



Expression of ideologies in media accounts of the 2003 and 2007 general elections in Nigeria

Discourse & Society

24(6) 763–773

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DOI: 10.1177/0957926513486224

das.sagepub.com



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Abstract

Existing studies on media representation of elections in Nigeria do not pay adequate attention to a critical linguistic perspective on language used in reporting electoral matters. Given the fact that ideologies are crucial in elections, this study investigates the ways that cover stories in two Nigerian news magazines, *TELL* and *The News*, express the ideological pursuits of social actors in the 2003 and 2007 general elections in Nigeria. The discourse patterns that expressed ideological pursuits in the reports were generally non-neutral. The discourse of the stories indicated an attempt to shape the perspective of readers in elections; the magazines held the view that they are responsible for the social orientation of the electorates. Ideologies are expressed, acquired, confirmed, changed and perpetuated through discourse. They are generally reproduced in the social practices of their members. Both *TELL* and *The News* magazines put to use the ideological polarization between the ideological structures of ingroups and outgroups, such that ingroups typically emphasize their own good deeds while they de-emphasise their bad deeds; on the other hand, outgroups de-emphasise or even totally deny their own bad deeds while they emphasise their good ones.

Keywords

Discourse, discourse structure, election, ideology, media, Nigeria

Introduction

The media monitor the activities of the government to ensure that it is accountable to the people, in conjunction with other institutions that operate within that society (Osisanwo

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2011: 1). The media are highly indispensable to the public. Jason (1996: 40) notes that 'the press must therefore, re-position itself for the democratic kingdom of our expectation. It will be the job of the press to educate and inform the people about the tenets and attributes of democracy'. It is sometimes almost impossible for readers to get the same meaning from two newspapers or magazines in reported accounts of the same issue. This may be due to the ideological differences between two print media.

Since we cannot separate a print medium's ideological stance from the angle from which a particular story is reported and how it is reported, it means that no print medium is ideologically neutral. Olowe (1993: 8) posits that news pages are not ideologically neutral. In essence, all newsworthy events are subjected to rigorous linguistic manipulation (mediation) to suit the print medium's ideological stance. In the words of Fowler et al. (1979), Fiske (1994) and Taiwo (2008), we can therefore say that print media's word choice(s) are never neutral; rather, they carry a power that reflects the interests of those who speak or write. According to Van Dijk (2006: 115), 'ideologies are expressed and generally reproduced in the social practices of their members, and more particularly acquired, confirmed, changed and perpetuated through discourse'. Therefore, members of given groups, such as media groups, have ideological positions which they try to sell to their readers through constant reproduction, and their readers, unconsciously in most cases, get bought and won over.

In recent times, linguists have ventured into pragmatics, text linguistics, discourse analysis, semantics and stylistics in an attempt to unveil the various accruable meanings in a text. In this light, our study examines language and ideology in the print media with a focus on headlines and cover stories in relation to how they try to reflect the minds, feelings, opinions and attitudes of those with influence. It emphasises how the ideologies of the news magazines are promoted in the various discourses which are observable in their pages in relation to the Nigerian general elections of 2003 and 2007.

Statement of the problem

The study of media discourse allows one to become aware of the workings of language, especially in the media field. Fairclough (1989, 1992) Van Dijk (1988, 2006), Scollon (1998), Pan (2002), Massi (2007), Taiwo (2004, 2008), Nunn (2007), Odeunmi (2007), Alo (2007), Chiluwa (2005, 2007), among others, have carried out different research projects on media discourse. However, we shall be concerned only with those carried out in the area of news discourse and ideological expression in discourse. Van Dijk, in his book *News Analysis: Case Studies of International and National News in the Press*, believes that 'news reports (...) constitute a particular type of discourse' (1988: 1) which he examines as a specific type of language, and as a sociocultural practice (1988: 2). He explores newspapers from both the Third World and the First World, and considers their coverage of the assassination of president-elect Bechir Gemayel of Lebanon in 1982. He shows that 'a qualitative analysis, based on a theory of news discourse structures and processing, provides a more adequate approach to the study of news than classical content analysis' (1988: 31). Van Dijk promotes several hypotheses, of which three are adapted and empirically tested. The first hypothesis 'predicts that cultural, historical, social, political, ideological, or institutional differences between different newspapers,

countries, or regions must necessarily result in differences in news discourse about a given world event'. The second hypothesis anticipates a 'similarity of news accounts'. According to him, 'this prediction would be based on an analysis of the influence of a globally shared or imposed set of news production routines and values'. The third hypothesis predicts 'different results depending on the type of newspaper' (1988: 32). The study is different from ours in terms of scope. Ours does not venture into international news, but only national reports that relate to Nigerian general elections.

In a related study, Wang (1993) discovers that the coverage of an event by two newspapers is both structurally and quantitatively different and that ideology and political interests are two possible factors which contribute to the perceived differences. However, Wang notes that similar events may also be portrayed in vastly contrastive ways by the same newspaper. Though our study also uses two news magazines, our interest is not restricted to a comparison of the two magazines. However, changes in society have given rise to the need for new processes of interpretation. Although Taiwo (2008) looks at language and power relations in the print media, studies on media representation of elections in Nigeria have not paid adequate attention to a critical linguistic perspective on language used in reporting electoral matters. Studies on ideology have provided impressive theoretical and critical analyses of ideology, but have failed to show how ideological representation of discourses could be accounted for, especially in relation to the control or dominating influence of one person or a political group in society.

Therefore, given the fact that ideologies are crucial in elections, this study investigates the ways the selected stories and voices in two Nigerian news magazines, *TELL* and *The News*, express their ideological pursuits and the ideological pursuits of social actors in the 2003 and 2007 general elections in Nigeria. The selection of the two magazines was based on their wide readership in Nigeria. This study is also restricted to the elections conducted during the political dispensation of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, that is, from 1999 to 2007. We are, therefore, only concerned with the 2003 and 2007 general elections in Nigeria.

Theoretical framework and methodology

Based on our intention to examine how discourse structures are ideologically represented, we specifically selected *TELL* and *The News* editions that reported issues bordering on general elections. Necessary stories and relevant discourse representations were copied out with their details, such as the name of the paper, date of publication and page number. The data were closely examined. They were then subjected to analysis. In an examination of the ideological affiliations of ingroup/outgroup members, Van Dijk (2006: 115) posits that 'systematic discourse analysis offers powerful methods to the study of the structures and functions of underlying "ideologies"'. Also, in our observation and study of the ideological affiliations of *TELL* and *The News*, we discovered that both magazines use the polarisation between the ideological structures of ingroups and outgroups, such that ingroups typically emphasise their own good deeds while de-emphasising their bad deeds. On the other hand, outgroups de-emphasise or even totally deny their own bad deeds while emphasising their good ones. Van Dijk (2006: 124–126) argues further that if ideologies are acquired, expressed, enacted and reproduced by discourse, this must take place through a number of discursive structures and strategies. For

instance, the use of the pronoun *we* is one of these structures, typically used to deictically refer to the ingroup of the current speaker. Van Dijk (2006: 125) goes on to present a table on what can be termed, here, as formal properties of ideological expressions in discourse. He termed them 'some expressions of ideology in discourse'. According to him, this is organised by discourse levels, such as those of global and local meanings, lexicon, syntax, sound structures, formats, rhetorical structures and interactional structures – that is, by Forms, Meanings and Actions. The underlying ideologies at each of those levels occur by emphasising or de-emphasising in many ways the good or bad properties of our own group and the good or bad properties of the outgroup.

Having spelt out our intended strategy in carrying out our analysis, we shall first present extracts that have been taken from our data for analysis.

Extract 1: Obasanjo's cabinet split over the third term: With the split in the rank of governors, the controversial extension of tenure for President Olusegun Obasanjo remains a hard sell.

The respected diplomat and friend of the President is one person whose close associates and presidential aides believe could sway Obasanjo on critical issues. The source said the President reportedly asked his friend 'Did I tell you I am interested?' (*TELL*, 8 May 2006)

Extract 2: A source told *TELL* that the Vice President had sworn privately that since Obasanjo had decided to stop him from succeeding him, he too would stop at nothing to halt him from getting a third-term in office. (*TELL*, 24 April 2006)

Extract 3: It was a speech Nigerians were waiting for. They wanted to hear their President own up to the attempt to secure a third-term through the controversial constitution amendment ... He told a bewildered nation that he never told anybody that he wanted a third-term in office. While his party men cheered, the opposition jeered at him for being economical with the truth. (*TELL*, 29 May 2006)

Extract 4: No to Third-term: Ex-Heads of State Unite against OBJ – Kicking against an Evil Agenda: Former Nigerian heads of state and retired generals unite to frustrate President Olusegun Obasanjo's sit-tight plans. Many retired Generals, like former heads of state, are against the third-term idea. They see it as dangerous and are particularly worried about Obasanjo's tactics of muzzling opposition, especially by dispersing lawful assembly of elements opposed to the idea. Gowon said what the current leaders must preoccupy themselves with was collective responsibility woven around representative democracy and not the suppression of dissent and skewed leadership (p. 27). (*The News*, 1 May 2006)

Extract 5: The Undying 3rd Term Plot – In spite of denials by President Olusegun Obasanjo, speculations about his self succession plot refuse to die. President Olusegun Obasanjo said, 'With barely over a year and a half in the life of this administration and with the major task of consolidating on our achievements and addressing those areas that still demand more concerted action, it is vital that we all understand the basic nature of the task ahead of us'. 'We have come a long way, but this (final) lap will make a difference. Nigerians expect us to win the race

against official indifference, complacency and compromise', the President charged the listeners (p. 22). (*The News*, 29 August 2005)

Extract 6: Balarabe Musa, former governor of Kaduna State, told *TELL* that members of the opposition were also planning to form an association called Nigerians United Against Third-term to fight Obasanjo and proponent of tenure extension.

The Youth Alliance for Good Governance, YAGG, last Tuesday morning led a protest march in Kano. The protesters, drawn from Bayero University, Kano and Federal College of Education, stormed the grounds of the state assembly complex, carrying anti-third-term placards with inscriptions such as 'No to third-term', 'Enough is enough for Obasanjo' and 'Obasanjo, just go back to Otta or Yola prison where you belong', among others. (*TELL*, 1 May 2006)

Extract 7: 2007 Elections: Why this Man Can't be Trusted – 'I am under Pressure' says Iwu, INEC Boss. (*The News*, 12 June 2006)

Extract 8: The Third-term Choristers – The plot to extend the tenure of President Olusegun Obasanjo thickens just as opposition against it heightens. For those who package and market 'Brand Obasanjo', the President is the messiah, redeemer, saviour, eternal light and political and economic guarantor, all rolled into one, that Nigeria now has and could ever have. (*TELL*, 5 December 2006)

Extract 9: Characters in this hideous drama, entitled 'Do-or-die', have begun work. They are the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the Nigeria Police, the Army, State Security Service (SSS) (p. 21). (*The News*, 16 April 2007)

Extract 10: Remorseless Vote Riggers – Here is how the People's Democratic Party rigged the April elections in Nigeria: Professor Maurice Iwu, Chairman, Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) has confirmed the worst fears of Nigerians that he was an interested party in the nation's general elections. To many observers, Iwu was doing the bidding of President Olusegun Obasanjo who, contrary to the provisions of the 1999 constitution that he must consult the council of State, unilaterally appointed him . . . We make bold to state that President Olusegun Obasanjo has been the chief instigator of the bastardisation of electoral process and the weakening, if not destruction of democratic tenets in the last eight years (p. 16). (*The News*, 30 April 2004)

Extract 11: Nigerians fear for 2003. (*TELL*, 6 January 2003)

Extract 12: Watchers of Nigerian politics have now seen that the strategies cut across political parties and abroad spectrum of highly placed individuals and organisations. When President Obasanjo addressed stakeholders from Abeokuta North Local Government Area of Ogun state on the much expected polls, he fired some potshots at people who criticised him for taking the shine off the Katsina State Governor, Umaru Yar'Adua, the PDP presidential candidate, at campaign rallies. 'I read that somebody said that I was campaigning', President Obasanjo began. 'I will campaign.' 'We want those who will succeed us to continue where we stop', he reasoned (p. 20). (*The News*, 16 April 2007)

Extract 13: Obasanjo endangers democracy. (*TELL*, 26 January 2004)

Extract 14: Buhari deserted. (*The News*, 12 May 2003)

Extract 15: Reps offered N25 billion bribe. (*The News*, 28 November 2005)

Analysis

The structures and strategies used in the expression of ideologies and the representation of discourse in the extracts are examined in the following text.

In the selected magazines' report extracts on the 2003 and 2007 general elections in Nigeria, we observed that ideological discourse structures were organized as a function of the structures of the underlying ideologies and the social representations and models controlled by them. Therefore, since the ideologies in the contexts were organized by well-known ingroup–outgroup polarization, we discovered that such a polarization was also 'coded' in talk and text. This is obvious with the use of pronouns, possessives and demonstratives. In extract 1, *TELL* tries to distance itself from the third-term agenda: 'Obasanjo's cabinet split over third-term'. The possessive, 'Obasanjo's', shows that his cabinet was heading for collapse due to the unpopular agenda.

The importance of pronouns in discursive structures and strategies cannot be over-emphasised, since ideologies are enacted and reproduced through discourse. The use of third-person pronouns (singular or plural) shows that the current speaker tries to deictically refer to his outgroup. For instance, the report in extract 3 says:

It was a speech Nigerians were waiting for. They wanted to hear their President own up to the attempt to secure a third-term through the controversial constitution amendment ... He told a bewildered nation that he never told anybody that he wanted a third-term in office. While his party men cheered, the opposition jeered at him for being economical with the truth. (*TELL*, 29 May 2006)

The use of the pronouns *they* and *he* is ideologically motivated. It presents the president as an individual who was trusted by Nigerians, yet he lied to them on the controversial third-term agenda when Nigerians needed him most to own up and bury the hatchet. His attitude, therefore, calls for distrust since he decided to deny the controversy till the end. This behavioural attitude, as reproduced through discourse, shows that any variable structure of discourse may be ideologically 'marked'. While the magazine emphasises the president's bad deeds by affirming his third-term intention, the president in defence tries to sustain his good deeds through denial.

In both magazines, we also observe that ideological discourse is generally organised by a general strategy of *positive self-presentation* (boasting) and *negative other-presentation* (derogation). This strategy may operate at all levels, generally in such a way that our good things are emphasised and our bad things de-emphasised, and the opposite for the Others – whose bad things will be enhanced, and whose good things will be mitigated, hidden or forgotten. For instance, in extract 10, *The News* depicts members of the ruling political party, PDP, as remorseless riggers. The description not only emphasises their bad deeds, but also de-emphasises any good in them. Ideologically, this shows that the magazine is

convinced that their victory is not popular. In the same vein, in extract 7, *The News*' presentation of the INEC Chairman shows derogation (2007 Elections: Why this Man can't be Trusted – 'I am under Pressure' says Iwu, INEC Boss). The negative presentation of the INEC boss identifies with the fears of the masses, while it poses a measure of distrust in the Chairman and the government of the day. It tries to warn the masses of the impending evil in the Other. The statement made by Professor Iwu is obviously a direct discourse. As a newsworthy individual and a force to reckon with during the electioneering process, his statement could not just be toiled with. In fact, the reporter needed it to fully convince the readers that danger loomed concerning the 2007 elections. The four-word statement is equally loaded with meanings beyond the intent of the speaker. The possible interpretations include being under pressure to cancel the election, being under pressure to rig the election, being under pressure due to the very short time frame, and so on. To many Nigerians, he was just doing the bidding of the president and his party, PDP. The reporter accompanies the statement with a comment on why the man cannot be trusted. The ideology of the magazine is promoted by this combination just to show the world that the pressure on Iwu is a sufficient reason not to trust or entrust our tomorrow into his hands.

Both magazines also try to promote the ideology of trust by generalising or over-generalising the number of people or Nigerians involved in pitiable situations or conditions. The text producers use negative terms or meanings in order to have negative effects against them. In extracts 11 and 12, we have 'Nigerians fear for 2003' and 'Watchers of Nigerian politics'. While the former shows that politicians had hit up the political climate such that the masses become very fearful of what tomorrow holds, the latter shows that many non-Nigerians are on the lookout for Nigeria to see what becomes of her after the general election. The text producer here hides the ideology of trust in numbers, where emphasis is placed on Nigerians and watchers of Nigeria.

Another news/discourse structure which pervades the entire news story is the selection of negative terms/lexical items for Them. Instances in extracts 1, 3, 4, 5 and 9 attest to this fact. In the extracts, the choice of the preceding adjectives in the expressions point to the existence of a hidden agenda. Expressions such as 'the controversial extension of tenure for President Olusegun Obasanjo remains a hard sell' (extract 1), 'the controversial constitution amendment' (extract 3), 'Kicking against an Evil Agenda' (extract 4), 'the Undying 3rd Term Plot' (extract 5) and 'characters in this hideous drama, entitled "Do-or-die"' (extract 9), inform readers that the government of the day is very deceptive. The use of such negative terms/words (adjectives) for the ruling president shows his desperation to remain in office beyond the constitutional era of a maximum of two terms of eight years. In spite of this, he did not mind amending the constitution just to suit that purpose, otherwise referred to as a hideous evil dramatic agenda. The discourse of presidential desperation is projected here.

To further show its ideological stance, *TELL* magazine selects negative topics, and most important in this situation is the choice of negative inscriptions about Them. The comment by the former governor of Kaduna State and the inscriptions by YAGG (extract 6) did not go unnoticed and unreported by *TELL*. The former governor of Kaduna State, Balarabe Musa, was quoted to have made some comments about the president's agenda. He is also presented as a strong member of the opposition force to the agenda, since he was in full support of a move to form an anti-third-term group. Again, we see the ideology of the magazine in this situation, namely that it is equally not in support of the

third-term agenda. Hence, it tries to give voice to newsworthy protesters. The magazine could have pretended not to see these protesters or even not reported the event at all, just as some newspapers and magazines choose to do. If it did see them, it could have just used an indirect discourse mode to report the protest. But in a bid to make the general public understand better and believe in the authenticity of the report, it had to quote the exact words of the students as written on their placards. The inscriptions ('No to third term', 'Enough is enough for Obasanjo' and 'Obasanjo, just go back to Otta or Yola prison where you belong') would definitely be very offensive to a caring and mindful president. The report, therefore, used quotation marks to clearly demarcate the protesters' voice from the reporter's. Since the protesters are students, the voice could also be said to be representative of Nigerian students in general. The report or negative remark really calls on the third-term plotters not to get the country into a state of anarchy and total breakdown of law and order through imminent riot or protest.

Another discourse/news structure observed in the data is the emphasis on negative agency about Them. Social actors are sometimes clearly distinguished in specific reports with the grammatical strategy of agency highlighted through activation. Activation is adopted by both magazines to identify the role of specific actions on the political landscape in Nigeria. The text producers activate social actors as active forces behind specific events in order to identify agency. Thus, while active structures reveal agency, passive structures obscure agency. The reporters mainly use passive structures when they are not so sure of the agency or when they intend to put readers in suspense. In extract 13, 'Obasanjo endangers democracy', Chief Obasanjo, the number one citizen in Nigeria, is portrayed as an enemy of progress and peaceful democratic governance. He is portrayed as an active participant in the destruction of democracy in Nigeria. This goes a long way in convincing the masses and electorate not to believe in this person. While the ideology behind this construction calls Chief Obasanjo to question, it calls the electorate to action, so that the government of the people by the people and for the people will remain theirs (the people's), will not be by another people and will not have another target. The realisation of activation by participation (grammatical participant roles) foregrounds the action of the president.

The obscuration of the identities of social actors is sometimes hidden or backgrounded through the grammatical strategy of agency obscuration. Passivisation is a linguistic strategy which showcases the ideology of the media. With passivisation, social actors are represented as recipients of a given activity or event. Beyond this, it allows the text producer to be silent about the actors of specific events or to background such actors. In extract 14, we have 'Buhari deserted'. The extract foregrounds the goal of the process. General Buhari is portrayed as the social actor who is deserted, while the reporter obscures the actors that actually deserted him. The name *Buhari* is a household name in Nigerian politics. One sees here that the text producer is more concerned about what happens to the household name rather than who performed the action. This therefore provides a means of obscuring agency in reports. Likewise, in extract 15 we have 'Reps offered N25 billion bribe'. The use of obscuration here is deliberate. The reporters believe that the masses are aware of the beneficiary of the third term if it eventually sails through. By implication, the one who doles out the N25 billion becomes an open secret which the text producers do not necessarily have to highlight. Obscuration can also be

effectively archived through the use of nominalisation. The magazines use nominalisations to serve two textual functions, which are rhetorical organisation and increased lexical density. In extract 5, we have 'The Undying 3rd Term Plot'. In this extract, agency is hidden while the nominalised structure takes on the role of goal. The question that arises here is who has refused to kill the third-term plot. This shows how nominalised structures help to cover up unclear claims. These are sometimes used to suspend readers and this may be mentioned later in the full story.

Another prominent news/discourse strategy through which underlying ideologies have been codified by both magazines is an emphasis on negative agency about the Other with the use of clefting. In extract 10, the text producers use clefting as a strategy to foreground and identify the president, Chief Obasanjo, as a major instigator in bastardising the electoral process thus: 'We make bold to state that President Olusegun Obasanjo has been the chief instigator of the bastardisation of electoral process and the weakening, if not destruction of democratic tenets in the last eight years.' The use of clefting here proposes the agent/actor who is behind the bastardisation of the process. This aligns with emphasising the bad properties or deeds of the outgroup. It also identifies with the reproduction of neoliberal ideology where individuals or groups may be personally attacked and discredited by the media, especially when they are opposed to the social actor(s) in question.

Conclusion

The two news magazines (*TELL* and *The News*) provide grounds for the writer to construct reality based on the ideological affiliations of the news magazines. The interests and ideologies of the owner of the magazine, the writer of the story and the social conditions surrounding the production of the cover story play a role in influencing this construction of reality. Indeed, if ideologies are acquired, expressed, enacted and reproduced by discourse, it must happen through a number of discursive structures and strategies. In the study of the expression of ideologies in the media accounts of the general elections in Nigeria, discourse was ideologically marked in different ways. There were diverse discursive instances projecting the bad in the government of the day, the ruling party, politicians and other social actors. Some of the observed discourse structures in our data include: the use of third-person pronouns (singular or plural to deictically refer to this outgroup); the use of *positive self-presentation* (boasting) and *negative other-presentation* (derogation); the promotion of the ideology of trust by generalising or over-generalising the number of people or Nigerians involved in pitiable situations or conditions; the selection of negative terms/lexical items for Them; the selection of negative topics; and, more importantly, the choice of negative inscriptions about Them; the emphasis on negative agency about Them; and the obscuration of the identities of social actors being sometimes hidden or backgrounded through the grammatical strategy of agency obscuration.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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