



A Discourse Analysis of Goodluck Jonathan's Response to the Kidnapping of the *Chibok Girls*

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Abstract: This paper analyses former President Goodluck Jonathan's speech in response to the kidnap of the Chibok girls in Borno State on April 15th 2014. The paper adopts Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) approach to the analysis of political discourse. This model of analysis incorporates critical discourse analysis with the analytical framework of argumentation theory based on the view that political discourse is primarily argumentative. The findings reveal that Jonathan's silence for security reasons were persuasive but normatively deficient; some of his arguments were drawn from dominant ideologies that favour the interest of his government, such as blaming the problem of Boko Haram on economic disparity as opposed to the inability of the government to win the fight against the extremists. The paper concludes that politics and political realities are largely influenced by language since it is through language that most political situations are evoked and experienced.

Key words: argumentation, political discourse, critical discourse analysis, government, Chibok girls.

1. Introduction

In modern democracies, the relationship between language and politics is inextricably linked together that it is very difficult to imagine politics without reference to the strategic use of language to persuade. Thus, when politicians make speeches, they not only attempt to persuade their listeners but also as a symbolic means of maintaining and regulating political systems. For Presidents, a speech is an essential component of governance and one of the most important means of exercising power beside constitutional and political power

conferred by law. It is in the light of this important function of political speech that this paper seeks to analyze the former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan's speech published in the *Washington Post* to defend his government's position on the kidnap of the Nigerian Chibok girls on April 15, 2014.

Although Boko Haram had targeted schools and killed hundreds since 2010 (see *Vanguard*, October 4, 2013), the kidnapping of the Chibok girls should have been prevented due to the heavy presence of security

agencies in Borno state. But the seeming lack of proactive actions on the part of the Nigerian security operatives and the government, attracted global criticisms in the social media under the hashtag: *#BringBackOurGirls* (<https://twitter.com/hashtag/BringBackOurGirls?src=hash>) As prominent world figures joined the *#BringBackOurGirls* campaign, it became clear that the Nigerian government could no longer remain silent. The former President Goodluck Jonathan had to personally address several audiences, explaining why he was silent after two weeks of the girls' kidnap and giving assurance that all efforts to rescue the girls were being put in place. The speech was addressed to both the local and international community. The response was carefully crafted to defend the government's position and interest in the crisis.

The focus of this analysis is to show the different ways Jonathan used language to defend his government's actions and inactions subsequent to the kidnapping. Some of the basic questions that are answered are (i) how does the relation of power manifest in his use of language and to what extent does this use of language capable of shaping public perception, assumption, and behaviour? What are the potentials of the use of political language in the Nigerian context to control, maintain and legitimize political power?

The paper is hinged on the broad view that there is a close relationship

between discourse and society and that this relationship is more opaque in the domain of politics than any other forms of discourse. Chilton (2004) defines politics 'as a struggle for power, between those who seek to assert and maintain their power and those who seek to resist it' (p. 3). This struggle for power is constructed and implemented through discourse and is a central process in the legitimization of political process. Even though power is legitimized through discourse, the power to legitimize and control is not exercised explicitly in discourse but is "implicit, backgrounded, taken for granted, not things that people are consciously aware of, rarely explicitly formulated or examined or questioned" (Fairclough, 2001:63). The fact that exercising power and control is hard to see only increases its strength in influencing listeners' or the readers' political thought. This indirect influence of political language on listeners or readers is what this paper argues in favour of, (i.e. that the language of politics is capable of generating beliefs, assumptions, and perceptions in such a manner as to facilitate acceptance of inequality). Thus, this paper through close textual analysis of Jonathan's speech explores the different argumentative strategies the former President employed to shape people's judgments about his government role in the kidnapping crisis.

2. Presidential Speeches

Presidential speeches constitute one of the genres of political discourse which has received attention over the years. This has resulted in the various delineations and classifications of political speeches such as inaugural address, address to party congress, campaign speech and acceptance speech. Inaugural and victory speeches have received more attention than other forms of presidential speeches. This is because of the importance of these speeches to the representation of institutional voices. Because of this vital function of presidential speeches, it has been subjected to different linguistic investigations or enquiries in African literary scholarship. (See Adetunji, 2006: Yusuf 2002; Kamalu and Agangan 2011; Ahmed 2012). Adetunji (2006) examines concepts such as inclusion and exclusion in political discourse with particular attention to Olusegun Obasanjo's speeches. Analysing the use of indexical references, the study argues that politicians use deixis carefully to manipulate their audience to accept their views on controversial issues. Kamal and Agangan (2011) on the other hand, analyse the text of President Goodluck Jonathan's declaration of his candidacy for his party's (i.e. PDP) presidential primaries. The study analyzes the text with insights from critical discourse analysis and systemic functional linguistics in order to uncover the underlying ideology and persuasive strategies

used in the declaration speech. The findings reveal that there is conscious deployment of diverse rhetorical strategies by the President to articulate an alternative ideology for the Nigerian nation. This is evident in a variety of persuasive nuances such as the appeal to ethno-religious sentiments; seeming alignment with the suffering majority of the country and the reconstruction of childhood experiences to entreat and manipulate the conscience of his party and other Nigerians.

Similarly, Ahmed (2012) examines negation in the acceptance and inauguration speeches of President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria and President Barak Obama of United States of America. The study argues that the ambiguity and lack of straight forwardness associated with the form and interpretation of negation has become a tool in the hands of politicians to conceal their intentions and consequently help them achieve political goals. The study further reveals that aside the purely traditional function of negation; i.e. that of negating the truth-value of declarative statements, negations also perform other functions such as creating common ground with the audience. It also serves as a form of mitigation whereby politicians reduce their commitment to the propositional content expressed in speeches, as well as false dilemma where listeners are force to choose between two alternatives when more than two alternatives exist. These functions

help in asserting and exercising political power more especially in controlling the content of discourse, and for power struggles.

3. Previous Studies on Chibok Girls

Several studies have examined on insurgency in Borno State of Nigeria. These include studies in political science and international relations, education and administration (e.g. Alao, Alere & Alao, 2012; Wosu & Agwanwo, 2014; Imasuen, 2015). Zenn (2014) examines Boko Haram's operation along the Borno-Cameroon boarder with particular focus on kidnappings. The findings reveal that Boko Haram had begun kidnappings as a form of self-sustainable fund raising before the abduction of the 250 schoolgirls in Chibok. Similarly, Chilwa and Ifukor (2015), analyse stance and evaluation in the *#BringBackOurGirls* campaign discourse on Twitter and Facebook. The authors adopt the appraisal framework and (critical) discourse analysis in examining the discursive features of the campaign and the role of stance in the evaluation of the social actors in the campaign discourse. The argument is that unless social media campaigns like *#BringBackOurGirls* are followed up with the implementation of strategic action plans, the process will turn out as mere 'slacktivism'. These few studies differ in their approaches; while the former is a discourse analysis of the *#BringBackOurGirls* campaign on social media, the latter deals with the sociological issues

that give rise to the insurgency. The present study is a discourse analysis of the speech made by the former President Goodluck Jonathan two weeks after the kidnapping of the Chibok girls, and their wider socio-cultural and political implications.

4. Political Discourse Analysis

Political discourse does not have a straight forward definition. This could be as a result of how the term 'political' is defined. Many political analysts (e.g. Wilson, 2012; Chilton 2004; van Dijk 1993) believe that the ambiguity of meaning in the definition of politics stems from the close connection of the term with other senses of the words such as power, control, domination, manipulation, struggle and etc. Wilson (2012) observes that when one looks at the connection between 'political' and other associated words then "almost all discourses may be considered political," because all of these concepts associated with 'political' may be employed in any form of discourse. In order to avoid such ambiguity, this paper adopts the close views of political discourse put forward by van Dijk (1993) and Wilson (2012). Both focus on political discourse as attached to political actors (politicians and citizens), political institutions involved in political processes, events, formal and informal political contexts. By this definition, the different responses given by Goodluck Jonathan to defend his government on the abduction of Chibok girls falls within the realm of

political discourse, because the President is a political actor involved in the political process of legitimizing his action after the kidnapping of the Chibok girls.

The interest in political discourse analysis has a long tradition, starting from classical Greek period to contemporary times. However, the analysis of political discourse from a linguistic perspective began since the early 1980s and 1990s (Wilson, 2012). Some well known political discourse analysis could be found in scholarly works such as Chilton (2004), Wodak (2012), van Dijk (1993), Wilson (2012), and Fairclough and Fairclough (2012) among others. In Africa, (e.g Nigeria), Chilwa (2012 & 2015), Taiwo (2008 & 2010), and Aboh (2009) have also significantly contributed to the study of political discourse.

One common theme that cuts across the models of political discourse analysis in the works highlight above is representation. However, Fairclough and Fairclough (2012) argue that representation is not a primary concern of political discourse, rather “political discourse is primarily a form of argumentation, involving more specifically practical argumentation - argumentation for or against particular ways of acting, argumentation that can ground decision” (p. 1). This model of political discourse is taken from Aristotle and contemporary political theory. Aristotle viewed politics as “action in pursuit of highest good,

based upon decisions, which are out of deliberation.” In other words, “politics is towards decision-making that can ground action” (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012:22). The nature of the speech presented by Goodluck Jonathan after the abduction of the Chibok girls, shows that the aim was to resolve the controversy involving government actions and inactions on the issue. This was by persuading the public to accept the government’s standpoint.

Power can be exercised through coercion or the “manufacture of consent” (Fairclough, 2001:9). The manufacture of consent is a language-based process of ideological indoctrination and is most cost effective among the various means of exercising power over the public by those in power. A broad consensus from political discourse analysts is that politics cannot exist without the strategic use of language. In fact Bourdieu (2000) argues that language is not only a means of communication in political discourse, but also an instrument of symbolic power by which individuals pursue their interests. Thus, the use of language by politicians is not just for the sake of distributing information, but is also strategically employed in order to control and legitimize the power structures and power relations within a particular society. Hence, the use of language by former President Goodluck Jonathan was not just to update the public about the actions his government had taken to secure

the release of the kidnapped Chibok girls, but also to frame and have a substantive implicit influence on his readers about their perception of government's role. In doing so, Jonathan illustrated George Orwell's thesis that "if a despotic government were to restrict the range of things that are expressible in language, it could restrict the range of things that are thinkable" (Geis, 1986:2). In other words, Jonathan in his speech, attempted to restrict people's thought about his actions and inaction during and after the kidnapping event.

5. Argumentation Theory

The theory of argumentation is based on the assumption that arguments pervade and partly regulate all verbal exchanges. This means that for one to speak is like to act upon an addressee by modifying his representation of the surrounding world. Through carefully planned discourse, speakers choose specific words to represent their views and opinions and convert their audience toward their preferred line of action (Kalemaj, 2014). The basic assumption is that, argumentation is used to handle the difference of opinions in a way that results in the acceptance of the arguer's standpoint by the addressee. This rhetorical procedure is especially applied in public persuasive discourse.

The study of political rhetoric touches on the fundamental activities of democratic politics. According to Kane & Patapan (2010) "public discussion and debate are essential in a democracy, and because leaders are

obliged to rule the sovereign people by means of constant persuasion, rhetoric is absolutely central" (p. 372). This view corroborates that of Aristotle in his famous *Rhetoric* where he stressed that the dialectical and rhetorical study of argumentation concerns the methods of reasoning and persuasion about all kinds of subjects in all kinds of circumstances - other than those with established certainty and knowledge where logic applies (cited in Lewinski & Mohammed, 2013). Ideally, the study of argumentation requires a mutual insight into both the methods and contents of argument which, by extension, calls for a scholar to be an expert in both the (logical, dialectical, rhetorical) methods of argumentation *and* in the respective subject theory (such as political theory, law, or medicine). Today, we can distinguish between different levels or approaches of examining political deliberation within argumentation studies such as the contemporary pragma-dialectic theory introduced by van Eemeren, and Grootendorst (2004); and the study of deliberative argumentation (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012). Lewinski & Mohammed (2013) distinguished between at least three levels of examining political deliberation within argumentation studies. The first groups according to them are scholars who illustrate largely their theoretical investigations into forms of argumentation with examples drawn from political discourse. There is

often an implicit assumption that it is here that one finds the most relevant or representative instantiations of argumentative phenomena such as fallacies (e.g., Walton and Macagno 2010). In a different vein, there are those who focus on rhetorical case studies such as Zarefsky and Benacka (2008) who move towards an Aristotelian practice of examining the details of political discourse, which is treated as the chief stage for civic argument. However, despite crucial insights, no systematic attempts at a theoretical integration between argumentation and political theory are made.

The second groups are scholars whose approaches are considered as advanced theories of argumentation. They provide a theoretical background for a systematic study of argumentative contexts, and deliberation features prominently among them. Examples include: van Eemeren (2010) and Walton (1998). Lewinski & Mohammed (2013) show that instead of being used chiefly for illustrative purposes, deliberative discourse becomes an object of consistent inquiry into the conditions it creates for argumentative exchanges. Consequently, models of argumentation in deliberative context are proposed, whether principally on empirical grounds (van Eemeren 2010; van Eemeren & Garssen 2010) or normative grounds (Walton 1998; McBurney, Hitchcock & Parsons 2007). Such studies of deliberative context allow introducing some of

their results into the conceptual and methodological framework of the theory at large. Moreover, empirically oriented researchers, originating in communications studies (Tracy 2010) or discourse analysis (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012), use methods of argument analysis and evaluation to systematically investigate the intricacies of actual deliberations. The present study largely falls under this category – they employ concepts developed within argumentation theory to analyze, evaluate, and theorize deliberative activities in a way that can not only directly further argumentation studies but also importantly complement both theoretical and empirical accounts of deliberation offered by political philosophers and scientists.

The third group that Lewinski & Mohammed (2013) considered are those that require a merger of the two theories. Their studies integrate between argumentation theory and political theory. Since the dominant democratic theory nowadays is the theory of deliberative democracy which puts arguments at the very centre of its conceptual apparatus, its investigations should also focus on such. One obvious avenue for scrutinizing commonalities between argumentation and political studies is conceptual work dealing with fundamental notions such as the rationality of political argument and political action, especially in the context of the deliberative theory of democracy. Early moves taken in

this direction by Habermas (1983) and Wenzel (1979) require a revisited inquiry that would incorporate recent developments in both fields (Lewinski & Mohammed 2013). However, such conceptual work can hugely benefit from a close examination of particular contexts for political deliberation.

This paper adopts Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) approach to the analysis of political discourse that incorporates critical discourse analytic concepts with the analytical framework of argumentation theory. This framework for analyzing political discourse is divided into three main parts: practical reasoning, deliberation, and argument evaluation using dialectic approaches. According to Fairclough and Fairclough (2012:246), practical reasoning arises in response to problems which confront us as agents in the world. Typically, practical reasoning involves arguing in favour of a conclusion (claim) that one should act in a particular way as a means of achieving some desirable goal or end. Thus, practical reasoning takes a goal as a major premise and a means-goal conditional proposition as a minor premise and concludes that given the goal and given that a certain action is the means to achieving the goal, the action in question should be performed. The actions, in other words, are intended to lead from the (undesirable) set of present circumstances, needing transformation, to the desired end. In

most cases practical reasoning takes places in a problem-solution context. The argument in practical reasoning starts with a description of a problem and then finding solutions to the problem, which can be found in all contexts that decisions on what to do need to be taken. This is why practical reasoning is a good model of political discourse analysis because politics is dominantly about decision making. Below is the summary of the structure of practical reasoning:

- (i) **Claim for action:** Agent (presumably) ought to do A.
- (ii) **Goal (G):** Agent's goal is future state of affairs G in which agent's actual concern or agent's value commitments is realized.
- (iii) **Circumstances:** Agent's context of action is composed of the following relevant facts (a) natural (b) social institutional facts E.g. Agent's value commitments (e.g. duties, promises, socially recognized (moral) value and norms).
- (iv) **Value (V):** Agent is actually concerned with the realization of V, or Agent ought to be concerned with the realization of V (V designates Agent's actual concerns or Agent's value commitment).
- (v) **Means Goal (M.G):** Action A is the means that will (presumably) take the Agent from C to G in accordance with (Fairclough & Fairclough (2012: 48).

The next stage of practical reasoning is deliberation. In deliberation, the agent is involved in deliberating on the claim for action; that is, if the

claim for action is the right thing to do. It also looks at the negative consequences of an action. Below is the summary of the structure of deliberation:

- (i) Claim for action: I (presumably) ought to do A/ A is (presumably) the right thing to do.
- (ii) Counter claim: I ought not to do A/ A is not the right thing to do.
- (iii) Goal (G): My goal is a future state of affairs G and I want G to become actual, or G ought to be realized in accordance with V.
- (iv) Negative Consequences (NS): Doing A will have negative consequences that will make G impossible to achieve (If I do A, I will not achieve).
- (v) Value (V): I am concerned with the realization of V/ I ought to be concerned with the realization of V.
- (vi) Circumstances (C): I am acting in this particular context, composed of the following relevant (natural social, institutional) (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012: 51).

The final stage is argument evaluation. This will involve asking critical questions that will reveal the structures of power and ideologies embedded in taking an action. The following are some of the questions that should be considered when evaluating an argument:

- (a) critical questions that challenge the rational acceptability of the premises (or their truth).
- (b) critical questions that can defeat the arguments.
- (c) critical questions that can rebut the claim.

6. Methodology

The data for this study is President Jonathan's speech retrieved from the Op-ed published in Washington Post of May 2, 2014. This came up after more than two weeks of heavy criticism from both national and international audiences. The republished version was downloaded from Rivers Report online newspaper (see appendix 1).

The speech was written purposely to appeal to international and national audiences of the planned action of government on the abducted Chibok girls. The choice for this speech is predicated on the fact that it is a special kind of speech (crisis-resolution) different from the other forms of speeches that have received attention such as inaugural and acceptance speeches. The analytical technique used for the study is a discourse textual analysis fashioned along critical discourse analysis (CDA) with a focus on argumentation theory. The Fairclough and Fairclough (2012) framework of analyzing political discourse is adopted. The analysis starts with the identification of the practical arguments in the text; that is by identifying the claims to action; the goals, circumstances, and values which support the proposed action, and then to evaluate the argument by asking critical questions, following the dialectical approach. The text has several components of the same basic argument (i.e. what to be done in order to rescue the kidnapped girls

and win the fight against Boko Haram), and the efforts which the government had put in place to rescue the kidnapped girls.

6.1. Analysis of Data

The main claim of the speech is found on line 14 -16 which states that “Boko Haram seeks to overwhelm the country and impose its ideology on all Nigerians. My government is determined to make that impossible. We will not succumb to the will of terrorists.” *The circumstances* are said to be the readiness of Boko Haram to “overwhelm the country and impose its ideology on all Nigerians” (line 14); also “there are political, religious and ethnic cleavages” line 25; and the existence of “economic disparities that remain a problem in our country” line 28. *The goals* are immediate and long term goals. The immediate goals are “my government and our security and intelligence services ...will not stop until the girls are returned home and the thugs who took them are brought to justice” (lines 6-9). The long term goal is the “new international cooperation to deny havens to terrorists and destroy their organizations wherever they are” (line 34).

The value/concerns of the speech is captured in line 5: “My silence has been necessary to avoid compromising the details of our investigation... I am a parent myself, and I know how awfully this must hurt.” The *means-goal* is reflected in “this month, Nigeria, Benin,

Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Britain and the United States established an External Intelligence Response Unit to share security information on such threats in West Africa” (lines 18-20), “In September, I will urge the U.N. General Assembly to establish a U.N.-coordinated system for sharing intelligence.”

6.2 Argument Evaluation

To evaluate the arguments, the analysis begins with the circumstantial premise. In the text Jonathan mentioned a lack of religious, political and ethnic harmony, and the existence of economic disparity between people. Nobody was mentioned to be the cause of the economic disparity. It seemed that “economic disparity” is something that came out of the blue, nobody was to blame for it; while perhaps it is the corrupt practices of government officials that contribute to widening this disparity. The description of the circumstances of economic disparity without an agent can therefore be challenged on account of its rhetorically biased nature; it is not rationally acceptable that an economic disparity should be without an indefinable agent responsible for it. The attribution of economic disparity without an agent as the cause of the kidnapping is an attempt to legitimize government’s policies which has for so long, not yielded any transformation in the lives of ordinary Nigerians.

6.3 Value Premise

In the speech, the former President seemed to appeal to the value of

compromising security investigation. According to him, his silence was to avoid compromising the details of security investigations. While this is a genuine concern not to carry out any action that may jeopardize the government's effort in fighting the insurgency, this did not at all address the case of the missing school girls and their hurting parents and relatives. Jonathan did not explain the connection. Addressing the parents of the kidnapped girls with discursive forms of palliative would have bolstered the image of the President more positively than what it is now. Thus, the association of silence in the midst of crisis and compromising security was a defective argument aimed at manipulating the public. This value premise was brought in to legitimize the government's silence even after three weeks of the kidnapping, and the so called government actions in the best interest of citizens, tends to draw from the ideology of the dominant ruling class. In most cases these actions are usually aimed at serving the interest of the few. The government's main claim was that "Boko Haram seeks to overwhelm the country and impose its ideology on all Nigerians" and the "government is determined to make that impossible." However, Jonathan did not make it clear if there was any difference between the past action and the present action of his government to resist Boko Haram. Moreover, there also existed no sign that the claim about Boko Haram

"overwhelming" the country was a new threat. If it was, how different was the form of resisting them different from the previous ways? If it was the same old strategy, then what made the president think it would yield better outcome as opposed to what happened in the last four years?

Moreover, the former President made his strategy for defeating Boko Haram and rescuing the kidnapped girls look like an effective means of achieving his goal. For example, his government's collaboration with the international community did not guarantee any positive result because Boko Haram is essentially an internal problem, though a global implications, whose solution lies within the type of strategy put in place locally to defeat them

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the analysis, some of the arguments made by the former president, such as being silent because of the fear of compromising security were persuasive but normatively deficient. While others were drawn from dominant ideologies that favour the interest of the government such as, blaming the problem of Boko Haram on economic disparity as opposed to the inability of the government to win the fight against them. The argument of attributing the Islamist insurgency to economic disparity also fails woefully because Jonathan inadvertently shot his government in the leg for their failure to level out such economic disparity.

In the light of these findings, one can conclude that using argumentation theory has contributed to the rigor and systematicity of critical discourse analysis of political discourse. This is evident in the way it reveals the power of social and institutional structures, manifested in the reasons for Jonathan's silence after the kidnapped of the Chibok girls. It also offers a way of challenging arguments that are drawn from dominant discourses and ideologies. For example, Jonathan's speech attempted to justify some of his past actions in combating Boko Haram. He also rationalized his future actions against Boko Haram as being credible. The planned actions were to be viewed as a way of assuring the public of the government's readiness to rescue the kidnapped girls. However, as his government made a vigorous effort to justify their policies and future actions, the arguments used in justifying them proved to be defective, which of course, aim at manipulating the public.

However, the argumentation theory may be inadequate to address some of the prevalent claims that are prevalent in postcolonial societies like Nigeria, where the claims of actions are mediated by the role of God and religion. For example, when a politician says "I will do everything humanly possible" it significantly mitigates the claim of action by asserting that the politician is only human and only God has the power to fulfil every promise.

Politicians utilize this phrase to remind people that they should not be surprised or disappointed if they fail to accomplish whatever is promised to the people. In such instances, analyzing the utterance as a claim of action may not yield any result since the speaker is not committed to the propositional content of the claim. So the notion that political discourse, involves primarily deliberations and practical argument may not be applied here. This is in the light that politicians do not need to be engaged in any deliberations or think of any negative consequences of their claims since it has already been mitigated by the role of God.

The limitation of the theory in analyzing some of the political communications in Nigeria is twofold. The first is that Fairclough and Fairclough's (2012) theory is a model that is developed mainly to apply to a crisis type of political discourse and such that a non-crisis type of political discourse may not be compatible with the model, because not all political discourse can be viewed as problem-solution type. Secondly, the theory was developed probably to address political situations unique to the western world. Hence, even though a discourse may be a crisis type that has problem-solution structure, this structure may not apply to all contexts as in the case of Nigeria. However, the integration of CDA with argumentation theory has offered a way of evaluating

arguments in political discourse that are difficult to challenge, because

they are drawn from dominant ideologies and discourses.

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