



## A critical discourse study of July 15th 2019 former president Obasanjo's letter to president Buhari

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### Abstract

Language is a powerful tool through which users can create identities of themselves and others. The purpose of this paper therefore was to examine the July 15th letter of former president Obasanjo to President Buhari. The paper employed Critical Discourse approach to deconstruct the text with a view to see how the writer used various linguistic devices as persuasive elements. It was found out that the writer employed various ideological modes and linguistic elements to successfully register his opinions. Hence, the paper holds to confirm further that discourse is indeed a social action which is usually influenced by the writer's affiliation.

**Keywords:** opinion, discourse, CDA, ideology

### 1. Introduction

Discourse analysts are usually fascinated by any piece of writing. This is because every discourse is an important material of academic and linguistic exercise. Hence, every writing is deconstructed linguistically with a view to unravelling certain hidden agenda in and around it. In the recent time, this exercise has been promoted by the emergence of critical discourse analysis; a textual approach that enables demystification of actors and actions in a text. In other words, the identities as well as the possible implicit agenda of the writing are revealed through the critical approach to textual analysis (Ameen, 2014) <sup>[2]</sup>.

On the 15th July 2019, former president Olusegun Obasanjo wrote an open letter to president Buhari on the state of the nation (Punch Newspaper, 2019). In the letter, he addressed issues bothering on security, or insecurity, in Nigeria. It is not the first. For instance, he wrote to ex-president Goodluck Jonathan (Ekhareafu & Ambrose, 2015) <sup>[3]</sup>.

Expectedly, the letter like the earlier ones, generated reactions from Nigerians of different strata. Some of the reactions have come in different forms; rejoinders, replies, rebuttals, comments, attacks, analyses, etc. some have appeared in the same form and genre of the president's letter: an open letter (Kurtis, 2019) <sup>[9]</sup>. In all of these, every writer or respondent wants to appear objective. Everyone wants to establish superior knowledge of issue being addressed thereby creating a notion of objectivity.

However, critical linguists and analysts are not bothered as they believe that no language use is objective (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997) <sup>[6]</sup>. They argued that no discourse is apolitical. By implication, there is no objectivity in any text or discourse. Discourse is perceived as a social action and every action is influenced by such factor as affiliation; political, religious, cultural, etc. (Ameen, 2014) <sup>[2]</sup>. The thrust here therefore is to deconstruct the letter with a view to unravelling some implicit issues that bother on language and language use as a vehicle to convey the writer's identity.

### 2. Methodology

The letter is analysed using critical study approach. This approach allows for incorporation of varied theories and methods of analysis. By this, reference may be made to tools in different linguistic fields, sociology, discourse analysis, etc.

#### 2.1 Discourse

Discourse is one of the most important means of expressing opinions and ideologies on a massive scale. A letter (such as the one written by the Former President) is an opinion discourse, and as van Dijk (1996) <sup>[11]</sup> put it, an understanding of opinion and what function it serves is important, because it is "by way of" opinion that the relation between ideology and discourse can be understood (p. 8).

Discourse can be defined as "the linguistic, cognitive and social processes whereby meanings are expressed and intentions interpreted in human interaction" (Trappes-Lomax, 2004, p. 136) <sup>[13]</sup>.

Van Dijk (1996) believes that an analysis of opinion must incorporate relating society, discourse and cognition. He explains that opinions are located in our minds and are a type of belief. Beliefs are held to be about what we know to be true or false and what we like or dislike. To him, opinions are usually regarded as subjective evaluations by which someone thinks something to be true yet might be regarded as false by someone else. This is to differentiate it from *knowledge*, which is the common-sense information that is taken to be true and it is not contested.

According to Cook (1992) <sup>[3]</sup>, discourse is the use of language for communication and it refers to sentences which are grammatically formed but which do not necessarily have to be grammatical.

It implies that opinion discourse is argumentative as recipients expect opinions to be defended and made plausible. The act of defending and arguing an opinion can be regarded as an ideological strategy of "legitimation" to persuade recipients to accept the opinion (Lagonikos, 2005).

To that end, arguing for an opinion would involve persuasive strategies. Persuasive communication, on the other hand, requires a change in the order of language used in order to encourage behavioural and opinion change in the recipients.

## 2.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

According to Widdowson (2007) <sup>[19]</sup>, it is difficult to give a single definition of Critical or Discourse Analysis as a research method. He adds that Critical or Discourse Analysis is nothing more than a deconstructive reading and interpretation of a problem or text.

Henry and Tator (2002) in Izadi (2007) <sup>[7]</sup> consider critical discourse analysis as a tool for deconstructing the ideologies of the mass media and other elite groups and for identifying and defining social, economic, and historical power relationship between dominant and subordinate groups (p.141).

CDA, as given by van Dijk (2001) in Schiffrin, Tannen and Hamilton (2001) <sup>[18]</sup>, is a type of 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.

As an approach, CDA goes beyond linguistic and descriptive approaches and “draws on the insight from social psychological theories and political science in order to establish interpretative links between social cognition, action and linguistic structures” (Kopytowska, 2012, p. iv) <sup>[8]</sup>, and examine “how exactly ideology shapes text and talk, and conversely how it is formed, acquired or changed by discourse and communication” (van Dijk, 1998, p.vii).

### Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in its approach to language politics and power, according to Trappes-Lomax, (2004, p.139) <sup>[13]</sup>

1. aims to lay bare the hidden effects of power, the kind of effects which may stigmatize the vulnerable, exclude the marginal, naturalize privilege and, through the simple contrivance of presenting ideology as common sense, define the terms of reference of political debate and subvert resistance;
2. draws on critical theory as well as on the various of the ways and means of discourse analysis.

CDA, according to Ameen (2014) <sup>[2]</sup>, thus sees language as a political tool. By politics, it means anything and any place where human social interactions and relationships have implications for how social goods are or ought to be distributed. It is a political enterprise in the additional and crucial sense that it is motivated by a particular political agenda; it seeks not just to understand the social world, but to transform it. To therefore understand how language affects and is affected by social life, CDA is a necessary tool for researcher because without critical analysis one cannot simply theorise about effects of language. In addition, a text analysis must consider the social conditions of production and interpretation (that is non-linguistic aspect of society) that will affect the writer and readers to produce and interpret texts in relation to their experience of the social world around them.

**Fairclough (1989) <sup>[5]</sup> recognized three dimensions of discourse which correspond to three stages of analysis. These three dimensions of any discourse are**

1. The *text* (whether spoken or written).
2. The *processes of production and interpretation* of the text.
3. The *social conditions* surrounding these processes.

**These three dimensions of discourse correlate with three stages of analysis which are interdependent. Analysis can start with any stage as long as they are all ultimately included to fully understand the meaning of a text. The stages are, according to Fairclough (1989) <sup>[6]</sup>**

1. *Description* of the formal properties of the text
2. *Interpretation* of the processes of production and interpretation or interaction with the text by producers and interpreters.
3. *Explanation* of the interaction and the social context as well as their social effects.

The *Description* stage of analysis is where the formal discourse choices of the text are analysed to uncover the lexical and structural trends in the text. He divided this analysis up into three sections: *Vocabulary, grammar and textual structures*.

The interpretation stage will look at such conditions surrounding the writer, the intended readers, the reason the text was written and the intertextual influences on the production and interpretation of the text are analysed. This will include intertextuality form such as *comparisons* and *reported speech*. The explanation stage is concerned with uncovering the degree to which discourse is determined by social structure and to what degree it supports or changes the existing structures. The discourse, at the stage, is seen either as part of social struggle or as a result of uncontested power relation in society. The aim is to reveal the *social, political and ideological effects* of the text.

One of the central objectives of CDA is considering the linguistic choices text producers make as a potential medium through which the ideology of a particular discourse situation can be reproduced (Sahragard & Davatgarzadeh, 2010) <sup>[12]</sup>. It is in contribution to this that Fairclough and Wodak (1997) <sup>[6]</sup> assume that “any part of our language text, spoken or written, is simultaneously constituting representations, relations and identities” (p.275). This means that discourse represents particular social relations between people and particular social identities.

Critical Discourse Analysis, according to Rahimi and Riasati (2011) <sup>[11]</sup>, “views language as a powerful means through which specific ideologies, identities and culture become dominant in a society” (P.1). Although Halliday’s (theoretical) linguistic framework has become the foundation of a variety of discourse analysis models, Critical Discourse Analysis is an interdisciplinary approach to text analysis. It is believed that CDA does not have a rigid framework and it is thus often considered a general methodology. As Wodak (2002) <sup>[6]</sup> puts it “CDA has not been and has never attempted to be or promote one single theory” (p.3). By implication, CDA is not a closed paradigm as one specific methodology is not a characteristic of research in CDA. It is in consonance with this that Abdullahi-Idiagbon (2010) <sup>[1]</sup> reviewing van Dijk (2000) states that “there is no unitary theoretical framework or methodology for CDA because it encompasses a range of possible approaches of analysis” (p.36).

CDA therefore is an amalgamation of a variety of sociological theories, theories on society and power, linguistic theories, etc. since discourses are made to appear commonsensical and apolitical. CDA provides some approaches to research with the primary aim of uncovering the relationship among language, society, power, ideology, values and opinions.

In sum, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a kind of discourse research which studies the enactment of dominance, social power abuse, and inequality through text and talk, in the political and social contexts. Critical discourse analysts try to understand and resist social inequality (Van Dijk, 1985). Critical Discourse Analysis is obviously not a homogenous model, nor a school or a paradigm, but at most a shared perspective on doing linguistics, semiotic or discourse analysis. (van Dijk 1993).

#### 4. Data Analysis

##### Description

**Genre:** The text is a letter. As such, it is an opinion discourse to which the writer, by virtue of citizenship of the country, is entitled. This informs continuous use of pronoun 'I'. This is in contrast to other opinion-discourse such as editorial where 'We' or 'The paper' is used. The implication here is that Obasanjo takes responsibility for all opinions expressed therein. By extension, it means "...say what you may" (para. 5), this is my opinion.

**Diction:** The letter is characterized by simplicity. Word choice is accessible. The choice of the style may not be unconnected to "...contents of this letter...should be available to all those who can help..." (para. 1). The simplicity is thus to enhance easy consumption.

**Representation of Actors:** Obasanjo's letter, as in other ideological discourse, draws division between the *ingroup* and *outgroup*; *us* and *them*. Here, the ingroup includes;

...all concerned Nigerians,  
 ...all right-thinking Nigerians  
 ...those (all right thinking) resident  
 ...all well-meaning Nigerians  
 .... all those who can help....

On the other hand, the outgroup members are not explicitly stated. Except for Boko Haram perhaps due to it being a 'common knowledge', the writer is being careful not to mention or identify any group with crisis. Where he mentions Fulani, he tries to hedge:  
 ...rightly or wrongly... (para 8.1)  
 ...is being perceived... (para. 5)

One thing is also clear in the representation of the in group, the writer uses generic term. Here, it means the writer avoids 'nomination' and uses generic terms such as "all concerned", etc. to portray fairness and objectivity. If he had used nomination terms, it would have portrayed 'certainty' as against 'opinion'.

**Representation of Event:** The letter presents a serious event of national interest in a very serious manner. The writer uses such words and phrases as

*Life and death*  
*Insecurity in the land*  
*Very serious*

*Hitting at the foundation of our existence*  
*Dangerously reaching a tipping point*  
*Civil war*  
*Crises*  
*Unfortunate situation*  
*Violent agitation*  
*Embers of hatred*  
*Avoidable calamities*  
*Force marriage*  
*Disunity*  
*Banditry*  
*Kidnapping*  
*Armed robbery*  
*Killings*  
*Rain of destruction*  
*Violence*  
*Disaster*  
*Rape*  
*Adversary*

To portray a serious issue under discussion, the choice of diction, therefore supports the earlier argument by the writer "the issue is very weighty and must be greatly worrisome" (para 1).

**Intensity of Expressions:** In the bid to further drive home the serious nature of the event, the writer uses intensifiers throughout the text. They are to convince the reader(s) to see the urgency of the matter at hand.

*Very weighty*  
*Greatly worrisome*  
*Great concern*  
*Adequate solution*  
*Very serious*  
*Very much worried*  
*Dangerously reaching*  
*So concerned.*  
*Cause maximum destructions and damage*  
*Our greatest and most important assets*  
*Very onerous cloud.*

**Modality:** The modality process in the letter is strong and of obligation. For instance,

... and must be greatly worrisome  
*It must be of great concern*  
*The contents...should be available*  
*We must understand and appreciate*  
*We must pray*  
*Must be embraced*  
*Government should open up discussion*  
*The outcome should be collated*  
*It must be owned by the citizens*

They are used by the writer to add force to the opinion expressed therein. Also, they are to portray seriousness of the issue. The use of the obligation modals is to indicate the writer is presenting his argument as the only attains to all other possible claims or arguments. He is thus portraying his opinion as being the credible one.

**Intertextuality:** Obasanjo, in order to lead credence to his opinion, adds some 'outer voices'. In other words, he makes reference to other sources:

*The recent explanation of the Chief of Army Staff for non-victory due to lack of commitment and lack of motivation on*

*the part of troops bordering on sabotage speaks for itself (para 4)*

*The Presidency and the Congress in the US have signalled to us to put our house in order. The House of Lords in the UK had debated the Nigerian security situation. (para 6)*

*some sympathetic Nigerian groups are saying "enough is enough" (para. 8)*

*Prof. Anya, a distinguished Nigerian merit Laureate, has this to say, "We can no longer say with certainty that we have a nation" (para 8)*

*...criminality is being perceived as a 'Fulani' menace unleashed by Fulani elite in the different parts of the country for a number of reasons.... (para 5)*

The references to other voices are to provide reasons readers should align with his opinion.

**Foreshadowing:** Through some lexical items, Obasanjo 'plays God' of some kind. For instance, he uses:

*all-right-thinking Nigerians....*

*concerned Nigerians....*

*well-meaning....*

to show that he 'knows' not all Nigerians or readers will agree with him. He thus expects various reactions and responses. Invariably, Obasanjo sees himself as a right-thinking Nigerian and anyone who does not feel the way he does about the issue is in the 'other' group. Those are 'them'

An obvious case of 'playing God' is in Para 3 where he says:

*...you can understand, I hope, why I am so concerned (para. 3)*

The use of 'hope' means the writer does not think or believe the President may understand why he is 'so concerned'. By all these, Obasanjo is placing or putting himself in the minds of the readers. Ordinarily, he would have said, 'I believe'.

**Passivation:** Obasanjo, in his letter, enjoys predominant uses of passives, or of sort, where actors are hidden. This is perhaps to avoid attacking, blackmailing or ad-hominem fallacy. For instance:

*The unfortunate situation is that the criminality is being perceived as a 'Fulani' menace unleashed by Fulani elite (para 5) Who perceives it so?*

*The main issue, if I may dare say, is poor management or mismanagement of diversity (para 6) whose poor management?*

These are to further portray objectivity image. And closely related to the use passives is the omission of 'your' when mentioning the causes of the current situation being addressed. Consider paragraphs 5 and 6 above. The writer could have inserted 'your' but perhaps he sees government as a continuous process without blaming anybody. Ever where he uses 'you' he makes it known that "over ten years" to mean that the President is not the originator of the current situation. The thrust therefore is

*"blame game among own forces must be avoided" (para. 12)*

However, Obasanjo, at the point of giving or preferring solution, begins to refer to the President. He begins to foreground functional term like 'the President and General' perhaps to establish the indispensable role he has to play because:

*"if there is failure, the principal responsibility will be that of the President and no one else" (para. 12)* This means

'you may not be part of the problem, only you can initiate a solution' through collective efforts. This informs the use of 'we' and 'us'.

*"The initiative is in the hands of the president of the nation, but he cannot do it alone" (para.9)*

**Implicative and Inference:** Obasanjo, in his letter, leaves some gaps for the reader(s) to fill through inferences. For examples:

*"This issue can no longer be ignored, treated with nonchalance, swept under the carpet or treated with cuddling glove (para 2)*

This means at present, the issue is being ignored, treated with chalance and swept under the carpet. Similarly, *where it may no longer be possible to hold danger at bay (para 3)*

That is, at present danger is held at bay.

**Self-Evaluation:** Obasanjo sees himself a right-thinking man and believes the President himself can vouch for that. He says:

*As you know very well, I will always boldly own what I say and disown what is put into my mouth" (para 2).*

Perhaps this is in reference to President's Buhari's statement in 2015 when he said:

*"Former President Obasanjo is a courageous patriot and statesman who tells truth to power when he is convinced leaders are going wrong"*

**Theme and Rheme:** Though there are many cases of marked theme in the letter;

*For over ten years...*

*The main issue...*

*With the death of Funke*

*To be explicit and without equivocation...*

One obvious use of 'marked theme' by Obasanjo stands out and requires a perusal:

*'...for the sake of Nigerian and Nigerians' (para 13).*

This is intended to portray the writer as a lover of Nigeria or a well-meaning Nigerian. However, a second look could be "if not for Nigeria, why would I be concerned about you?"

#### 4.2. Interpretation and Explanation

Having discussed the formal properties of the letter, this section is to briefly consider some socio-historical context on which Obasanjo's letter is based.

Obasanjo is a Yoruba man. We can then hold the death of Funke, a Yoruba woman, is the only trigger of his letter. He might not have written the letter, were the victims not Yoruba.

Lastly, Obasanjo relies on some ideological modes to persuade readers, and the President specifically. He uses such strategies as 'narrativisation' by making references to past events such as 'civil war' and 'rationalisation' by giving a chain of reasoning. These are carefully used to convince the readers and the President. For instance, the cases of rationalisation can be found in:

*...as a Nigerian who still bears the scar of the Nigerian civil war on my body and with a son who bears the scar of fighting Boko Haram on his body, you can understand, I hope, why I am so concerned. (para 3)*

*The Presidency and the Congress in the US have signalled to us to put our house in order. The House of Lords in the UK had debated the Nigerian security situation. We must understand and appreciate the significance, implication and likely consequences of such concerns and deliberations. (para 6).*

While cases of narativisation are found in: ...*which may inadvertently or advertently mushroom into pogrom or Rwanda-type genocide that we did not believe could happen and yet it happened.* (para 8.2)

*It happened to Yugoslavia not too long ago.* (para 9)

These references to past similar events as well as giving some chains of reasoning are to legitimate his claims and opinions so that readers could accept his line of argument.

## 5. Conclusion

Attempt has been to deconstruct the former President Olusegun Obasanjo's letter to President Buhari. It is basically an academic exercise without finding the right or the wrong claims. This is based on the conviction that discourse of any form could be a source of ideology through which writers portray their identities.

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