

Politics, Culture and Development in Nigeria

A Festschrift for
Gabriel Olatunde Babawale

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A Semiotic Analysis of Selected Political Posters in the Development of Politics in Nigeria

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Introduction

VARIOUS studies have been carried out in the fields of advertising and politics [see, for instance, Crystal & Davy (1969), Crystal (1987), Ude (1996), Adejumo and Odebunmi (1997), Goddard (1998), Holden (2001), Morris (2005), Oyekola (2005), Osisanwo (2005) and Osisanwo (2010).] However, majority of these works have concentrated on the areas of language and advertisement without giving consideration to political posters. Osisanwo (2010) only carries out a lexico-semantic analysis of selected political posters. The present study differs from others since it set out to examine the use of signs and symbols in political posters.

Political climate has been inundated with crises that now leave the country and the electorate with palpable fear in the social and political terrains. A major issue that is crucial to understanding the nature of politics and political associations in Nigeria is the exchange of money for electoral gains. Nigerian politicians today are no longer interested in ruling because of the need to take the country to the next level positively. Rather, they are interested in taking her to the level of financial and moral bankruptcy as a result of political corruption that pervades the Nigerian political psyche. They think of what goes into their pocket at the end of the day. Hence, elections are fraught with rigging, insincerity, violence, the survival of the fittest and the elimination of the unfit. In other words, Nigerian politics is basically a creation of the elite or a group of people who have so much to derive from its corporate existence. Despite the fact that majority of them know that it is not their level of advertisement or publicity that determines whether they get to power or not, campaign funds are still expended on political posters.

Political posters are produced in large quantities and consist of a colourful picture

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or illustration along with a short identifying trademark of the person or thing advertised, which in this case is often represented by the picture of the politician being advertised to the public (Osisanwo, 2010). It is often accompanied with a lot of propaganda, which uses as a major instrument for piercing through the heart of the masses.

Language and Politics

Language, as a human vocal noise or the arbitrary graphic representation of noise used for communication purpose (Osisanwo, 2003:1), and the faculty of human speech present in all human beings due to heredity (Crystal, 1971:161), is indispensable to man since it is the main means of communication which distinguishes man from other animals. Since man as a social animal constantly finds himself in an environment where there is need for communication, language—the main channel through which the patterns of living are transmitted from man to man (Halliday, 1978:9)—is then used to achieve this aim. On the other hand, attempts to arrive at a consensual definition of politics have been a Herculean task since the definition given to it is relative. In other words, it depends on the angle from which it is viewed. In everyday usage, we can simply say that politics signifies what politicians do, especially that which pertains to the affairs of the state, which the etymology of the word 'politics' suggests (that is, from Greek *polis*, city, state) (Joseph 2006:2). In the words of Chilton (2004:1), politics has been defined as 'a struggle for power, between those who seek to assert and maintain their power and those who resist it'. The thirst to be in control of power probably explains why there seems to be a lot of contest or struggle between individuals to take over the mantle of leadership in a particular environment. What therefore is the business of politics and politicians? Politics is said to involve reconciling differences through discussion and persuasion. In other words, politics is fraught with deliberations for the betterment of a prevailing situation. Hence, communication is very essential to politics (see Hague et al, 1998).

Political Posters and Advertisement

All over the world today, the role of the media in political campaigns cannot be overemphasized. According to Schaffner (2004), the mass media (which may include television, radio, flyers, posters, text messages, billboards, handbills and the Internet) play a vital role in mediating between politics and the public. Advertising is a strategy used in calling the attention of the (general) public to a particular product or service with the aim of inducing them to patronize the commodity. Advertising also has to do with the techniques and practices used in bringing products, services and even opinions to public notice such that the public can react in a certain way to the advertised commodity. Advertising techniques

(media) range from mouth-to-mouth advertisement to highly technologized advertisements as observable through cinema houses, television, radio, billboards, the Internet, posters, handbills, catalogues, magazines, newspapers, free samples, mechanical devices, window dressing, labels, wrapping papers, tickets, signs, show cards, footballers' shirts, T-shirts, table mats, tins, bottles, calendars, diaries, buses, cars, containers, cups, plates, notebooks, chairs, tables and other devices. Some of these are given as free samples, while others are given just to advertise the name of the product/service. As observed by Scammell and Langer (2006), of all the media campaign communication channels, television advertising is predominant. This is not to say, however, that posters do not equally play a vital role in disseminating information and selling out the advertised product or individual to the masses.

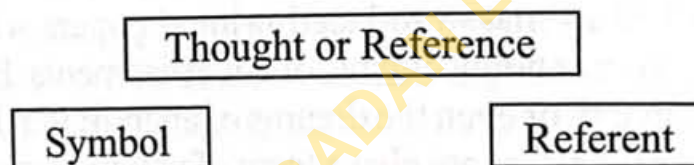
Political Posters and Semiotics

Posters can be described as mass-produced printed papers which are exhibited publicly and meant to give announcements or advertisements. Posters can be used to promote a product, event, or even the dreams of an individual, especially as it is done in politics. Political posters are also a form of advertisement but specifically used for politics. They are basically used for the purpose of campaign as organized by a political party or candidate for public office in order to attract the support of voters in an election. Political posters play an important role in the education and mobilization of citizens in most democracies. Structurally, a poster always has the picture, name, party logo, and the intention of the candidate that is vying for an elective position. Unfortunately today however, there is a lot of propaganda in political posters, which has led the vast majority of the people away from believing not only in the intent of the poster, but also in the mission statement of the candidate. Political posters are now fraught with lies, deceits and other forms of propaganda. In the same vein, in the case of political posters, a person who is initially not interested in the purported dreams and aspirations of a politician may end up in the politician's camp after being cajoled by such words and the magnificent outlook given to the poster. Crystal (1987:390) posits that 'in most cases it is the visual content and design of an advertisement that makes its initial impact and causes us to take note of it'. It therefore becomes imperative that the choices made to convey the intended message should be well selected and accurately pruned, since all these are intended to give people the opportunity to identify the product/service, remember its name, make them feel it is familiar and persuade them to patronize it. It therefore relies almost totally on the use of language. The use of language is obviously laudatory as it extols a product/service, unveiling its positive qualities and emphasizing its uniqueness.

Semiotics is an aspect of language study which is otherwise known as semiology. It involves the study of signs. One prominent scholar among its founders was the

Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who saw it as the study of “the life of signs within society” (Ultimate Reference Suite, 2008). The initial use of the word was traced to the doorsteps of the English philosopher, John Locke in the 17th century. The subsequent use with which it is probably identified till date is from the independent work of Saussure and of the American philosopher, Charles Sanders Pierce in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They both see the idea of semiotics as an interdisciplinary mode of examining phenomena in different fields.

It is apposite to quickly recall the concept of the semiotic triangle presented by Ogden and Richard (1923) and re-echoed by Palmer (1996:24), in which the relationship is seen as a triangle, where the 'symbol' represents the linguistic element, 'referent' represents the object, while 'thought or reference' represents concept thus:



Semiotics could therefore be seen as a discipline which is very relevant to almost all face(t)s of life, because of its comprehensive nature. Hence, McArthur (1996:835) asserts that “semiotics is a comprehensive discipline in that almost anything can be a sign: clothes, hairstyles, type of house or car owned, accent and body language all send messages about such things as age, class and politics.” Semiotics has been conceived as the study of signs; and signs are made up of many different components—words, sounds, body language and context—all of which combine to create visual language which aids our understanding of a set message (see Moulton, 2005; online).

Ferdinand de Saussure treated language as a sign-system, and his work in linguistics has supplied the concepts and methods that semioticians apply to sign-systems other than language. One of such basic semiotic concepts is Saussure's distinction between the two inseparable components of a sign: the signifier, which in language is a set of speech sounds or marks on a page, and the signified, which is the concept or idea behind the sign. Saussure also distinguished parole, or actual individual utterances, from *langue*, the underlying system of conventions that makes such utterances understandable. It is this underlying *langue* that mostly interests semioticians.

Modern semioticians have applied Pierce and Saussure's principles to a variety of fields, including aesthetics, anthropology, psychoanalysis, communications, and semantics. Among the most influential of these thinkers are the French scholars:

Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Julia Kristeva. In this study, our interest is drawn to the use of semiotics for communicative purposes in political posters.

Theoretical Consideration

Charles Sanders Peirce, the American philosopher and founder of modern semiotics, proposes that signs can be defined in three categories, that is, icons, indexes and symbols. Icons are signs whose signifier bears a close resemblance to the thing they refer to; they resemble their referents (such as a road sign for falling rocks); whereas indexes are obtainable where there is a direct link between the sign and the object; they are associated with their referents (as smoke is a sign of fire); and symbols have no logical meaning between them and the object (see Underwood, 2003; Osisanwo, 2005); they are related to their referent only by convention (as with words or traffic signals). Peirce also demonstrated that a sign can never have a definite meaning, for the meaning must be continuously qualified.

The objective of a semiotic analysis has been critically examined by scholars, including Pavis (1982:13) and Ogundeji (1988:45), who have submitted that it examines the formal and internal organization of a text relating the componential significating patterns of the texts to vigorous dimensions by considering the intratextual, intertextual and extratextual significations (Ogundeji, 1988:45). Hence, its approach has been so described as being more appropriate than other dramatic texts.

Obviously, the study of sign systems (semiotics) is not restricted to humans; it spans virtually all face(t)s of life. McArthur (1996:835) therefore describes the study of animal communication as zoo semiotics, while the study of technical systems of signals such as Morse code and traffic lights is communication theory. Therefore, our objective in this analysis is to examine the signs used in the posters in relation to our central focus, which is politics. This is in the area which can be described as "political semiotics". We shall further consider other semiotic types used in developing these.

Our analysis in this section does not promise to be all-inclusive. In fact, the essence of this is to enable us interpret the pictorial representation on the cover page of our text, with the optimism that it should aid our understanding of the text. For the purpose of our analysis therefore, we shall be concerned with the indexical category of signs. However, we shall further attempt a general survey of the text. We may need to re-emphasize that an index is a sign whose signifier we have learnt to associate with a particular signified (see Underwood 2003; online).

Presentation of Data

For the data used in the analysis here, refer to the samples (after the references).

Analysis of Data

Our analysis here adopts Charles Sander Peirce's signs, which he says can be defined at three levels, that is, icons, indexes and symbols. Our goal is not only to identify the icons, indexes and symbols used but to equally establish their significance in the meaning-making process of political posters.

Icons

Icons are signs whose signifier bears a close resemblance to the thing they refer to. In our data, each of the different political parties has a party symbol or logo. What is actually iconic about this is the meaning of an umbrella in the case of Peoples Democratic Party, henceforth PDP. An umbrella is a device held above the head to shield a person from rain, snow, or sunlight. The umbrella signifies that the party is capable of protecting the masses in the days of rain and in the sun. It calls the attention of the masses or the electorate to the protection. In other words, if PDP is voted to power, the protection of the masses is guaranteed, come rain, come shine.

In the case of the maize icon of the All Nigeria People's Party, henceforth ANPP's, maize, there is the belief that the party is capable of providing food for all. Maize is a common name for the cereal grass widely grown for food and livestock fodder. It ranks with wheat and rice as one of the world's chief grain crops, and it is one of the largest crops produced all over the world. Maize signifies a lot of things. It is one of the farm products which can be used in producing different kinds of other cereal-related food items and other consumables by human beings. Its cobs are used as an important source of furfural, a liquid used in manufacturing nylon fibres and phenol-formaldehyde plastics, and also refining wood resin. It can also be used to make lubricating oils from petroleum, and purify butadiene in the production of synthetic rubber. Beyond these, the cobs are also used as pipes for smoking tobacco. Corn oil, extracted from the germ of the corn kernel, is used as a cooking and salad oil and, in solidified form, as margarine; it is also used in the manufacture of paints, soaps, and linoleum (see Microsoft Encarta, 2007). They are equally used as fuel source. Since it is high in sugar content, maize is processed to produce alcohol for use with gasoline as gasohol, and the dry stalk is a potentially important fuel biomass. All these showcase the multiplicity of products that can be derived from maize. The intention of ANPP therefore is to assure the electorate that, 'with us as inscribed in our logo, you can have the whole world at your doorstep'.

In the case of the AC, the observable icon is broom. A broom points to the fact that the party is set to sweep away evil from the land. In other words, all corrupt practices and anti-good governance will be a thing of the past. This portends

victory for the masses since such an attempt will be geared towards helping to protect the public treasury while the money in the reserve will be properly channelled towards the development of the society. If corruption is swept away from a given society, the utilization of public funds would better the lots of the masses.

Indexes

Indexes are obtainable where there is a direct link between the sign and the object. We equally have instances of this in our posters. In sample 26 in the appendix, we have Bola Ilori trying to campaign for a seat in the Senate. He therefore puts a picture of the mace which is symbolic of the seat he is contesting for. On the same poster, he also has the Oranmiyan logo which is meant to appeal to the sensibilities of the Yoruba that he is truly their son.

Symbols

In the case of symbols which have no logical meaning between it and the object, we have all the party logos/emblems. There is obviously no one-to-one correspondence between the two, but parties only try to bring in one or two things to showcase what they believe in. All these are obviously important in the meaning-making process of the political posters.

Pictures

Structurally, political posters always have the picture, name, party logo, and the intention of the candidate that is vying for an elective position. They consist of colourful pictures or illustrations along with a short identifying trademark of the advertised, which in this case is often represented by the picture of the politician being advertised to the public. Pictorially, politicians are presented as healthy and happy individuals who can make things happen. In all the selected posters in our data, all the politicians put up either a smiling face to connote happiness or a good disposition towards the masses.

In sample 25, there is the inscription 'OGD team' and the pictorial representation of the team. This is used by some other PDP aspirants to advertise themselves. They feel this will work for them since OGD, that is, Otunba Gbenga Daniel, the Governor of Ogun State, already has some level of popularity and acceptance among the people of the state; likewise sample 42, which has to do with 'the winning team' carries the picture of both Governor Gbenga Daniel and the presidential aspirant of the party, that is, President Umaru Yar'Adua. The essence of this is to use the coveted popularity of the Governor and the President as a yardstick for the masses to accept their persons.

All the pictures are also foregrounded. They are presented very boldly such that anybody can easily see them from any angle. The pictures are usually the most observable thing on the posters. This is often followed either by the party's logo or the politician's name. The foregrounded pictures are equally politically motivated for meaning. The pictures are presented to passers-by for consideration. Such pictures are therefore often attractive and almost spotless. Wherever a poster is pasted, especially in public places, it is expected to immediately catch the attention of passers-by, hence, they ordinarily consist of a colourful picture or illustration along with a short identifying text or trademark. However, it is worthy of note to remark that what catches the attention of the passer-by is relative. While an individual's attention may be caught by the impact of a concise/striking design, another's may be from the sumptuous appeal of an ornate work of art (see Ultimate Reference Suite, 2008).

Conclusion

From our discussion and analysis, it is obvious that the identified semiotic features of political posters are actually meant to present politicians or political parties to the public, thereby sensitizing the public to patronize them. We discover that political adverts are usually packed with propaganda (through the icons, indexes and symbols used) by highly rating the concerned politician/political party than its actual status. Our work, which centres on the advertisements in newspapers, on billboards and handbills, depicts that such adverts are often well crafted and neatly presented since they intend to actually communicate life to the electorate and influence their decisions at the polls. A lot of creativity therefore goes into it, thereby motivating and spurring the public into action and patronage of the advertised politician/political party. It is therefore obvious that politicians are aware of the need to communicate to the masses through the use of semiotics in the democratic reality and the supposed culture of politics in Nigeria.

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Chapter 6: Appendices



APPENDIX 1



APPENDIX 2



APPENDIX 3



APPENDIX 4



APPENDIX 5



APPENDIX 6



APPENDIX 7



APPENDIX 8



APPENDIX 9



APPENDIX 10



APPENDIX 11



APPENDIX 12



APPENDIX 13



APPENDIX 14



APPENDIX 15



APPENDIX 16



APPENDIX 17



APPENDIX 18



APPENDIX 19



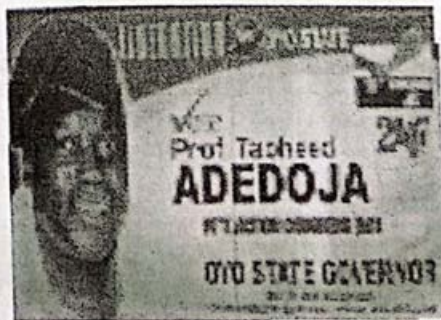
APPENDIX 20



APPENDIX 21



APPENDIX 22



APPENDIX 23



APPENDIX 24



APPENDIX 25



APPENDIX 26



APPENDIX 27



APPENDIX 28



APPENDIX 29



APPENDIX 30



APPENDIX 31



APPENDIX 32



APPENDIX 33



APPENDIX 34



APPENDIX 35



APPENDIX 36



APPENDIX 37



APPENDIX 38



APPENDIX 39



APPENDIX 40



APPENDIX 41



APPENDIX 42



APPENDIX 43



APPENDIX 44



APPENDIX 45



APPENDIX 46



APPENDIX 47



APPENDIX 48