

Language as Platform for Power and Political Control: A Critical Study of Selected Speeches of Mrs Maryam Babangida on The Better Life Programme

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Abstract

The paper focused on the role of language in creating and sustaining power relations and political control. These power relations are created, enacted and legitimized by the application of certain linguistic devices. Such linguistic devices could be seen in the use of strong and mild imperatives, enactment of lexical items with negative expressive value, use of declaratives among others. An eclectic multidimensional approach was adopted in the research under the Norman Fairclough's (1995) and Van Dijk's (2006) perspectives. These perspectives were identified to consist of the micro and macro structures that have dialectical relationship within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). These structures were used to underscore the power of language as strategy for domination, liberalism and manipulation. The paper uses Critical Discourse Analysis to underscore the role of language in creating and sustaining power relations within a defined social political context. The aim is to critically analyze the advocacy strategies adopted by Mrs. Babangida as language features and find out whether they are used as instruments of empowering women or manipulating them for political advantage. The findings reveal that the former First Lady deployed language as a platform for not only promoting asymmetrical power relations but also produced, reproduced, legitimized and maintained social structures that sustain domination and political control

Keywords: *political control, power, Critical Discourse Analysis, language*

Introduction

Power involves control, mainly by (members of) one group over (those of) other groups. Such control may pertain to action and cognition, that is, a powerful group may not only limit the freedom of action of others but also influence their minds (Van Dijk; 1998). Power is a complex and an abstract idea but has significant influence on our lives. According to Fairclough (1998:38), "power is to do with powerful participants controlling and constraining the contribution of non-powerful participants". Power is equated with influence and control (Van Dijk; 1996). Power is central for understanding the dynamics and specifics of control (of action) in modern societies, but power remains mostly invisible. Power is also encoded in discourse as a way of gaining control over hearers (Oha; 1994). Power relations in society are often manifested in the use of language – text and talk, which are the primary media of social control and power.

Wareing (2004: 18) describes power as "the force in society that gets things done and by studying it, we can identify who controls what and for what benefits". Besides the elementary recourse to force to directly control action, modern and often more effective power is mostly cognitive. This is why some critical discourse analysts (Van Dijk; 1998, Fairclough; 1989) argue that 'modern' power is mostly cognitive, and enacted by strategic ways such as persuasion and manipulation, to change the minds of others in one's own interest.

Politics is concerned with power, the power to make decisions, to control resources, to control other people's behavior and often to control their values. Politics is a struggle for power in order to put certain political, economic and social ideas into practice (van

Dijk; 2006). In this process, language plays a crucial role, since every political action is prepared, accompanied, influenced and played by the use of language. Language is considered an instrument of manipulation by politicians to achieve their set goals. Beard (2000:2) reiterates that it is important to study the language of politics because it enables us to “understand how language is used by those who wish to gain power, those who wish to exercise power and those who wish to keep power”. Language is a means of unmasking agenda of personalities whether under democratic or military regime. However, the potentialities of language to achieve all these are not haphazard. They are governed by language conventions and features that are predictable. In order for language to express all these, it must be based on functionally systematized patterns of language use and creation of meaning within a defined social political situation or context. This brings to the fore the spectacle of discourse patterns or analysis used to understand the way that language items and meaning are organized to express human thoughts and actions in the society.

This paper underscores the efficacy of language in creating and sustaining power relations by focusing on analysis of discourse structures that have implications of power and unequal power relations in selected speeches of Mrs Maryam Babangida (Nigeria’s former First Lady). The status and office of “First Lady” in Nigeria has been embraced as a sociopolitical culture and convention even when it lacks constitutional backing. The status of “First Lady” became reckoned as important and crucial in the country’s political economy in 1987 under the military administration of General Ibrahim Babangida (Iheanacho; 2016). Mrs Babangida through her structural configuration of the activities of the office under the frame of Better Life for Rural Women Programme, transformed the office and made it popular and officially recognized in the structure and chain of political leadership in the country.

However, Bujra (1986) observed that the desire to undermine the popular opposition to the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and create an alternative basis of support for its neoliberal policies, made the Babangida administration to come up with its version of populist policies that were supposedly aimed at empowering rural women. In essence, a primary aim of the regime therefore, was to use Better Life Programme to construct a new basis of popular support for its SAP inspired democratic economic transformation.

The paper is oriented towards linguistic purposes and as such is not meant to focus on the structural organization or implementation processes and oversight of the Better Life Programme. Rather, it would study the selected speeches of late Mrs Maryam Babangida as discourse processes that contain identifiable utterances that can be critically analysed as verbal forces for effecting social changes. Mrs. Babangida had been adjudged the “pillar” of gender advocacy in Nigeria. There is need therefore, to critically analyze the advocacy strategies adopted by Mrs. Babangida as language features and find out whether they are used as instruments of empowering women or manipulating them for political advantage. The paper will show the role of language in establishing, creating and sustaining power relations as well inequalities within the frame work of Critical Discourse Analysis.

Overview on Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. CDA is not only concerned with

words on a page but also involves examining social context (Van Dijk; 1993). CDA analyses discourse, taking into consideration linguistic, social and political factors with the aim of exposing hidden ideologies that entrench injustice or inequalities in order to get them resisted by dominated groups (Fairclough;2003).

In CDA, language is viewed as a social practice and is interested in the ways that ideologies and power relations are expressed through language (Baker and Ellece; 2011). According to Van Dijk (1985), when speakers and writers are able to influence the mental models, knowledge, attitude and eventually the ideologies of recipients, they may indirectly control their future action. That is, mentally mediated control of the actions of others is the ultimate form of power, especially when the audience is hardly aware of such control, as is the case in manipulation. Indeed, most forms of discursive and communicative access, such as control of setting, interaction, topic or style will be geared toward mind controlling of participants, recipients or audience at large, in such a way that the resulting mental changes are those preferred by those in power and generally in their interest.

Van Dijk; (1998) defines social power as power belonging to people who have privileged access to social resources such as wealth, education and knowledge. Oha (1994:110) reiterates that “to understand how power functions as a constraint in discourse, we need to consider the differences between the social roles of speakers and their audiences, and the implication of such social roles for discourse roles”. The wife of a military Head of State in Nigeria has power as a result of the power or authority vested on the husband. This authority or power is seen as ‘natural’ and even when such power is deployed to dominate, manipulate or influence, it is usually not visible because it has become ‘natural’ and ‘common sensical’ (Fairclough; 2003). Critical Discourse Analysis therefore focuses on the discourse strategies that legitimate control, or otherwise naturalize the social order, and especially relations of power and inequality.

Methodology

The conceptual basis to analyse the speeches is coached from Fairclough’s perspective. Fairclough’s (1995) model of Discourse Analysis operates with a dialectical relationship between the micro- structures of discourse and the macro-structures of society. The micro level is concerned with the analysis of lexical choices in the speeches while the macro level concentrates on the communicative situation and the functions the speeches are meant to perform. A critical insight into the lexical choices, mood and modality deployed in the speeches as well as their communicative functions unfold the power relations hidden in the speeches. The study will also identify and explain discourse structures that shape beliefs and ensure the perpetuation of power. Insights from Van Dijk’s (2006) notion of manipulation will be incisive to the understanding and analysis of the speeches. Manipulation according to Van Dijk (2006) does not only involve power, but precisely abuse of power, that is domination.

Materials

In this research, selected speeches of Mrs Maryam Babangida (Nigeria’s former First Lady) were purposively selected to form the data for the study. The speeches were selected from a collection of speeches by Mrs Maryam Babangida, obtained from the resources of the

library of National Centre for Women Development, Abuja. The speeches were delivered during the inauguration of Better Life for Rural Women Programme.

Textual Analysis

The analysis will capture discourse structures that have implications of power and unequal power relations in terms of power as strategies of domination, liberalism and manipulation.

Power as Domination

This strategy was deployed by Mrs Babangida to show supremacy, authority and power, especially supremacy of a particular view or belief over that of others (the women). As the dominant social group, people in power have privilege and advantage to control what can and should be said and which perspective to foreground in discourse as shown in the utterances in text 1;

Text 1

We are keenly interested in their lot in order to ensure that they achieve a better level of life – for themselves and their children. We also want to generate a new awareness, one that stresses self development for rural women, especially in the fields of education, creative pursuits and recreation.

(Opening address by Mrs M.I Babangida at the workshop on Better Life for Rural Women held at Abuja on the 14th and 15th September, 1987)

The first instance of dominance and supremacy is reflected in the lexical items; ‘we’, ‘their’, ‘lot’, ‘to ensure’, ‘themselves’, ‘to generate’. The speaker draws attention to her privileged self who has everything working for her and is now ‘keenly interested’ in the ‘lot’ of the ‘rural women’ to ‘ensure’ a ‘better level of life for themselves and their children’. The asymmetrical power relation between the speaker and the audience is best revealed in the lexical items ‘we’ and ‘their’. By implication, ‘we’ who are privileged and who have greater access to social privileges and who wants the dominated, the less privileged to see things in the light of our view. This also implies that the speaker’s children are not part of this ‘better level of life’ she is talking about. It shows there is an asymmetrical power relation between the speaker’s children and the children of the women.

Text 2

Our commitment to upliftment of their standard of living and development is a responsibility which we must assign to ourselves; and we cannot afford to fail.

(Opening address by Mrs M I Babangida at the workshop on Better Life for Rural Women held at Abuja on the 14th and 15th September, 1987).

Some lexical items in relation to power and dominance are reflected in ‘our’, ‘upliftment’, ‘we’, ‘responsibility’. The gap between the dominant and the dominated or the less privileged is best revealed in the phrase; “we must assign to ourselves”. It is an order that is common sensical and ideologically loaded. The implication of the speaker’s use of the imperatives is part of the linguistic coding of the speaker audience relations (Oha; 1994). The imperative mood portrays the power she enjoys as ‘First Lady’. In other words, the choice of the imperative mood signifies an obligation to be carried out by the ‘First Lady’ and her fellow privileged women.

Power as Liberalism

A speaker uses power to liberalise when s/he does not impose any constraint on the audience. In such a situation, the basic concern of such a speaker is to declare her/his intention and give room for the audience to freely make their decisions or choices of the views or opinions to embrace (Oni; 2010). It is an attempt by the speaker to bridge the gap between her and her audience, as in text 3;

Text 3

We are aware of the magnitude of our problems as women. They can only be solved collectively not individually. In addition, women all over the country should start thinking seriously of playing a more direct role in the political process of the country. Who can speak better of a woman's problems than a woman.

(Goodwill message by the First Lady Her Excellency Mrs Maryam Babangida on the occasion of the launching of the Ogun State chapter of Better Life Programme for the Rural Women on Thursday, 25th February, 1988)

As is evident in the text above, authority is not emphasized. The choice of declarative statement has a way of neutralizing the power or authority of the speaker. The speaker assumes the role of a speaker who only declares her views on the need for women to work collectively in facing some of their challenges especially their participation in the political process; "... start thinking seriously of playing a more direct role in the political process of the country." The rhetorical question tries to liberalise the power and prompts the women in order to get their attention in an attempt to chart a common front with them.

Power as Manipulation

Manipulation as intended here is a communicative and interactional practice, in which a manipulator exercises control over other people, usually against their will or against their best interests. More specifically, manipulation implies the exercise of a form of illegitimate influence by means of discourse. Manipulators make others believe or do things that are in the interest of the manipulator, and against the best interests of the manipulated (Van Dijk; 1996). One of the characteristics of manipulation is that it involves power and domination.

An analysis of the power dimension involves an account of the kind of control that some social actors or groups exercise over others. Such control is first of all a control of the mind, that is, of the beliefs of recipients, and indirectly of the actions of recipients based on such manipulative discourse;

Text 4

It gives me great pleasure to be on this platform this morning in connection with a workshop devoted to two important themes very dear to my heart, namely women and rural development. This workshop is unique in the annals of this country because, for the first time, it has brought together the policy makers, planners and executors of rural development programmes to jointly discuss the problems with those directly concerned

(Opening address by Mrs M I Babangida at the workshop on Better Life for Rural Women held at Abuja on the 14th and 15th September, 1987)

Mrs Babangida invokes the women's empathy by expressing 'great pleasure' and 'a workshop devoted to two important themes very dear to my heart'. Through empathy, she first draws the women's attention towards herself. Secondly, the speaker made a recall to past events noting the uniqueness of the workshop 'unique in the annals of this country' in order for the women to appreciate the fact that the workshop is the first of its kind 'for the first time' in the country. These are all clever ways of manipulating the women and making them believe she is acting in their best interest. She tried to establish common ground with the women, express an understanding and respect for their socioeconomic position and reassure them of goodwill to them. These are manipulative strategies meant to appeal to the emotions of the women in order to generate support.

Text 5

Our religion enjoins us all to seek knowledge to improve ourselves as human beings. This also is the message of the Better Life Programme.

(Goodwill message given by the First Lady, Mrs Maryam Babangida on the occasion of the launching of the Better Life Programme for Rural Women in Katsina State on Wednesday 31st August, 1988)

The manipulation is reflected in the comparison between 'religion' and the message of the Better Life Programme. The religious shared convention is implicitly used to influence the women. The comparison is to give spiritual credence and authority to the programme. She is playing on the women's religious sentiments/affiliations to manipulate and influence them.

The analysis so far shows utterances that are so skillfully crafted to dominate, deceive, manipulate and of course get the support of the people especially the women. The promises may not be fulfilled eventually but the main purpose of the speeches is to gain support.

Findings and Conclusion

The study reveals that within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, language plays a vital role in manifesting, creating and sustaining power relations in society. These power relations are reproduced, enacted and legitimized by the application of certain linguistic devices. Such linguistic devices could be seen in the use of strong and mild imperatives, enactment of lexical items with negative expressive value, use of declaratives among others. The study reveals discourse structures that have implications for power in order to uncover hidden meanings and messages that are embedded in the linguistic expressions used. The study is not merely concerned with the linguistic analysis or general discourse analysis of the speeches but probes deeper into discursive strategies for the maintenance of inequality, power relations and political control. Power as dominance is achieved through imperatives or the use of pronominal selection which enable the speaker to impose her views on others.

The application of analytical tools from Fairclough (1995) and Van Dijk (2006) theoretical approaches has enabled the researcher to describe the speeches as strong tools for creating and enacting power. The study revealed the efficacy of language as platform for power and political control through strategies of domination, liberalism and manipulation. Also that power could be enacted through the control of the mental models or social representation of other people by the use of persuasion, coercion or information giving. The research shows specifically how the former First Lady through the

manipulation of linguistic facilities reconstructed and controlled people's thoughts, beliefs and perceptions in order to dominate them. In conclusion, the speeches by Mrs Maryam Babangida were used as tools not only for gaining support for the husband's administration but also for establishing, maintaining and sustaining power and political control.

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