

AN ANALYSIS ON PRAGMATIC FORCE IN OLUSEGUN OBASANJO'S OPEN LETTER TO GOODLUCK JONATHAN

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Abstract

Political language use is usually targeted at gaining advantage over political opponents. In order to achieve this desire, political leaders tactfully employ carefully chosen speech acts and particular verbal and non-verbal exchanges through which they achieve their communicative goals. This study investigated the pragmatic force, the illocutionary intention, which former President Obasanjo strove to achieve in his open letter – *Before It Is Too Late* – to then incumbent President Jonathan. The aim was to analyse how he maximally utilised the speech acts to convey his message to the electorates. Bach and Harnish's model of Speech Act Theory, which accounts for the illocutionary intentions of a language user, served as its theoretical framework. Thirteen sample utterances purposively selected from the data were subjected to descriptive qualitative analysis. The findings revealed that four speech acts kinds were predominant in the open letter. These acts were generally used to persuade the Nigerian masses cum electorates to accept Obasanjo's intention which was to ensure the exit of then incumbent President Jonathan from the seat of Nigeria's presidency. Critical analysis of the language of the letter revealed that the language of political leaders tended towards "anointing" and handing over power to candidates of their choice.

Keywords: Language, Pragmatic force, Open letter, Speech acts, Obasanjo

1. Introduction

Language, no doubt, is a very important feature of human beings. Every functional society requires it for the purpose of communication. According to Kecskes (3), communication results from interplay of intention and attention motivated by socio-cultural background that is privatised by the individuals. However, the pattern of communication differs among various occupations. For instance, political language use is usually targeted at gaining advantage over political opponents. Thus, political leaders persuade listeners (in most cases, the masses cum electorates) to toe their political line of action, irrespective of whether they benefit from that or not.

In order to achieve their desired objectives and communication goals, political leaders tactfully employ carefully chosen speech acts and particular verbal and non-verbal exchanges. According to Austin (cited in Osisanwo, 60), speech acts are processes in which "a person performs an act such as stating a fact, stating an opinion, confirming or denying something, making a prediction or a request, asking a question, issuing an order, giving a permission, giving a piece of advice, making an offer, making a promise, thanking somebody or condoling somebody". The above and more constitute the pragmatic force of a given speaker's utterances.

While corroborating the above definition, Mey (95) maintains that “speech acts are verbal exchanges happening in the world. Uttering a speech act, I do something with my words: I perform an activity that (at least intentionally) brings about a change in the existing state of affairs ...” Such changes in states, especially as it affects who mounts a given political position, are usually the targets of political leaders. These are effectively achieved when the perlocutionary effect(s) of an utterance is/are noticed through the hearer’s action(s).

There are several media of communication. One of them is letter writing, of which open letter is a kind. This medium has constantly been leveraged by Nigeria’s former President, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo GCFR, to convey his (hidden) intentions to the direct and indirect addressees of his open letters. Thus, this study seeks to explore the pragmatic force, communicative goal, of Obasanjo’s open letter to former President Goodluck Jonathan in order to bring out the communicative value of the letter. Studies on political discourses of notable Nigerian political leaders, whether from the rhetorical, pragmatic or stylistic perspectives, have concentrated on their speeches. Thus, the pragmatic study of the language of Obasanjo, in his open letter – *Before It Is Too Late* – to Jonathan, has not been significantly addressed. This study tries to fill that gap, using Bach and Harnish’s (1979) model of speech act theory.

However, some concepts relevant to the study require clarification. They are discussed in the following section.

2. Conceptual Clarification

2.1 Pragmatic Force

It is apposite to briefly define the term pragmatics here, before delving into the meaning of pragmatic force. The definition of pragmatics, though, varies according to scholars. Generally, however, scholars (Bach and Harnish, 1979; Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1996, among others) note that pragmatics accounts for the specific meaning of utterances in particular social and situational contexts. Pragmatics is fundamentally concerned with communicative action in any kind of context. This essence is captured by Leech and Short (290) thus:

The pragmatic analysis of language can be broadly understood to be the investigation into that aspect of meaning which is derived not from the formal properties of words and constructions, but from the way in which utterances are used and how they relate to the context in which they are uttered.

The communicative action of any given utterance constitutes the pragmatic force. Every communication process sets a goal which speakers intend to achieve. Usually, this goal is mainly the creation of meaning which a given speaker targets to deliver to the recipient(s). Pragmatic force, therefore, is the illocutionary intention which a speaker uses language to achieve. It is the illocutionary and social goal of an utterance; in other words, the illocutionary function or force of a given utterance.

Hakim, Haryati and Suparno (168) refer to pragmatic force simply as “functions of utterances”. They further refer to it as illocutionary force and posit that it is actually “the function of words, the specific purpose that the speaker has in mind” (Hakim et al.173). Similarly, Ezeifeka views the “pragmatic force” or “point” as the action one performs in saying something. She posits that “illocutionary acts carry the force of ... performing actions through utterances” (Ezeifeka54). Pragmatic force/illocutionary force is usually achieved through speech acts. When a speaker utters something in a language, an act (speech act) has been performed.

Speech act is one of the essential domains of pragmatics. Austin who originally drew a three-fold dimension of speech acts named them locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts (cited in Lyons 730; Mey 95). These acts are discussed in the section on theoretical framework.

2.2 The Concept of Open Letter

It is already a fact that communication is central in the overall essence of human existence. The art of communication is carried out through many means including letters. Letter writing, according to Ugot (29), is “a form of communication which aims at informing or persuading someone. Through letters, we can express our feelings, desires and even pass on information to different people and organisations”. Conventionally, letters are addressed to individuals, groups or organisations and the contents are usually for the consumption of only the affected person(s) or group(s).

Nevertheless, letters can be made open depending on the occasion or the interest of the writer. An open letter is a letter that is intended to be read by a wide audience, or a letter intended for an individual, but that is nonetheless widely distributed intentionally. Open letters are usually written to emphasise the addressee’s responsibilities in a given matter and to provoke a public debate. In most cases, open letters are politically motivated as they seek to arouse certain emotions from the public and garner public support for a cause. They are circulated to the public through newspapers and other media.

According to George (2), an “open letter is meant to change something or draw attention to something But if your goal is to change something, an open letter should be a part of your strategy and not the strategy itself”. Thus, when open letters are written to political leaders, especially incumbent Presidents of a country, as in the case of the data for this research, they are intended to draw the attention of the citizens (the masses who voted the incumbents into positions) to salient issues that would prepare the electorates’ minds to take a better position when elections come on board.

Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, to the knowledge of this researcher, is the only notable Nigerian leader who had employed this tool (of open letter) effectively in the Nigerian political landscape. The open letter analysed in this work is the means (parts of the strategies) used by him to draw the attention of Nigerians to the evils and inabilities noticed by him in the administration of the then President Jonathan. The real strategies lie in the dominant speech acts used to reach an intended political end. It, therefore, interests this researcher to investigate the effectiveness of the open letter in bringing out the communicative intentions of the writer and eliciting necessary response from the addressees.

3. Theoretical Framework

This research, however, is anchored on Bach and Harnish’s (1979) model of Speech Act which dwells on “intention” and “inference”. Particularly, Bach and Harnish seek to explain how the illocutionary force intended by the speaker is inferred by the hearer. According to them, the need for inference arises because many speech acts are indirect. They argue that a speaker has an intention for uttering a statement, and that the hearer needs to infer what the intention of the speaker is, based on the mutual contextual beliefs (MCBs) that they both share. MCB refers to salient contextual information shared by both the speaker and the listener with relation to a given communication setting. Bach and Harnish (5) call such pieces of information ‘beliefs’ rather than ‘knowledge’ because “they need not be true in order to figure in the speaker’s intention and the hearer’s inference”.

Bach and Harnish (40) categorise illocutionary acts into two: communicative and non-communicative (conventional). The communicative illocutionary acts, which formed the basis for analysis in this work, is sub-divided into: *constatives*, *directives*, *commissives* and *acknowledgements*. It is noteworthy that the illocutionary act is the communicative act that is intended to be achieved by an utterance (Jackson and Stock-well 180). It is what is meant but not explicitly stated. According to Dada (cited in Abuya 9), illocutionary act is the core of the Speech Act Theory.

Therefore, Obasanjo and Jonathan have shared knowledge of the Nigerian political situation, including the workings of government. Equally, Nigerians are aware of the hardship and other associated problems which they are passing through during the administration of Jonathan. To that end, all concerned are capable of inferring meanings from the utterances contained in the open letter referred to in this work. This forms the basis for adopting the above theory.

4. Methodology

Obasanjo's open letter – *Before It Is Too Late* – to Jonathan which was published in the Daily Trust Newspaper of 12 December 2013 constituted the data for analysis in this study. Thirteen sample utterances were purposively selected and subjected to descriptive qualitative analysis. Bach and Harnish's theory in the classification of acts performances in language was used to x-ray the pragmatic force (illocutionary intention) which Obasanjo intended to achieve in the open letter.

5. Data Analysis

Four speech acts kinds namely, *constatives*, *directives*, *commissives* and *acknowledgements* were identified in the open letter. In what follow, some examples of the use of the speech acts are discussed.

5.1 Constatives

These are acts which commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition. They also express a speaker's belief and his desire that the hearer forms a similar one.

Sample 1: *I could sense a semblance between the situation we are gradually getting into and the situation we fell into during the Abacha era*

Performatively, the above utterance is an indirect act of warning. It is hinged on the mutual belief that, in the Nigerian political landscape, the Abacha era was marked with period of national pains, chaos, tyranny, underdevelopment, austerity, and mutual suspicion. The intention is to raise consciousness among Nigerians and put Jonathan at alert so as to avoid repetition of unpalatable history.

Sample 2: *Mr. President, you have on a number of occasions acknowledged the role God enabled me to play in your ascension to power*

The locution is a direct act of claiming. Indirectly, it is used to inform the people of Obasanjo's role in raising Jonathan to his present political position. It means Obasanjo was instrumental in Jonathan's political successes, and as such, Jonathan should be loyal and heed the advice or rather instructions of his political god-father.

Sample 3: *Uptill two months ago, Mr. President, you told me that you have not told anybody that you would contest in 2015*

Directly, the utterance is an act of claiming. It performs an indirect illocutionary act of representing the addressee as a liar. It further defames Jonathan's public image and thus warns him not to contest the 2015 presidential election.

Sample 4: *To allow or tacitly encourage people of "Ijaw nation" to throw insults on other Nigerians from other parts of the country ... is myopic and your not openly quieting them is even more unfortunate*

While urging Jonathan to call the ethnic jingoists among the Ijaw people to order, the expression accuses and condemns the addressee. It is mainly intended to tarnish the image of Jonathan since he is presented as being sectional and tribalistic in dealing with the Nigerian people.

Sample 5: *Allegation of keeping over 1,000 people on political watch list rather than criminals ... and training snipers and other armed personnel secretly and clandestinely acquiring weapons to march for political purpose like Abacha ... if it is true, it cannot augur well for initiator, the government and the people of Nigeria*

Similarly, the above sample is an indirect act of accusing and warning the addressee, but presented in a passive voice to avoid holding the speaker responsible as the original source of the allegation. The overall intention is to present the addressee as one who engages in unjustified killings and other heinous acts. The expression raises the awareness of Nigerians to such heinous tendencies of Jonathan thereby making them to beware of such devilish character.

5.2 Directives

These are utterances used by the speaker to make the hearer do something positive in the speaker's/writer's thought pattern.

Sample 6: *I want nothing from you personally except that you should run the affairs of Nigeria not only to make Nigeria good, but to make Nigeria great for which I have always pleaded with you and I will always do so*

The above sample urges the addressee to do the right thing that will make Nigeria great. Indirectly, the utterance exonerates Obasanjo from possible accusations of undue interferences to Jonathan's government and also clears him from being perceived as a selfish leader. It further presents Obasanjo as a caring leader while portraying Jonathan as a careless one who does not deserve any further benefits from Nigerians. This could have possibly made the electorates vote against Jonathan in the said election.

Sample 7: *Please, move away from fringes or the extremes and move to the centre and carry ALL along*

This is a direct expressive act of begging. Indirectly, it accuses Jonathan of being sectional and highly unfair in his dealings with both the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) members and Nigerians generally. The emphatic "ALL" projects further these divisive tendencies by Jonathan while the overall intention of the utterance is to weaken the peoples' interest in him and thus make them withdraw their support for him.

Sample 8: *Mr. President, let me again plead with you to be decisive on the oil and gas sector so that Nigerians may not lag behind*

Despite the seeming request made here, the utterance is intended to highlight the allegation that Jonathan has abandoned the "Olokola and Brass LNG projects". It reveals that the addressee is becoming inimical to viable development projects that could boost the economic base of the country.

Sample 9: *Move away from culture of denials, cover ups and proxies and deal honesty, sincerely and transparently with Nigerians to regain their trust and confidence*

The utterance is a direct act of commanding. Its indirect illocutionary implication is that the addressee can no longer be trusted in any way. Therefore, he does no longer deserve the high office of Nigeria's presidency. The utterance tarnishes Jonathan's public image thereby sustaining hatred for him from the electorates.

5.3 Commissives

These are acts which commit the speaker in varying degrees to some future actions.

Sample 10: *I will want to see anyone in the Office of the President of Nigeria as a man or woman who can be trusted, a man of honour in his words and character*

The expression is a direct illocutionary act of stating. It is, nevertheless, an indirect commissive act of vowing to work against the success of Jonathan if he contests in the 2015 presidential election. Already, the writer had laid the platform for his decision when he implied that the addressee is corrupt and untrustworthy. Since the delight of every citizen of a country is to have a faithful, less corrupt and caring leader, the utterance may have convinced the electorates that Jonathan has come short of these attributes, and as such can no longer be supported to continue. The utterance further advises Jonathan to desist from his evil deeds.

Sample 11: *I have done and I will continue to do and say what is first in the best interest of Nigeria and second what is in the best interest of the Party*

Based on the misunderstanding, rancour and quarrels among the leadership of the ruling PDP, Obasanjo portrayed himself as a peace loving fellow who would continue to toe the path of peace for the benefit of the nation. He therefore sees Jonathan's intention to contest as something which will threaten the peace of the nation. The utterance is a commissive act of ensuring the addressee leaves the Presidential Office based on the "agreement" that he would serve for only one term. The writer believes that keeping to the "agreement" is in the best interest of both the country and the Party.

5.4 Acknowledgements

They are used to express psychological state and attitude of a speaker towards a given circumstance.

Sample 12: *You were exemplary in words when during the campaigns and the 2011 elections you said "my election is not worth spilling the blood of any Nigerian"*

This sample is an expressive act of commending. The indirect illocutionary value of the utterance is that Obasanjo now feels disappointed with the addressee since he is unable to stop the seemingly politically motivated Boko Haram menace and other forms of insurgency leading to bloodshed across Nigeria. It depicts non-fulfilment of a promise and a request to quit on the basis of non-performance.

Sample 13: *Today, you are the President of Nigeria, I acknowledge you and respect you as such*

The utterance is an indirect illocutionary act of asking Jonathan to live up to his responsibilities which include lightening the burden of the people, ensuring good governance and upholding equity since he is still the Nigerian Chief Executive Officer. Moreover, it reminds him that he may not continue to enjoy such position as change is always permanent, and imminent in his case.

6. Discussion

The analysis above has revealed that the speech acts employed by former President Obasanjo in his open letter to former President Jonathan constituted different kinds of illocutionary acts. These are constatives, directives, commissives and acknowledgements. The constative acts implied that Obasanjo used language to entice the audience into discrediting the addressee of the letter and therefore believing in him. Directives were used to call on the addressee to do the rightful things and desist from the dangerous paths he is toing. They were, in fact, used to warn the addressee against the damaging effects his actions may plunge the country into, if he fails to turn a new leaf.

The commissive acts were used to project the writer's new resolves which were mainly to remain patriotic to Nigeria, decline his membership of the ruling PDP and ultimately work against Jonathan's second term presidential bid. Acknowledgements showed that Jonathan has not really done much that worth commendation, according to the writer's assessment. The few instances of it were used to commend the earlier disposition of the addressee. Yet, the writer now expresses his disappointment in the addressee, giving the alleged derailing from his original position.

Thus, the perlocutionary effects were that Obasanjo was able to elicit from the first addressee, Jonathan, an open reply – *Re: Before It Is Too Late* – where the latter tried to clarify the Nigerian masses on most of the allegations leveled against him. Secondly, Obasanjo was able to convince the second addressees (the Nigerian masses, since it was an open letter) to form a corresponding attitude that he intended. This manifested in the fact that they believed in him and voted against Jonathan in the 2015 presidential election. This brought about Jonathan's loss at the polls.

7. Conclusion

Based on the findings, the work concludes that language remains a veritable tool which political leaders and office seekers use to convince, woo or lure the electorates to either retain or withdraw their support from a given leader or candidate. This is noticed through their choice of utterances which is usually characterised by hidden intentions that are implicitly stated, and aimed at individual interests. In fact, the instrument of the open letter offers a viable platform through which political leaders achieve their intentions of gaining advantages over political opponents.

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