion. Registers as the technical terminologies of occupations or professions are more accessible than the jargon and come in both formal and informal items depending on the context of usage, the making of the audience and the intention of the communicator.

Context is a very important factor in language because to understand how meaning is conveyed in language, it is necessary to have an understanding of the different levels of language and their complex interrelationship. Consideration must be made of the relationship of the language form to the context.

The different associations between the user's own reactions to language and the complex nature of the society in which the user operates create different layers of meaning relationships: denotation, connotation, creativity, collocation, etc.

We shall first isolate and discuss the registers – words /phrases in the data

s/n	Item	Source	Code	Word class/description
1	Your constituency	Item Ai	Standard English	Nominal (group)
2	to participate	Item Ai	Standard English	Verbal (infinitive)
3	Re-election	Item B	Standard English	Nominal (affixed)
4	Politician	Item B	Standard English	Nominal (common noun)
5	Electorate	Item b	Standard English	Nominal (common noun)
6	Republic	Item B	Standard English	Nominal (common noun)
7	Unfulfilled promises	Item B	Standard English	Nominal (group)
8	Politicksian	Item B	Neologism (pun)	Nominal
9	My party's nomination	Item Di	Standard English	Nominal (group)
10	Next election	Item Di	Standard English	Nominal (group)
11	the generals in Minna	Item Di	Nigerian English	Nominal (group)
12	Presidential screening committee	Item Ei	Standard English	Nominal (group)
13	Democracy	Item Ei	Standard English	Nominal (group)
14	2 nd Term	Item Eii	Nigerian English	Normal
15	Niger Delta wahala	Item Eiii	Nigeria Pidgin English	Nominal (group)
16	Rig	Item Fi	Standard English	Verbal
17	Money bag politics	Item Iiii	Nigerian pidgin English	Nominal (group)

From our analysis above, we have discovered that most of the registers are nominal and politics or elections-related. The context strongly indicates the eve of elections or the preparatory stage of electioneering. During this period, “constituencies” are delineated, “the electorate” are given promises which were never fulfilled (unfulfilled) in the first term as the “politricksians” (tricky politicians) are preparing for “re-election” for the second (2nd) term. Characteristic of the context, they are looking forward to the “next election” in which they will “rig” with their “money bag(s)”. As they prepare to face the ‘presidential screening committee’, they first visit “the generals in Minna” (Nigerian English expression for the past military rulers in Nigeria believed to be wielding immense political power because of their illicit wealth and loots. All in all, the registers collocate easily and form a class-membership or nyponymy which sypernyms are suggestive and largely communicative.

Meaning and Layers of Meaning

The goal of every communication, including cartoon expression, is to impart meaning based the situation (linguistic and non-linguistic), shared previous knowledge or common cultural background of the interlocutors, the intention of the message composer and the capacity of the message decoder. In addition to using pictures, cartoonists use words to convey meaning at the levels of denotation, connotation and creativity.

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Denotation

This refers to the surface, non-associative or ordinary meaning of words. From our data, there are obviously some words and expressions that are presented and intended to convey the denotative meaning. They include the following “constituency”, “abandon”, “participate”, “Remember”, “pity”, “bad roads”, “Bad economy”, “Nigerian Economy” and “voters’ card”. These words mean almost exactly what every user of English knows them to mean.

Connotation

This level of meaning is based partly on association with other facts and also largely on emotion. This emotive or associative use of words is not only to indicate a physical or mental fact but also to suggest the feelings which accompany the fact. In their collocative forms, connotative expressions may be predictable or unpredictable but are always obviously ‘provocative’ within the context because they carry greater subtle and potential depth than denotations.

Connotations also carry some effects of the composition on the decoder with the implications that follow from expressing something in a particular way in which the knowledge and beliefs about the world upon which both the composer and the decoder rely when they interact.

The cartoonist relies much on the connotative level of meaning to convey his messages of political satire, indictment, innuendoes and excitement.

Some of the expressions which bear connotative meaning are:

- | | | |
|----|-----------------------------|--------|
| a) | How are you going to do it? | (Ai) |
| b) | the floor of the house | (Aii) |
| c) | these contending doctors | (C) |
| d) | real power | (Dii) |
| e) | it must be permanent | (Ei) |
| f) | masses party of Nigeria | (Fii) |
| g) | politicians | (Hiii) |
| h) | Money Bag Politics | (Iiii) |

The use of ‘money bag’ to qualify ‘politics’ in item Iiii above is connotative. In the context of electioneering in Nigeria, very wealthy persons, especially those who looted the public treasury emerge with a lot of money, not to assist people but to buy off their conscience and lure them to vote for them even when they are not qualified. On this basis, the description ‘politicians’ is often used in Nigeria to refer to those who are engaged in electioneering. The word has since acquired negative connotations because of the incessant corrupt practices of the persons who in the positive sense should have been called ‘statesmen’.

The word 'permanent' in (Ei) also conveys the scheme to remain in power perpetually, hence, the expression "second term", for re-election. In doing this, they engage all sorts of intrigues: visiting "past generals in Minna", inviting "contending doctors" (C) to reveal their prospects and making much noise at 'the floor of the house' (Aii) (the main bowl of the Assembly or Parliament). In the end, their efforts are to assault the ordinary citizens. This is why the cartoonist is asking for the "Masses Party of Nigeria" (Fii).

Creativity: This level of meaning is obtained from the composers' initiative to explore linguistic and non-linguistic elements to convey his message explicitly. At this level, the artist requires some depth of contemplation in relation to the extra possibilities of achieving the communication goal within the framework of linguistic or paralinguistic norm.

In our extracts, we have isolated these items:

- | | | |
|------|--|--------|
| i) | Politricksian | (Bvi) |
| ii) | Every day is for the thief 2003 is for the owner | Bii) |
| iii) | It must be permanent | (Ei) |
| iv) | Nigerian Economy 1998 | (Gii) |
| v) | Nigerian Economy 2001 | (Giii) |

The word "politricksian is coined from *Politics + tricks + ian* – "ian" is a suffix added to another word to mean 'doer', e.g. electrician, magician, etc. Hence, 'politricksian' is a practitioner of political tricks. This is an effective morphological creativity based on neologistic principle.

The item in Biii is adapted from the popular saying or axiom that everyday is for the thief but one day is for the owner of the property; meaning that the thief will fail one day. Here the artist is saying at 2003, the politician may not succeed as usual.

The song in (Ei) is adapted from the popular gospel song. "What the Lord has done for me, it shall be permanent". Here the politician is saying that this political fortunes will not cease. This is an ironic satire on him. Items Gi and Gii are in contrast. This principle of juxtaposition draws attention to the effect of bad economic management.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

We examined political cartoons as a form of communication used by the composers to impart messages to the Nigerian audience about the political goings-on in the country within the context of the 2003 electioneering period. We provided a background to the nature of cartoons in general and political cartoons in particular and proceeded to classify our data which were derived from two Nigerian national dailies – Punch and Vanguard. Our

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investigations revealed that the cartoons have political contexts in the form slogans, innuendoes and persuasions. These are communicated in a three layers of meaning amongst others namely denotation, connotation and creativity.

Our conclusion is that with the deployment of the three strategic linguistic dimensions coupled with the pictogrammatic dimension (exaggerated pictures and images, the cartoons have delivered on their purpose of reaching out to a mixed audience with a multidimensional communication effectiveness based on clarity.

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