

## **The Language of Conflict Resolution: A Critical Discourse Analysis of President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan's Concession Speech**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to analyze the Concession Speech given by former Nigerian president, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, when he lost the general election in 2015 and its resultant effect in precluding possible political instability in Nigeria. The speech is believed to be a turning point in the history of the country and has helped to mitigate what increasingly looked like a potential political conflict. The data for this study constitute some selected sentences from the concession speech delivered on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017 by the then Nigerian President, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan. Through the use of a purposive sampling procedure, the generated data were annotated using the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The paper discovers that the concession speech contributed immensely in averting possible political conflict in the country. This is so because prior to the President delivering the speech, the general atmosphere in the country was that of tension and uncertainty. There was unmistakable fear that conflicts could breakout if the election results were somehow manipulated and contrived. Thus, the concession speech shows that language can be used to bring a lasting resolution to any existential or potential conflict.

**Keywords:** *Language, conflict, election, concession speech*

### **Introduction**

Language is a very powerful tool which influences the way people think and act. In a multilingual and multi-religious country like Nigeria, utterances can often be mischievously and ignorantly misconstrued from religious, ethnic or regional perspectives. Therefore, the choice of language by both the leaders and the followers is very essential in binding the country together. In fact, the corporate existence of the country depends to a large extent on how the constituted authorities are able to manage the always looming tension that may arise from the different warring ethnicities. Sometimes, a careful use of language plays a very important role in unifying a people or nation. . That is why the Amnesty International --- a body that recognizes freedom of speech as a powerful and essential tool for combating racial discrimination --- prohibits hate speech and requires countries to pay attention to laws and policies on it. Hate speech is an emotive concept which is used to refer to "any speech that is used to demean persons based on their identifiers such as race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and predispose them to act of violence" (Adelakun, 2017). Therefore, hate speech is one of the many factors that can trigger conflicts in a social setting.

In the history of Nigerian politics and prior to 2015, an incumbent president had never vied and lost an election. Even with the growing support the then opposition APC flag bearer Muhammadu Buhari enjoyed in many parts of the country, it was very difficult to foresee an incumbent surrendering the chair to the opposition. Hence, many analysts predicted that the country would be plunged into political turmoil that could eventually lead to her disintegration. However, contrary to this widely held assumption and to the surprise of many, the incumbent Goodluck Ebele Jonathan lost the election and conceded defeat even before the votes were completely counted and the results announced.

The concession speech, which was the first of its kind in the history of Nigeria, helped to avert a potential civil conflict in the country. This paper, therefore, attempts to use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyze the speech by extracting some sentences from it, to show how they helped pacified what was an ominously tense atmosphere in the country. It is important, at this point, to state that the common trend among scholars is to study acceptance or inaugural speeches (see Idris 2017; Ayeomoni & Akinkulere 2012; Sharndama 2015; Koutchade 2015). In comparison, the study of concession speech is relatively rare. Although Maikiyari (2017) and Anurudu & Oduola (2017) have studied the selected concession speech, neither of them looks at the speech from the angle of conflict resolution. It is this void that this paper attempts to fill.

### **Conceptualizing Conflict**

Conflict is said to be an inevitable part of living together of human beings. Dudley (1982, p. 9) argues that “conflicts is an inescapable part of our daily lives, an inevitable result of our highly complex, competitive and often litigious society”. Thus, when two or more people live and interact with each other, conflict is always bound to happen, due to divergent interests, goals and values. Since “conflicts are common and unavoidable in all human society” as suggested by Afegbua (2014), it is important for people to find ways to mitigate its effects so as to live in a harmonious relationship. Supporting this argument, Darby (1995, p. 25) notes that “Conflict is neither good nor bad, but intrinsic in every social relationship from marriage to international diplomacy. “The real issue is not the existence of conflict but how it is handled”.

It is important to note that although scholars are not in a unanimous agreement on the meaning of the concept of conflict, it has nevertheless been defined by many. Forsyth (1990), for example, defines conflict as a situation in which the actions or beliefs of one or more members of a group are unacceptable to and hence are resisted by one or more groups or members. Again, Oyeshola (2005, p. 101) as quoted by Mohammed (2006, p. 7) contends that conflict is:

When there is a sharp disagreement or clash, for instance, between divergent ideas, interests or people and actions. Conflict is universal yet distinct in every culture. It is common to all persons yet experienced uniquely by every individual. It is a visible sign of human energy and often the result of competitive striving for the same goals, rights and resources.

According to Realist theorists such as Morgenthau and Haas, competition for power is what provokes violent reactions in individuals. In international politics, the struggle for power as well as the existence of incompatible interests among the individual actors create room for discord and conflict. In other words, the insatiable quest for power coupled with self-centeredness among politicians are what trigger conflicts in many countries. However, in spite of the assertion that power is seen as the means to an end, Mohammed (2005) suggests that “Conflict becomes intense not necessarily because of the value attached to what is being fought for by the conflicting parties, but because of the psychological importance of winning and losing” (p. 8).

### **Post-election Conflicts in Nigeria**

Nigeria has experienced numerous conflicts that are directly or indirectly related to her turbulent political history. Radda (2006, p. 111) asserts that “the kinds of conflicts that

have engulfed Nigeria over the years, especially with the return to civil rule in 1999, have been more violent than non-violent". In fact, since the country attained independence from the British imperialists, her political history is replete with spate of political conflicts, which usually happen before, during or after elections. According to Omojologboju (2006), out of the eight general elections conducted in Nigeria since independence in 1960, seven have been violence-ridden: 1964/1965, 1979, 1983, 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011.

In other words, from the first post-independence election organized by the government of Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and President Nnamdi Azikiwe in 1964 and 1965 through many military dictatorship rule to the return of democracy in 1999 to date, all the election conducted in the country were characterized by massive rigging, electoral fraud, intimidation and pervasive violence. Thus, it can be argued that the only general election that is relatively violent-free is that of 2015.

Thus, it is fair to stress that nearly all the elections that took place in the country, whether at the state or federal level, are characterized by massive protests and violence mostly from the losing parties. This could be attributed to the perceived rigging and inflation of election figures, especially by the ruling party. The end result of this is usually the outbreak of post-election violence that endangers lives and properties. Therefore, prior to the formal announcement of the 2015 election results; and with the ruling party heading towards inevitable failure, Nigerians and other foreign onlookers were anxious about a potential break out of conflicts, if the results were somehow manipulated in favor of the incumbent President.

In the last analysis, it is important to note that post-election conflicts in Nigeria can be attributed to a number of factors such as insatiable lust for power by the political elites which make them rig election in their favor. This alongside inadequate security, partisanship on the part of the electorates, lack of compliance with the electoral laws, lack of faith in the judiciary as well as the lucrative nature of political offices make people to resort to violence and conflicts in order to win elections. It is quite worrying that most of the political conflicts that were experienced in Nigeria over the years had threatened to undermine the corporate existence of the country as a united entity.

### **Conflict Resolution**

Conflict resolution, also referred to as dispute settlement, is said to be a sub-discipline in the field of Peace Studies. It is a process through which conflicting parties address the contending issues between them and permanently resolve the conflict. Yagcioglu (1996) describes conflict resolution as a peaceful and mutually satisfactory way to end or significantly, and hopefully permanently, de-escalate a conflict. For conflict to be permanently resolved, Oberg (1996) suggests the need to identify and recognize the conflict as what it is, so as the resolution to it will free all parties for the exploration of mutual development opportunities.

Among the ways through which conflict can be averted are avoidance of hateful speech and the use of de-escalatory language. Bambale (2006) opines that although democracy supports freedom of speech, hate speech and incendiary language should be avoided to prevent escalation of conflict. Again, people should use conciliatory and calming language so that conflict can easily be eliminated. Following from the review above, conflict resolution is, therefore, an analytical and problem-solving approach to conflict and its resolution (Mohammed 2006, p. 9).

Thus, it can be argued that it is this de-escalatory language that Jonathan used to quell the tension that began to envelop the country on the cusp of announcing the election results. But, as Adeniyi (2017, p. 200) puts it, “to the surprise of anyone in Nigeria and around the world, news broke out that Jonathan had called Buhari to concede the election and congratulate him on his victory”. Later in the day, the outgoing President duly delivered the concession speech before the media. This ended what increasingly looked like a potential socio-political conflict in the country. In this context, the use of de-escalatory language played an important role in averting conflicts.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used in this study is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of both written and spoken discourse. According to van Dijk (1995, p. 17), CDA is a general label for a special approach to the study of text and talk, emerging from critical linguistics, critical semiotics and in general from a socio-politically conscious and oppositional way of investigating language, discourse and communication. Bloor and Bloor (2007) add that CDA is a multifaceted approach as it shows influences not only from linguistics, but also from other diverse fields of studies such as anthropology, ethnography, cognitive psychology and ethnomethodology. CDA, thus, tries to explain the dialectic relationship between language, culture, society and politics. Fairclough (1995, p. 132-133) defines CDA as:

[a] discourse analysis which aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony.

Again, van Dijk (1995, p. 18) argues that studies in CDA not only pay attention to the aspects of grammar, but also to other dimensions of discourse such as style, rhetoric, schematic organization, speech acts, pragmatic strategies, and those of interaction, among others. CDA also uses some concepts to study both written and oral texts. These concepts are foregrounding, presupposition and framing. Foregrounding is the practice of making some parts of a text more prominent, so that it stands out from the surrounding words or images. Thus, to foreground a word is to highlight its importance so as to aid memorability and to invite interpretation. Presupposition, according to Ibrahim (2017, p. 186s), is the assumption the writer or speaker makes in the production of discourse, which can be shaped by social, cultural and political contexts. Framing, on the other hand, deals with how the text is presented and the perspective taken by a writer or speaker. To frame a text, therefore, means to look at it from a particular point of view, in order to bring about the hidden messages encoded in it. Goffman (1974) uses the term ‘frame’ to refer to the definitions and expectations that people hold, and use, to make sense of situations which they encounter in their everyday life. For instance, an event may be framed as a play if an audience recognize some latent signs that give the event away as a play. Based on this proposition, this study attempts to frame the selected concession speech, so that it is presented as resolving the possible post-2015 election conflict. The choice of framing as an approach to CDA is informed by the fact that van Dijk (1997) suggests that the approach

could be applied to the study of variations of style, rhetorical devices such as metaphors or euphemisms, speech acts such as promises and threats, and in spoken discourse, and also the many forms of interaction.

By critically analyzing the speech as a spoken discourse, it can be argued that the speech was meant to quell what could have been a political turmoil in the country. Adesanmi (2017, 256) notes that “Discourse Analytical Approach generally refers to a systematic description of the various structures and strategies of text or talk, and relates these to the social or political context of a people”. On the basis of this assertion, the concession speech can be analyzed as a counsel to Nigerians to embrace the outcomes of the elections and move the country forward. Being well aware of the fact that nearly all the previous elections were marred by post-election violence, the President did not try to deflect blame to anyone. Instead, he took full responsibility of his defeat, knowing fully well that his supporters will take comfort from the speech and act in accordance with the laws of the land.

### **Methodology**

The data for the study is made up of some sentences from the concession speech delivered on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017 by the then Nigerian President, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, on the eve of his election defeat against the current President, Muhammadu Buhari. Through the use of purposive sampling technique, the speech, which was delivered even before the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) officially announced the results, was selected to serve as the data for the study. Using CDA, the selected sentences from the speech were analyzed to show how they succeeded in maintaining the political unity and social harmony among the ethnically diverse people in the country, averting the purported political conflict which threatened to engulf the country.

### **Data presentation, Analysis and Discussion**

In this section, the sentences extracted from the speech are presented and analyzed. This is done in such a way that sentences that appear to have portrayed the same idea and are, therefore, capable of making the same appeal to Nigerians are grouped together. Based on this, the data is analyzed under five different subheadings as follows:

#### **Jonathan thanked all Nigerians regardless of political affiliation**

The sentences below reveal how the outgoing President thanked all the citizens of the country, regardless of political, ethnic or regional affiliation:

1. I thank you all for turning out en-mass for the March 28 General Elections.
2. I thank all Nigerians once again for the great opportunity I was given to lead this country and assure you that I will continue to do my best at the helm of national affairs until the end of my tenure.
3. I thank you all.

The speech as observed in this study began and ended with the President's expression of gratitude to all Nigerians for participating in the elections, irrespective of the party affiliations or the candidate they actually chose during the elections. This gesture from the President helped to send positive messages to his government officials, party leaders and fans who might have otherwise rejected the results and cry foul. Nigeria's political history is dominated by leaders who try to cling to power at all cost. However, contrary to this popular expectation, Jonathan decided to hand over power to the newly elected

government. According to Gumperz (1982, p. 218), “To interact is to engage in an ongoing process of negotiation, both to infer what others intend to convey and to monitor how one’s own contributions are received”. Following this assertion, it can be argued that the concession speech was positively received by the President’s aggrieved followers.

### **Jonathan declared the elections free and fair**

The following sentences show how the President himself declared the elections free and fair. This is in stark contrast to what happened during previous elections in which elections were conclusive only after the losing candidates went to Tribunal or Supreme Court and final verdict given by judges.

4. I promised the country free and fair elections. I have kept my word.
5. We have established a legacy of democratic freedom, transparency, economic growth and free and fair elections.

It is very telling to any supporter of PDP when the President himself declared the elections free and fair. This had prevented the country from plunging into potential political conflicts that could have metamorphosed into extended socio-economic crises. Busari (2017) quoted Jonathan to have said “I always say that I reformed the democratic process as a President in order to consolidate democracy in Nigeria and the sub-region. I conceded defeat without a fight because I wanted to set a standard for our democracy going forward”. Jonathan further adds that his commitment to the protection of lives and investments of Nigerian people, their assets and the economy made him concede defeat and avert looming crises.

### **Jonathan asked PDP members to be happy with the elections outcome**

The following sentences extracted from the speech illustrate the above:

6. Today, the PDP should be celebrating rather than mourning.
7. For the past sixteen years, we have steered the country away from ethnic and regional politics.
8. We must stand together as a party and look to the future with renewed optimism.
9. Although some people have expressed mixed feelings about the results announced by the Independent National Electoral Commission, I urge those who may feel aggrieved to follow due process based on our constitution and our electoral laws, in seeking redress.

It is evident that by declaring the elections free and fair as well as urging his supporters to follow due process in seeking redress, the President had successfully downplayed the severity of his election defeat. This, by extension, helped in calming the tense atmosphere that began to sweep across the country. This corroborates Gumperz’s (1982) assertion that “...individuals use talk to achieve their communicative goals in real life situations...” (p. 218). Again, Busari (2017) quotes Jonathan to have said. “My aim then was to change the narrative and prove that election related litigations should no longer define Nigeria’s democracy. People must not always go to court to obtain judgments before elections in Nigeria are declared complete”.

### **Jonathan called on Nigerians to remain united**

The following sentences from the speech manifest how the President called on Nigerian to remain united and shun any violent acts that could have undermined the continued existence of the country:

10. As I have always affirmed, nobody's ambition is worth the blood of any Nigerian.
11. The unity, stability and progress of our dear country is more important than anything else.
12. I also commend the security services for their role in ensuring that the elections were mostly peaceful and violence-free.

In Interactional Sociolinguistics, which is an approach to CDA, Gumperz (1982, p. 221) suggests that "speaking can be treated as a reflexive process such that everything said can be seen as either directly reacting to preceding talk, reflecting a set of immediate circumstances, or responding to past events". Therefore, the above sentences can be interpreted as response to the many post-election violence that characterized all the previous general elections. The president alluded that by trying to cling to power at all cost, the outcome can only be catastrophic to peace and progress of the country. In other words, by voluntarily conceding defeat, the President has saved the country from being dragged into potential conflicts. Indeed, "Interactional Sociolinguistics assumes that interpretative assessment always builds on local or context-specific background knowledge... (p.219). Thus, the knowledge that the country is usually vulnerable to crises during and after elections made the President deliver the unprecedented concession speech. Again, Busari (2017) quotes the President to have said, "Above all, what that decision did for me and the nation was to avert a looming crisis. I was convinced that the implication for peace and the economy of the sub-region and the rest of the continent could not have spelled anything but doom"(.).

### **Jonathan congratulated Buhari**

The above is shown in this sentence:

13. I have conveyed my personal best wishes to General Muhammadu Buhari.

It was via a phone call that the incumbent President first congratulated the President-elect. Busari (2017) argues that this call is believed by many to have averted a major crisis that would have ruptured the nation's unity. It is against this background that van Dijk (1995, p. 20) argues that "patterns of discourse control and access are indeed closely associated with social power". This means that while the ordinary masses have control over discourses such as conversation with friends and family members, elites have access to and control over public and institutional forms of discourse. In line with this assertion, one can argue that the outgoing President wanted the speech to be understood as discouraging his embattled supporters from doing anything that would have undermined the laws of the land. Similarly, Fairclough (1995) submits that in discourse, the subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing, and they are unaware of the potential social impact of what they do or utter; and that is why it is important to raise the awareness and consciousness of people. It is this awareness that makes people to act and behave in the right way, so that peace and harmony reign in the society.

Ahmadvand (2011, p. 82) claims that meaning is a multidisciplinary and slippery concept with amazing complexity. In other words, in this modern era, one cannot be absolutely sure about the validity of the meaning of a written or spoken text. Thus, it is necessary for someone to have the much-needed skills and expertise to understand the hidden layers of meaning of a discourse. The aim of CDA, therefore, is to attempt to reveal the hidden meaning as well as the ideological loads of the discourse. It is on the basis of this submission that this paper argues that the selected speech can be looked at as an attempt by President Jonathan to calm the tense atmosphere that shrouded the country prior to the formal announcement of the election results.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the study which sought to highlight the ways in which language can be used to avert an existential or potential conflict reveals that the concession speech—which was the first of its kind in Nigerian history—was maximally implored to prevent potential political conflicts that could have extended to socio-economic crises. The study has proved that language is a useful tool that can be used to prevent potential conflict. As a country, Nigeria has had a turbulent democratic history. The concession speech, delivered by the then outgoing President, from my findings, ended what apparently looked like potential socio-political conflict in the country, evidence that, language plays vital role in averting conflicts and in conflict resolution. .

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## Appendix

### President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan's Concession Speech

I thank you all for turning out en-mass for the March 28 General Election. I promised the country free and fair elections. I have kept my word. I have also expanded the space for Nigerians to participate in the democratic process. That is one legacy I will like to see endure. Although some people have expressed mixed feelings about the results announced by the Independent National Electoral Commission, I urge those who may feel aggrieved to follow due process based on our constitution and our electoral laws, in seeking redress. As I have always affirmed, nobody's ambition is worth the blood of any Nigerian. The

unity, stability and progress of our dear country is more important than anything else. I congratulate all Nigerians for successfully going through the process of March 28<sup>th</sup> General Elections with commendable enthusiasm and commitment that was demonstrated nationwide. I also commend the security services for their role in ensuring that the elections were mostly peaceful and violent-free. To my colleagues in the PDP, I thank you for your support. Today, the PDP should be celebrating rather than mourning. We have established a legacy of democratic freedom, transparency, economic growth and free and fair elections. For the past sixteen years, we have steered the country away from ethnic and regional politics. We created a Pan-Nigerian political party and brought home to our people the realities of economic development and social transformation. Through patriotism and diligence, we have built the biggest and most patriotic party in Nigerian history. We must stand together as a party and look to the future with renewed optimism. I thank all Nigerians once again for the great opportunity I was given to lead this country and assure you that I will continue to do my best at the helm of national affairs until the end of my tenure. I have conveyed my personal best wishes to General Muhammadu Buhari. May God Almighty continue to bless the Federal Republic of Nigeria. I thank you all.