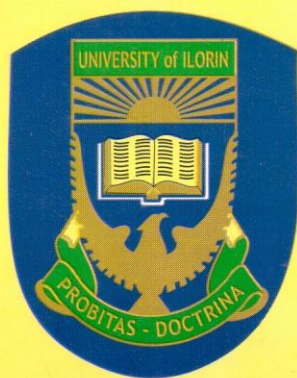


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A SPEECH ACT ANALYSIS OF ALAROYE HEADLINES ON ABACHA'S DEATH

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the employment of pragmatics in indigenous print media, using Alaroye newspaper as a case study. The study's preoccupation is to investigate the appropriateness of the language used in describing and reporting the stories concerning the Nigerian former military ruler, General Sanni Abacha, after his death. It is observed that one of the most important and interesting aspects of the potential power of the media, from a linguistic point of view, is the way people and events are reported. Linguists have been interested in the relationship between how a story gets told, and what that might indicate about the point of view from where it is told.

The theoretical framework to be adopted for this work is 'speech act' (an aspect of pragmatics; the field of linguistics that deals with language use). It is pertinent to note, however, that speech act has contributed immensely to the study of language. Every kind of conversation, either transactional or interactional, involves some speech acts, which may either be felicitous or infelicitous. Hence, the instrument used for this study is a collection of a few Alaroye newspaper publications between June, 1998 (immediately after Abacha's death) and August, 1998. The work is, at the end, intended to establish whether the language used in reporting Abacha's demise was fair or not in the true expression of the circumstances surrounding his deeds in his lifetime and the subsequent reporting at his death.

Introduction

Mass media function among other things, to educate, inform and entertain. They have also been perceived to persuade and assist in the transmission of cultures. They also play an important role in the building of the political fabric of nationhood as well as make possible the general diffusion of knowledge about life in our world. Put simply, therefore, they influence many aspects of our social, political and economic lives. Through the transmission of information from one person to another, communication brings about knowledge which is important in development.

However, the kind of communication used in most developmental processes does not bring about development. What mainly exists is a one-way flow of information from the government or policy makers to the people. These modern media of communication are usually urban-centric in nature. The language used in the media is mostly the language of the elites. Before now, most programmes on radio and television broadcasts and the greater number of newspaper publications were in English. This, in a way, alienated the illiterates, who constitute the majority of the Nigerian population (see Adesanoye, 1990:62 as cited in Adeosun, 2002:102).

Okwori (1994:14) sees alternative means of communication (exemplified in indigenous communication) as the viable means to use in a country like Nigeria which has the larger part of its population in the rural areas. Indigenous communication is seen as the solution to the problems of the modern system of communication because it is consistent with the people's tradition in developing regions. Moreover, information or messages communicated through the use of traditional forms of communication are seen to be more 'credible' than those communicated through modern mass media of communication because they are characterized by emotions, feelings, values and

social experiences shared by members of a community.

In Nigeria today, the indigenous print media is flourishing alongside its exogenous counterparts as we have the likes of *Alaroye*, *Iroyin Yoruba*, *Akede_Agbaye*, *Ajoro*, *Gboungboun* and a host of others. Hence, there is rapid development in passing information across to the people at the grassroots who are predominantly illiterates.

Selected editions of *Alaroye* – a newspaper using an indigenous language, Yoruba – constitute our data. In a nutshell, this study seeks to investigate the appropriateness of the language used in reporting the death of a former Nigerian military ruler, Late Sanni Abacha, using the Speech Act theory as a pragmatic module in analyzing textual samples of the news items.

Language and the Media

The mass media have become the principal means through which we gain access to a large part of information about the world as well as much of our entertainment. Because of this, they are powerful sites for the production and circulation of social meanings. To a great extent, the media decide the significance of things that happen in the world for any given culture, society or social group. The language used by the media to represent particular social and political groups, and to describe newsworthy events, tends to provide the dominant ways available for us to talk about those groups and events (Thomas & Wareing, 1999:50).

One of the most important and interesting aspects of the potential power of the media from a linguistic point of view is the way people and events get reported. The media have a powerful role in the coinage and use of new terms and concepts. They are sometimes responsible for ascribing labels to certain events or social phenomena, and these labels enter the language as new terms. Therefore, to carry out the traditionally instituted functions

of educating, informing and entertaining, and the social functions of surveillance, interpretation and cultural transmission, the mass media – the print and the electronic – use language as a means of reaching their vast audience. The success or failure in reaching this vast audience would depend on the appropriateness of the choice of language.

Communication, according to Okenwa (1993:66), is quite intentional. He says: "In communicating, the purpose of the communication may be to use language to inform, to educate, to persuade, to interpret, to sell or to entertain". However, a well-planned mass media message may well have a purpose but this purpose may be lost to the audience if the language does not serve as an effective conveyor-belt.

Thus, Okenwa (1993:67) submits that language, in the business of mass communication, is to be seen as a factor that should convey the purpose of the communicator. It should also be seen as how what is said is said. The 'what' of communication deals with the information, while the 'how' determines whether message sent will ever be the same as message received. Overall, language as discussed so far is the vehicle by means of which communication is effected through the mass media.

Theoretical Framework

Speech Act is an aspect of pragmatics, the field of linguistics that deals with language use in relation to users, context and certain presumptions. It studies the role of utterances in relation to the behaviour of speakers/hearers in interpersonal or interactional communication. It developed around the 1960s, most especially in the hands of great scholars like J.L. Austin John Searle, Kent Bach and Robert M. Harnish, H.P. Grice and others (Adegbija, 1999:198).

Crystal (1995:323) refers to speech act as "not an act of speech (in the sense of parole), but a communicative activity,

defined with reference to intentions of speakers while they engage in speaking and the effects they achieve on the listeners". According to Traugott and Pratt (1980:229), speech act theory treats an utterance as an act performed by a speaker in a context with respect to an addressee. Performing a speech act involves performing:

- (a) a locutionary act, the act of producing a recognizable grammatical utterance in the language; and
- (b) an illocutionary act, the attempt to accomplish some communicative purpose. Promising, warning, greeting, reminding, informing, and commanding are all distinct illocutionary acts.

They also classify illocutionary acts into Representatives, Expressives, Verdictives, Directives, Commissives, and Declaratives, the sub-categories of which they define and explain. And, according to Ayodabo (1997:134), the central point of the speech act theory is that speaker's communicative competence includes not just knowledge of what illocutionary acts can be performed in the language, but also, how, when, where and by who they can be performed. This is why Traugott and Pratt's theory also emphasizes appropriateness and inappropriateness of actions performed by utterances.

Also, Austin, in Coulthard (1993:13 – 16) theorizes that most utterances as we have them in any conversation, especially in interpersonal communication do not only communicate information, but are action bound. He refers to those utterances that convey information of statements as 'constatives' and those that are equivalent to action as 'performatives'. He demonstrates that constatives are usually either true or false. That is, they could be weighed on the truth value scale. For example, "I feel grateful" or "I shall be there" only describes or states one's feelings or disposition; and these statements could either be true or false, whereas performatives are regarded as neither true nor false, but

indicate the issuing or emission of an utterance which at the same time equals the performance of an action; for example, "I take you as my wife" or "I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth's". However, as Leech (1983:176) submits, Austin later detects a problem with the kind of acts tagged 'constative'. He is of the opinion that a statement which originally had the attributes of a 'constatives' such as the declarative "I resign" in its true nature is a performative, because it is identified with the performance of an action. For in "I resign", a person has, in fact, resigned.

Thus, Austin observes that paramount to human utterances are the acts of 'doing' and 'saying', which makes him conclude that all utterances, not minding their theoretical or formal distinctions, are performative, thereby arriving at two types of performative, namely: 'implicit performative' and 'explicit performative'. He gives examples of primary (implicit) performative as "I shall be there" and explicit performative as "I promise that I shall be there". The absence of a performative verb in one of the utterances given does not render the utterance non-performative (i.e. constative). Rather, what we have is the implicit or primary performative. But the important thing is that the two utterances constitute the act of saying and doing. Thus, Austin, having tagged all utterances performative, treats an utterance as either felicitous or infelicitous (i.e. appropriate or inappropriate). He submits in Coulthard (1993:14) that for an utterance to be felicitous and not otherwise, certain procedures must be followed as follows:

- (a) There must be an accepted conventional procedure, having a certain conventional effect, which should include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances.
- (b) Particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the particular procedure involved.
- (c) Also, the procedure must be executed by the participants both correctly and,

(d) Completely.

These procedures point to the fact that the uttering of certain words by appropriate persons in appropriate circumstances can institute the performance of certain conversational acts. He also classifies performative utterance as:

- (a) Locutionary act (the act of saying something)
- (b) Illocutionary act (the act performed in saying something)
- (c) Perlocutionary act (the act performed as a result of saying something) that is, the effect of illocutionary act on the listener

Several criticisms have been made of Austin's theory of illocutionary acts. The most important of these criticisms is that of convention. Austin asserts that the force of any utterance is a matter of convention. The term "convention" seems too general. It is true that illocutionary acts should be performed on the basis of linguistic conventions but there are some describable acts that cannot be considered as conventional acts especially in some situations where an utterance lends itself to only linguistic conventions, buttressed by pragmatic awareness. Thus, Austin does not indicate specifically what he means by "convention".

Despite Austin's shortcomings, his work serves as a bedrock for the development and study of speech acts. His theory lays the foundation on which subsequent theories were built, and several terms coined by him are still being used by scholars in the area of pragmatics.

Searle's theory of speech act was founded on Austin's. He brings a great challenge and development to speech act. He refers to speech act "as the basic unit of communication" (Adegbija, 1999:200 – 202). He also posits that "speaking a language is engaging in a rule-governed behaviour". That is, speaking a language is performing acts according to rules, and that speech acts are intentional behaviours; that for one to engage in a speech act, one's intention is clearly demonstrated in

what is said. He distinguishes the locutionary acts (and regards them as complete speech acts) from the perlocutionary acts which are the effects or consequences of illocutionary acts on the listeners.

Searle, just like Austin, also claims that speech acts performed within a language is a matter of convention. He argues that the notion of meaning can be a matter of rules or convention. Thus, he emphasizes the need to capture the intentional and conventional aspects of relationship between them in our account of illocutionary acts.

Another influential speech act schemata whose tenets are instrumental in investigating our data is that of Bach and Harnish (1979). They propose intention and inference governed acts of speech. They are of the opinion that behind every utterance, the speaker has certain illocutionary goal purposed to be achieved. They also add that communication with language is essentially an inferential process. We are made to understand that the ability of an addressee to recognize the illocutionary intent of a speaker (or writer) is based on his awareness of certain contextual features which they call Mutual Contextual Beliefs, Linguistic Presumptions and Communicative Presumptions. These three variables cohere in such a socioculturally and pragmatically sensitive order in assisting a hearer to logically draw a basic linguistic conclusion from an utterance. The implication here is that for a communicative act to be felicitous / successful, Bach and Harnish maintain that a hearer should recognize the illocutionary force of an utterance and its consequent effect.

Hence, an eclectic approach of speech act theory shall be employed in this study. It has helped in explaining how people can or are able to realize the full intent, purpose and meaning of an utterance as it is used in a given context. Thus, speech act theories have been successfully used in analyzing such texts as music, poetry, speech writings, marriage oaths, court judgments,

etc. Their usefulness also extends to the mass media especially in analyzing aspects like editorials, news, advertisement, cartoons, etc. In this study however, we shall focus on the news coverage on Abacha's death in *Alaroye* newspaper.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

This section investigates the 'acts' performed by the various utterances in the newspaper captions. These utterances have been categorized according to: (i) their functions; and (ii) the illocutionary force and/or intention behind their use. The data which constitute each of these categories will be presented and analyzed separately in order to provide for clear and lucid statements about them.

Category A

This comprises the data which overtly have elements of truth i.e. utterances which satisfy truth conditions based on the contextual realities. The bulk of the data in this category falls under statives and/or assertives. The utterances make verifiable statements about the "protagonist" (Abacha in this case). And to actually foreground this speech act intention, the name (Sanni) Abacha appears in each of the utterances which constitute our data in this category.

Datum I: *Obasanjo ti t'ewon de, oju ti Sanni Abacha l'ona orun*

Obasanjo is back from prison, shame on Abacha in his grave (June 17, 1998).

Datum II: *Olu Falae ti gbehin Abacha*

*Olu Falae has survived Abacha
(June 26, 1998)*

Datum III: *Bi Abacha ko ba ku, ogun Ojukwu iba tun sele*

Had Abacha not died, another Ojukwu (civil) war

would have erupted (June 26, 1998)

Datum IV: *Owo ti Abacha ji ko*

The fund looted by Abacha (July 28, 1998)

The summary of the stories carried by the sampled texts in this category is a mere recapitulation of floodgate of criticisms which was opened at the instance of Abacha's death, in whose lifetime, freedom of expression was abrogated. Hence, his death provided for a vent through which a saturated and condensed statutory right of expression was restored. Most of the captions of *Alaroye* at that time were essentially statives and assertives with the journalists' freedom unleashed to feed the 'information-starved' society with the atrocious acts of Abacha which they have been, for long, gagged from unfolding.

Datum I and datum II have undertones of performatives. In I, even though, this utterance appears constative, as it makes a verifiable truth-conditional statement about events following Abacha's demise, it has an undertone of expressive, depicting the writer's state of mind (which has possibly been under stringent measures) in relation to the subject of reporting. From the utterance – *Obasanjo is back from prison, shame on Sanni Abacha in his grave* – one is easily led to the understanding that Sanni Abacha was a damned enemy whose death, instead of being mourned, is turned into mockery (of his existence). The sarcasm is heightened with the use of direct speech act. This instigates a tendency for impoliteness.

In datum II also, a first glance at the expression presents it as a constative. The caption highlights the names of a key politician who was released from prison at the instance of Abacha's death. However, a close investigation of the utterance reveals an inherent performative act; the deeds done by words in context. The performative act is foregrounded with the use of the word 'survived' when essentially what the word is used to mean in

that context is its indirect expression of mockery because it is least likely to imagine that 'a jailor's' death would be mourned by the inmate who has been unjustly incarcerated.

In datum III and datum IV are clear cases of constatives. They express truth. Given the escalating crisis prior to his death, it was likely that a civil war would have erupted. But at his death, the trend in the country witnessed a sharp turn around; with those condemned to death out-living their arbitrator. A point worthy of note here is that the *Alaroye* report headlines investigated in this category all fall within the first one month of Abacha's death. So, the bottled anger and ill-feeling of the masses towards the authoritarian military boss, which could not be rehearsed when his nozzles were still emitting flames, were unleashed through the vent created by his exit. This explains why there is no tinge of face saving act, however little, in datum IV. It presents an accusation of an ex- number one citizen in a blunt manner. The impoliteness discernible from the utterance is a mutation of the ill-treatments the journalists suffered from Abacha's hands in his lifetime. Now that his fiercely blazing fire has begotten cold impotent ash, the masses (journalists inclusive) seize the opportunity to launch a pay-back attack on the deceased using the power of words.

Essentially, all the utterances in this category have direct illocutionary acts of stating as their basic function, for instance in the caption: "The fund looted by Abacha". The feature writers of *Alaroye* seemed to be conscious of the susceptibility of their utterances to various interpretations, given the background knowledge of the fragile 'unity in diversity' which incessantly plagues the country. So, as far as possible, emotive attachment is strictly avoided. A tendency of giving a balance and an objective report of the events following Abacha's death largely informed the choice of direct illocutionary acts in unfolding Abacha's atrocious acts.

Category B

Overtly and covertly, the utterances which constitute this category are performatives. Apart from generating additional meanings to what has been overtly stated, these texts rehearse what the news agency actually 'did' with words. In the first instance, at the sentential level, there are varieties ranging from declarative to interrogatory. This is a mirror of 'use' or functional load which can be superimposed on a particular structure to appropriately make the interlocutors (both present and imagined) react in a way.

Datum I. *Nje o ye ka sunkun Abacha?*
 Do we really need to mourn Abacha's death?
 (June 23, 1998)

At the literal level, the utterance appears rhetorical. It was directed to readers to inquire whether they were sympathetic to Abacha's death or not. Pragmatically, an indirect speech act has been performed with the expression. Instead of saying that mourning Abacha's death was not really worth it, the paper tends to preempt the readers' minds by giving them a 'close-up' question whose response is determinable, given the dictatorial and impoverishing rulership of Abacha in his lifetime.

This device foregrounds the illocutionary intention of the paper not only to condemn the magnanimity of his inhumanity but also to make every reader conscious of nemesis. With the world knowledge of expectation from an ideal ruler and the other side of the coin that Abacha's governance represented; and with the various pragmatic presuppositions connected with Abacha's personality vis-à-vis his heinous acts, the perlocution of this verbal act is the feeling of remorsefulness and lack of pity for the deceased which it instigates in the minds of the readers.

Datum II: *Adesanya: Jagunlabi, ekun oko Abacha*
 Adesanya: the hero, Abacha's great antagonist
 (August 4, 1998)

Adesanya is praised here as a brave Yoruba nationalist who, against all odds, stood in unequivocal opposition against Abacha's autocracy. With this utterance act, one deduces a tinge of impoliteness towards Abacha. This is because the paper maximizes praise to Adesanya and maximizes dispraise to Abacha (Leech, 1983). The inference that could be drawn here is that the directness of the act is more of face threatening than face saving. The illocution is directive as it encouraged Adesanya (i.e. maximizing his praise; by addressing him as a hero) on a certain course of (brave) action against Abacha. With the world knowledge and MCBs about Abacha's personality, the paper deemed it necessary to boost the ego of a man who was brave enough to stand in opposition to one whom everyone feared.

The perlocutionary effect of the utterance is a feeling of satisfaction on the part of Adesanya and other nationalists that their efforts are being appreciated by the people as the media generally stand as the voice of the people/citizenry.

Datum III: *E wa gbo o! Abacha ti n ya were diedie ko too ku*
 Hear this! Abacha was gradually running mad
 before *his death*
 (August 18, 1998)

The inside-story of this caption recasts Abacha's inhuman and abnormal undertakings and behaviours towards the end of his life. However, *Alaroye* chose to heighten his misdemeanour by, in a compressed form, likening him to a mad man. The potency of the power of words in this utterance is resident in one's understanding of the Yoruba worldview that gradual death befits cruel and inhuman people. So, for this nemesis to catch up with

Abacha, his same-mindedness nose-dived into insanity to foreground slow-death phenomenon. The speech act here is direct; it lacks face saving. Rather, it is an impolite molestation (dispraise) of Abacha. The illocutionary act in force here is expressive. This stems from the fact that the paper was a little 'emotional' in that Abacha's death provided a vent for the bottled anger in retaliation of his suppression, oppression and depression. At the perlocutionary level, the felicity condition of the act culminates into an appeal the caption generates for patronage on the part of the curious readers.

Datum IV: *Iyen ni pe awon Gomina Abacha le sunkun*
So, Abacha's governors could really weep
(August 25, 1998)

Prior to Abacha's demise, most politicians and military stakeholders in the political arrangement in Nigeria were forced to carry Abacha's flag as the Nigerian president in the 'pre-programmed' return to civil rule. So, the image of this class of people who claimed to pledge their supports was painted in this edition of *Alaroye* as being betrayed by uninformed sudden death of their 'guru'. And with all the havoc he has wrecked on the country, it is astonishing that those who claimed to be people-serving governors could mourn a despot's death.

This is a clear case of indirect speech act with a measure of face saving strategy. Because this set of people being addressed in this utterance were still alive, *Alaroye* tended not to be grossly impolite as the case with datum III. Instead of calling 'these governors' hypocrites that they were, the declaration is hedged.

In other words, the speech act genre here is verdictive as it measures or assesses the level of honesty of these governors. The perlocutionary sequel it instigates in the minds of Nigerian readers is the feeling of mistrust, dishonesty, sly-naturedness of

our purported leaders. The perlocution further warns readers against these wolves in sheep's clothing.

Concluding Remarks

There is a disparity between the language use in the editions of Alaroye which heralded Abacha's death and the editions six weeks later. The face saving acts and politeness observed in the earlier edition elude the later editions. This is probably due to increased awareness and acceptance of the reality that the long-silenced voices could be heard once again without fear of molestation. The intense fear which paraded the media industry in Abacha's lifetime was fast dwindling and the media could rise to attack his misdeeds with the pen. For instance, a sudden withdrawal/detachment of prefixing titles or epithets from Abacha's names at the instance of his death gives a serious implication of deliberate acts performed by the web of these varying utterances.

Though the newspapers from where our data were sourced were published in Yoruba language, efforts have been made in this paper to translate them into English for the benefit of the study without necessarily losing (extensively, if any) the pragmatic flavour with which the original texts were presented. In the analysis, it was discovered that variegated speech act forms and functions, linguistic and communicative presumptions, world knowledge amidst other pragmatic modules, serve as meaning-dependent properties of which the encoder(s) and the decoder(s) rely upon to arrive at the 'intended' meanings of selected headlines from *Alaroye*.

To cap it up, it is necessary to stress that this paper is just one of the endless explorations in the ocean of meaning. As such, it may appear not intensive in terms of depth. However, a little

effort has been made to, at least, affirm that though meaning is an amoebic phenomenon, it begins to take a shape as one gets closer to the context of use in relation to the intention of the user (s).

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