An Appraisal Analysis of Olusegun Obasanjo's Open Letters to Presidents Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari

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Abstract

Pragmatic analyses in the past and recent times have examined political speeches ranging from campaign, inaugural and other political engagements. However, scholarly works on letters written by present and past presidents to their successors are very rare. Even though many scholars have engaged a lot of pragmatic theories and discourse analytical tools in investigating political discourse, to the best of our knowledge, none has examined letters from a past president to a serving one. This paper, therefore, adopts appraisal theory of Martin and White (2005) to analyse Olusegun Obasanjo's letters to President Goodluck Jonathan and President Muhammadu Buhari. The paper accounts for the stances taken by Obasanjo and the strategies employed in enacting them. The study reveals that Obasanjo aligns and disaligns with his adressees. He negotiates his dialogic positions with his addressees through affiliative and disaffiliative stances and employs the strategies of evaluation, hearsay, proclaim, endorsement and denial to enact his stances. The paper concludes that media political correspondence from past presidents may serve as an alternative guide to the incumbent president and it may strengthen governance if properly deployed.

Keywords: Letters to Presidents, Appraisal Theory, Stance, Olusegun Obasanjo, Media Political Discourse.

1.0 Introduction

Political discourse are of various kinds and from various sources; among which are presidential addresses, speeches by state governors, parliamentary discourse, campaign speeches, political interviews and so on. The important place occupied by politics in the management of human affairs makes it a matter of utmost interest to man and this, coupled with its richness and resourcefulness, account for the vast pool of scholarly publications in

this domain of human endeavour. Political discourse has attracted scholarly inputs from various disciplinary and theoretical perspectives including law, media, language and linguistics, political science, sociology and anthropology and so on.

In the domain of language where this study is domiciled, quite a volume of scholarly journal articles have been published from various theoretical perspectives. Existing works include Olaniyi (2010) which examines President Umar Yar' Adua's inaugural speech of 29th May, 2007. The paper observes that apart from making assertions, President Yar' Adua also uses language to perform acts. It concludes that political inaugurals afford elected political office holder the privilege of using language to make promises and give assurances of good governance. Oladimeji and Bamigbola (2012) and Kamalu and Argangan (2012) examine President Goodluck Jonathan's declaration of interest. While the former focuses on the role of context in the choice of speech acts in the selected speech, the latter accounts for the rhetorical strategies deployed to articulate an alternative ideology for the Nigeria nation. Akinwotu (2015) examines the pragmatic strategies in the final session of the Ondo State governorship election media debate of 2012. The study which adopts a combination of Brown and Levinson (1987) politeness and facework, Watts' (2003, 2005) relational work and frame theory identifies polite and impolite verbal behaviour in the language use of the participants in the debate. Participants employ promising and testimonial argument to achieve positive politeness in the data. They also employ offensive and defensive politeness strategies to categorise and frame one another as corrupt, inept, incompetent, unfit, dishonest, deceitful. Also, Akinwotu (2016) investigates the deployment of political rhetoric in communicating intentions in selected political speeches of Obafemi Awolowo and Moshood Abiola. Findings reveal the use of combat rhetoric (metaphor and linguistic elements with negative semantic connotations, direct command, and intertextual reference) and tact rhetoric (ethos, pathos, logos, and structural parallelism) to either register the speaker's aversion to an idea or event or to boost the self-image of the speakers respectively. Again, Akinwotu (2018) adopts a combination of stylistics and Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar as approaches to examine the patterns of language use in the inaugural speeches of Governor Olusegun Mimiko of Ondo State. The paper reveals that the speeches are characterised by lexical items (adjectives, adverbs, pronouns) which the speaker creatively deploys to promote his political programmes, and to present himself as a committed, sincere and responsible leader. Sharndama and Ngbemena (2016) examine the linguistic and discourse features in selected election speeches Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan and General Muhammadu Buhari (rtd). The study reveals that Jonathan and Buhari strategically deploy lexical and syntactic elements to communicate and legitimise their ideological orientations and to achieve effective persuasion. Odeleye (2015) examines inaugural speeches of former Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammadu Buhari as military Heads of States and later as civilian presidents. The study reveals that interrogative and imperative moods are deployed to perform various pragmatic functions such as commanding, promising, warning, praying, stating, appreciating, and encouraging. It further reveals that the

maiden speeches of military presidents do not begin with appreciation but civilian presidents inaugural speeches do. Okoro (2015) examines the pragmatic functions of language use in President Muhammadu Buhari's campaign speeches during the March, 2015 general election in Nigeria. The study reveals that the speeches were characterised by a preponderance of assertive and commissive acts which are mostly used to persuade the electorate and to mobilise support to win elections.

Furthermore, Josiah and Johnson (2012) investigate the first inaugural speeches of former President Goodluck Jonathan in 2011 and former president Barrack Obama in 2009. The study focuses on the illocutionary force and the face-threatening/face-saving acts in those speeches. Furko (2016) examines the evidential markers, general extenders, quotation makers and markers of (un)certainty in political interviews broadcast by the BBC, CNN, and Hungarian TV with the view to account for the manipulative uses of pragmatic makers in political discourse. Ezeifeka (2013) focuses on a Critical Discourse Analysis of interpersonal meaning and power relations in selected inaugural political speeches in Nigeria. Doha (2015) is a critical examination of American political discourse as manifested in Hillary Clinton's interviews.

A look at the reviews above has revealed that scholarly works on letters written by past presidents to their successors are very rare. This is the gap this study attempts to fill. This paper adopts appraisal theory of Martin and White (2005) to analyse two letters of former President Olusegun Obasanjo (one, to former President Goodluck Jonathan and the other, to the incumbent President Muhammadu Buhari) with the view to accounting for the stances taken by Obasanjo and the strategies employed in enacting them in the data.

2.0 Methodology

The data for this study are two letters written by Olusegun Obasanjo (Nigerian President 1999 - 2008) to Goodluck Ebele Jonathan (Nigerian President 2009 - 2015) and Muhammadu Buhari (Nigerian President 2015 - date). The letters which address issues of national interest were published by *the Vanguard* of 2nd December, 2013 and *the Punch* of 24th January, 2018 respectively. They were downloaded from the newspapers site and subjected to analysis.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

The theory that is adopted for analysis in this study is Appraisal Theory put forth by the Sydney University linguist; James R. Martin in the 1990's and later developed by Martin and White in 2005. White (2011) describes appraisal as a framework for analysing evaluative use of language in which speaker/writer adopts a particular position or stance and by which they engage with socially-determined value positions and in the process support/uphold and oppose/dispute such positions or the social subjects who hold to these positions. Appraisal theory is a breakthrough in the study of interpersonal meaning in discourse analysis, typically, in news (print and non-print) discourse. Hence, it is

considered as a combination of Critical Discourse Analysis and System Functional Grammar approaches to linguistic analysis (Liu, Lihua, 2007). White (1998:p.45) believes that an evaluative use of language is a special method of exploring, describing, and explaining the way language is applied to evaluate, to adopt stances, to construct textual personas and to manage interpersonal positioning and relationships. It is a method of analysis in which attempts are made to identify and describe the attitude of writers/speakers towards the propositional content of their discourses. The theory has three main systems (Attitude, Engagement and Graduation), which are in turn sub-divided into subcategories focusing on specific attitudinal and linguistics aspects as shown in the framework below.

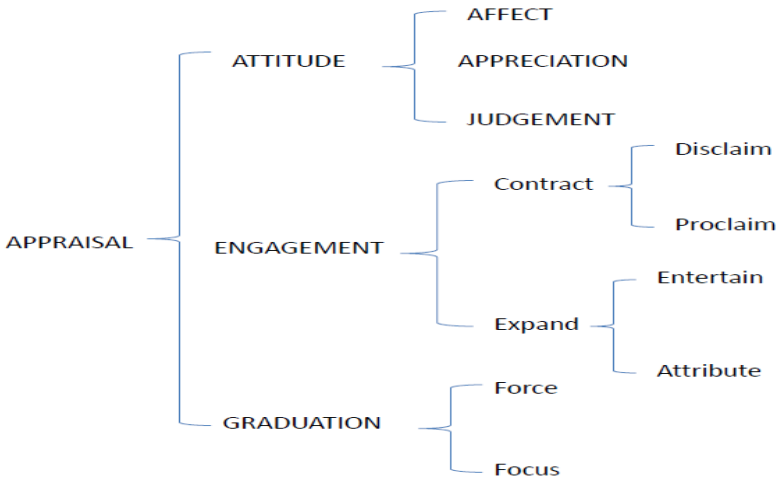


Fig 1.1 Appraisal theory (Martin and White, 2005:38)

The framework above shows that appraisal has three main systems namely; Attitude, Engagement and Graduation which are in turn subdivided into sub-systems. For instance, attitude, which is the system for meaning making, is a construct for representing feelings (positive or negative). Attitude has three sub-systems –*affect, appreciation and judgement*. *Affect* is a system that accounts for speakers'/writers' positive (e.g to be happy, joyful) and negative (e.g to be afraid, sad) emotional dispositions towards a person, thing, happening or state of affairs. *Appreciation* focuses on the assessment of objects, artefacts, processes and states of affairs. A beautiful garden; a fantastic idea, are examples of appreciation. *Judgement* has to do with an ethical/ normative assessment of human behaviour according to laid down rules or conventions of behaviour. Linguistic elements such as *corrupt, virtuously, dishonest, murderous, tyrant, bully, hero, betray, obstinate, indefatigable, abuse, defraud, courageously, stupidity, foolishly, eccentric, and maverick a*re often used to make judgements. These however, may be influenced a number of variables including our

experiences, cultural backgrounds, expectations, assumptions and beliefs (see Martin and White, (2005:p.35).

The second main system, *engagement*, is concerned with the resources used by speakers/writers to dialogically (adjust/negotiate) present their argument/viewpoint. It is subdivided into *contract* and *expand* which are also subdivided into *disclaim* and *proclaim*; and *entertain* and *attribute* respectively. Included in these categories are values such as attribution, modality, hearsay, concession, polarity, evidentiality, hedges, boosters and metadiscursives (see Martins 2001). *Graduation* is the third system and it is concerned with the values that act to provide grading or scaling (Martin & White, 2005:p.136), which is used to show the different levels of appraisal power and the involvement grades of attitude.

Appraisal theory is applied to this research paper to adequately account for stances/positions taken by Obasanjo to evaluate his stance objects in his speeches. The study therefore, accounts for how the writer deployed engagement strategies to construct and to manage interpersonal positioning and relationship with his addressees.

4.0 Data presentation and analysis

This section examines the data for this study. A look at the data reveals two types of stances taken by the writer to position himself either for or against the proposition in his letters. They are affiliative and disaffiliative stances.

4.1 Affiliative stance in Obasanjo's letters

Affiliative or alignment stance is a generic category for stances taken in support of the propositional content of speaker's utterance. It has to do with the situation where the writer agrees with or supports the propositions of the person being addressed as he aligns with formulations and viewpoints being advanced in the texts. This stance is taken by the writer to adopt a position towards what he construes from the words, observations, beliefs and viewpoints of others. He also brings into play, quotes and references to refer to the words and thoughts of another voice. Reference in this regards, indicates that the writer shows that the utterances are in some way relevant to his current communicative purpose. This stance is taken to evaluate the social sanction, esteem and value of the person or object of evaluation which could either be intelligent or non-intelligent object. The appraiser's attitudinal positioning is shown in his sentiment and expression towards the behavioural process of the addressee or the object being addressed.

Excerpt 1: The second is to use only identity cards with watermarks issued by INEC itself to party officials only for identification of political party coordinators, officials and agents and not political party dresses or arm and wrist bands which nobody can wear for purposes of identification on election duty or function. Both the presidency and the National Assembly must so far be commended for

adequately providing funds as confirmed by INEC and therefore, funding cannot be an excuse for poor performance by INEC. (Obasanjo, 2018:p.4)

Excerpt 2: Buhari was the leader of the party, Bola Tinubu's statement about Muhammadu Buhari in 2013 is fairly prophetic 'Muhammadu Buhari is an agent of destabilization, ethnic bigot and religious fanatic who, if given the chance, would ensure the disintegration of the country. His ethnocentrism would jeopardize Nigeria's national unity. (Obasanjo, 2018:p.6)

Excerpt 3: The labour of Nigeria democracy heroes must not be in vain. Some men of God would hold President to his words on free, fair and credible and peaceful election. Nigeria must not be allowed to slip off the democracy path nor go into anarchy and ruin. (Obasanjo, 2018:p.2)

Excerpt 4: In the present circumstance, let me reiterate what I have said in the number of occasion. Electing Dr Goodluck Jonathan in his own right and on his own merit as the President of Nigeria will enhance and strengthen our unity, stability and democracy. All, it will lead us towards the achievement of our Nigeria dream. (Obasanjo, 2013:p.3)

Excerpt 5: The five positions which you share with nobody except with God and which place great and grave responsibility on you are leadership of the ruling party, headship of the Federal Government or National government, Commander-in-Chief of the military, Chief Security Officer of the nation, and the political leader of the country. Mr President would always remember that he was elected to maintain security of Nigerians and protect them. (Obasanjo, 2013:p.2)

Obasanjo deploys endorsement strategy to acknowledge the disposition of the Presidency and National Assembly in providing adequate funds for the conduct of general election (excerpt 1). He endorses the position of the Presidency and National Assembly with the verbal element 'commended'; while he uses the verbal element 'confirmed' to endorse the forthrightness of INEC to publicly confirm the receipt of the funds. The strategies of hearsay and acknowledgement are significant in excerpt 2 where the writer relies on the statement of another voice (Bola Tinubu) as an evidential proposition to interpolate himself directly into the text as the responsible source of his utterance. Of note is the adjective phrase *fairly prophetic,* which is deployed by the stancetaker to align with Tinunbu's position (*Muhammadu Buhari is an agent of destabilization, ethnic bigot and religious fanatic who, if given the chance, would ensure the disintegration of the country*). By aligning with the position of the speaker (Tinubu), he tacitly condemns the morality/suitability of the appraised person (Muhammadu Buhari) who was constructed a religious bigot and an ethnocentric person.

In excerpt 3, Olusegun Obasanjo adopts evaluation strategy to appraise the President's promises on the expected election. '*Free, fair, credible and peaceful'* are descriptive adjectives deployed to evaluate the election which as at then has not been conducted. An endorsement- neutral formulation such as '*some men of God will...*' tends towards dialogistic expansion. The writer did not only indicate his personal investment in the current argument (*The labour of our democracy heroes must not be in vain*) but added to the formulation by representing the current view as one which is not his alone, but which he shared with some groups (men of God) in the wider community. He also deploys proclaim strategy to make a strong pronouncement and to agree with the proposition. His use of the modal verbal phrase 'must not be', further serves to affirm his stance which he takes to align with the formulation that has been a generally acceptable norm in the country. Obasanjo uses proclaim as a strategy to reemphasise his position when he says 'let me reiterate what I have said in number of occasion' (excerpt 4). The expression opens a dialogistic expansion that allows alternative dialogue in which he deploys the endorsement strategy in the second clause to align with or approve of the candidature of Goodluck Jonathan for the position of the President of Nigeria. The nominal phrase, 'electing Dr Goodluck Jonathan in his own right…' is used to show the writer's stance as revealed in concluding part of the sentence (…will enhance and strengthen our unity, stability and democracy). However, in excerpt 5, Obasanjo deploys proclaim strategy to refer to evidential statement which he emphasised as a means of reminding the addressee of his duty. The verbs '*remember, maintain and protect'* are used to proclaim his position.

4.2 Disaffiliative stance in Obasanjo's letters

Dis-affiliative or disalignment stance, in this study, is conceptualised as a general terminology for positions taken by the writer to disagree, dis-endorse, reject and take alternative viewpoint as against the one taken by his addressees. In this case, the stancetaker takes an alternative position by opposing a particular viewpoint which may be in form of a negative assessment or a judgement on the socially acceptable behaviour (honesty, capacity, tenacity) that the speaker may be insinuating as lacking or absent in the person/object being addressed. It is the ethical region of attitudinal positioning of the writer towards his addressee. The writer passes judgement/blame and condemnation on the people/object of evaluation through the assessment of places, things, happenings and state of affairs.

Excerpt 6: The Chairman of INEC must stand firm and carry out this duties [sic] with competence and unbending neutrality. Card reader must be used without fail and accreditation must be completed and number ascertained and made public before voting commences as done in 2015… Madam Amina Zakari should in honour stay out of election and not to serve as a contamination to election process. Otherwise, it will be difficult to deny the rumour that she is being assigned to collation center for one duty only- to write out figures that are not results of the voting in the field on fake results sheets without water

mark or on genuine results sheets which she will have access to as a commissioner. (Obasanjo, 2018:p.4)

Excerpt 7: As a leader, two things you cherish and hold dear among others are trust and honour both of which are important ingredients of character. I will want to see anyone in the office of the Presidency of Nigeria as a man or woman who can be trusted, a person of honour in his words and character. I will respect you for upholding these attributes and dignifying that office. (Obasanjo, 2013:p.4)

Excerpt 8: Bode George puts it bluntly in his statement of December 3, 2018 when he said; 'The other day, the Vice President of Nigeria, Prof Yemi Osinbajo -a learned man and enlightened person in all parameters- was seen at various market in Lagos state and Abuja distributing #10,000 each to market women'. What an absurdity! … It was indeed an obscene display of executive recklessness and abuse of office. Pray, where did the money come from? Was it budgeted for in the appropriation law? In more civilized nations, Osinbajo would have been impeached and prosecuted for gutting our collective treasury. (Obasanjo, 2018:p.3)

Excerpt 9: 'For all democrats and those carrying out the process of elections, there must be the red line that must not be crossed in tactics and practices of democracy' I personally have serious doubt about the present INEC integrity, impartiality and competence to conduct fair, free and credible election. …I am concerned as a democrat who believes that with faithful and diligent practice of democracy, we can get over most of our political problems and move steadfastly and surefootedly on the course of stability, unity of purpose, socio-economic growth and progress for all. Democracy becomes a sham if elections are carried out by people who should be impartial and neutral umpires but show no integrity, action with blatant partiality, duplicity and imbecility. (Obasanjo, 2018:p.1)

Excerpt 10:But I will not support what I believe is not in the best interest of Nigeria, no matter who is putting it forward or who is behind it. Mr President, I have passed the stage of being flattered, intimidated, threatened, frightened, induced or bought. I am never afraid to agree or disagree but it will always be on principles, and if on politics, in the national interest. (Obasanjo, 2013:p.10)

Obasanjo positions himself against the appraisal object or the propositions he reacted against in excerpt 6. Through dis-endorsement strategy, he positioned himself against acts that have the tendency to rubbish the result of the expected elections. He uses the

comparative clause '*as done in 2015'* to refer to, and adopt the method used in 2015 presidential election. By this same strategy of dis-endorsement, he reveals his doubt in the capacity or willingness of INEC to conduct a credible election. The action phrases *'without fail; must be completed and ascertained and made public'* are foregrounded to show distrust in INEC. He therefore advices the Chairman of INEC to discharge his duties in a manner that will produce a credible election result. Of note is the choice of the modal auxiliary 'must' to proclaim his position about the appraisal object. Obasanjo disaffiliates with the appointment and participation of Amina Zakari (appraisal object) in the conduct of the election. He evaluates and judged the stance object as a potential *contamination* to election process should she go ahead to participate in the conduct of the election. He advises the INEC commissioner (Madam Amina Zakari), to rescue herself from the process of the elections to avoid controversy that may tarnish the result of the elections. His stance is revealed in the verb phrase "should…stay out" supported by his conclusion that "it will be difficult to deny" that she was not appointed to falsify the election result.

The appraisal strategy that is significant in excerpt 7 is evaluation which the speaker deploys to dis-align with the character of the appraisal object (President Goodluck Jonathan). His evaluation of the appraisal object shows that he does not trust him. His expectation (social expectancy) of the occupant of the position of the president is dignifying (*a man or woman who can be trusted, a person of honour in his words and character)* but Obasanjo does not see the President Jonathan as one who merits the seat in integrity and character. The expression "I will want to see anyone..." resides in other person(s) rather than the addressee. Contract-proclaim evaluation strategy is used in excerpt 8 where the writer relies on the statement of a public figure (Bode George) to affirm his position on the object of appraisal (Prof. Yomi Osinbajo). He deploys evaluation strategy to appraise the Vice President, Prof. Yemi Osinbajo, by using the adjectival phrases *'a learned man and an enlightened person in all parameters.* He evaluates the action of Osinbajo which he claims to be diametrically opposed to his educational status. The exclamatory statement, '*What an absurdity'*, reveals the social sanction attached to the action of the personae. Obasanjo disaffiliates with the appraisal object (Osinbajo) by condemning and judging his action (*would have been impeached and prosecuted for gutting our collective treasury*). His classification of Nigeria as a less-civilised country resides in the expression "in a more civilised country..." which proceeds from his judgement and position on the condemnable sanction that Osinbajo's action should have attracted.

Obasanjo's social judgement on INEC, the election umpire, is clear as he expresses some reservations about the ability of INEC to conduct a '*fair*, *free* and *credible'* election (excerpt 9). He deploys evaluation strategy to assess and dis-align with the object of appraisal (INEC) with regards to its *integrity*, *impartiality* and *competence*. He describes the INEC chairman and perhaps his lieutenants, as being incapable of doing the right thing (display of imbecility). The counter-expectancy strategy, signaled by his use of the conjuction 'but', is deployed to supplant a proposition which would have been expected in a normal

situation (people who should be impartial and neutral umpires). Excerpt 10 reveals Obasanjo's position against whatever the President may want to use in making him (Obasanjo) shiver or abandon his interest in Nigeria. He deploys the expression " I have passed the stage of being flattered, intimidated, threatened, frightened, induced or bought" to express his stance (resoluteness). To further enact his disagreement with the President, he engages his reader/addressee with the futuristic action verbal phrase '*will not*' to enact a negative and alternative dialogistic position.

5.0 Conclusion

This paper adopts Appraisal Theory to investigate the perspectives and pragmatic strategies in Obasanjo's letters to President Goodluck Jonathan and President Muhammadu Buhari. It accounts for the stances taken and the strategies deployed by Obasanjo to enact his dialogic positions in the data. This paper reveals that two categories of stances namely *affiliative* and *disaffiliative* are taken by Obasanjo in the letters. The strategies employed by the stancetaker in communicating his dialogic engagements include proclaim, hearsay, endorsement, evaluation, concur, pronouncement and acknowledgement. The paper further reveals the engagement of some linguistic features by the stancetaker in strategic enactment of his positions in the media political correspondences. Adjectives are deployed to evaluate issues/objects of appraisal while verbs used to enact personal or interpersonal positioning and to refer to issues either in the past or present.

The paper concludes that presidential media political correspondence may serve as a critical but an alternative position to guide the incumbent president and this may strengthen governance if properly deployed. Further study can examine ideological stances of former President Olusegun Obasanjo in addressing his potential readers.

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