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**IDEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION OF POLITICAL OPPONENTS: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE
ANALYSIS OF ATIKU ABUBAKAR'S 2023 MANIFESTO**

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Abstract

This paper examines how an opposition presidential candidate in Nigeria employs transitivity structures to represent social problems, assign agency and construct ideological positions in their manifestoes. Specifically, the study focuses the manifesto of Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, the presidential flag-bearer of the Peoples Democratic Party in 2023 general elections. Analysis of data is predicated on a fusion of Halliday's Transitivity System of Systemic Functional Linguistics and van Dijk's Ideological Square. Using a qualitative interpretative design, the data analysed from the manifesto are six(6) excerpts drawn from the candidate's perspectives on lingering security threats in the country. The findings reveal that the opposition candidate deploys components of the transitivity structures from the manifesto particularly participants, material and relational processes to represent in-group and out--group members in relation to the scourge of insecurity in the country. The findings also show that the ruling party is negatively constructed through direct and indirect indictment while the opposition party is framed in positive light. The framing of insecurity in the country portrays the ruling party as colossal failure while the opposition candidate is positioned as embodiment of reformist and messianic ideologies needed to rescue the country from security threats.

Keywords: Atiku Abubakar, Campaign discourse, PDP, Ideology, Transitivity Systems

Proclivity for dissenting political voices is a common social phenomenon globally, particularly in relatively populous countries. Usually, similar ideological leanings within a society's political ecosystem tend to organize one another and present a united political front in order to either retain political power or challenge existing power holders. In a multi-cultural society, opposition political parties present alternative political worldview to jostle for political offices and position themselves as better placed to enable dividends of democracy trickle down to the common man. By so doing, they put government in power on its toes. In this connection, Linberg (2024) observes that democracy as it is generally understood today requires both public engagement and competitions and thereby gives the electorate a choice of options. Choices not only strengthens democratic norms but also serve as catalyst to socio-economic development. Thus, Dennis (2020) argues that opposition political parties play crucial role in ensuring accountability and democratic growth by scrutinizing government decisions, policies and (in) actions. Similarly, Dahl (2019) submits that opposition, and when need be, criticize what government does and present alternatives. He goes further to point out that this is especially important in the circumstances of democratic transition, when authoritarian precedents and habits may still significantly shape the behavior of the ruling party.

In spite of the significant roles played by opposition parties in modern democracies as pointed out above, scholarly attention has tilted more in the direction of political discourse emanating from the ruling parties. In Nigeria, political oppositions have enjoyed less scholarly attention. More worrisome is less attention on the use of language by opposition political parties in their discourse to ventilate perspectives on socio-political realities of the country. One of the communication channels through which opposition political parties use language to engage the electorate, express their ideological positions on social realities and challenge the government in power is the use of campaign manifestoes. However, campaign manifestoes have received scanty scholarly attention.

This study is therefore aimed at conducting a transitivity system analysis of how opposition political party manifesto during the 2023 presidential elections encode ideological representation of the lingering national insecurity. The objectives of this are to investigate: (1) how participants in the manifestoes are represented and (2) ideological implication of the participants' representation. Specifically, the focus of the study is the manifesto of Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, the presidential flag bearer of Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in 2023 general elections. The study is significant as it helps to project the voice of opposition candidates in Nigeria as critical stakeholders in the political system of the country.

A Brief Biography of Alhaji Atiku Abubakar

Atiku Abubakar was born in Jada, Adamawa State on 25 November, 1946. He has Master of Arts degree in International Relations from Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge, United Kingdom in 2021. He is a politician and a businessman. He was a former vice president of Nigeria in the administration of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo from 1999 to 2007. Before his nomination as a running mate to Chief Obasanjo, he had won the governorship election of Adamawa State under the banner of Peoples' Democratic Party in 1998. Atiku Abubakar ran for the seat of Nigerian President five times unsuccessfully. For instance, he was also a presidential candidate of the Action Congress in the 2007 presidential election finishing as third to Umaru Yar'Adua of the PDP and Muhammadu Buhari of the ANPP. Alhaji Atiku contested the presidential primaries of the Peoples' Democratic Party for the 2011 presidential election and lost to President Goodluck Jonathan. He Joined the All Progressives Congress in 2014 preparatory to 2015 general elections and was defeated by General Muhammadu Buhari at the presidential poll. He rejoined PDP in 2017 and emerged as the party's presidential flag bearer but lost to President Buhari in 2019 presidential election. In May 2022, Alhaji Atiku was again nominated as the Peoples' Democratic Party Presidential flag bearer for the 2023 elections but lost to Bola Ahmad Tinubu. At present, he is the presidential candidate for African Democratic Congress in the upcoming 2027 general elections next year.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical discourse analysis looks beyond what is said in a text. It goes further to question why it is said, who benefits, and what assumptions or ideologies are embedded in the text. According to Van Dijk (2015), CDA 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. He points out the central goal of such research, emphasizing that with such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose and ultimately resist social inequality. Similarly, Bevitori, 2026; Berkovich & Benoliel, 2024 posit that critical discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary approach to discourse that critically examines how language and other forms of meaning-making are implicated in the exercise, reproduction, legitimation and contestation of power and ideology within particular socio-political contexts. They contend that it therefore moves beyond the description of linguistic structures to explain how discourse contributes to the construction of social realities, identities, relationships and power relations.

Ideology in Political Discourses

Beyond the surface meaning associated with linguistic components of a text, there is always a second layer of embedded meaning, the demystification of which reveals the fullest intent of the text. Typically, political discourses are replete with such underlying intents. Usually such intents are used to keep politicians relevant to the electorate. Hartmann (2015) defines ideology in terms of its functions in a political party. For him, ideology connotes the programmes that political parties present to the electorate, the tasks they perform as organizations and the functions to perform when in government. There is a strong nexus between ideology and the governance of a society. Thus, Odunze (2020) maintains that ideology refers to ideas and guiding principles about how society should be organised in order to achieve the common good. Omotola (2021) sees ideology as a set of ideas about politics, all of which are related to one another and that modify and support each other.

Related Studies

A plethora of studies have been conducted on the politicians' use of language in their discourse to express opinions on issues of social concerns. For instance, Wahab (2013) examined the significance of political opposition within the Nigerian democratic system. The study explored both the legal foundations and the philosophical justification for the existence of opposition parties, with particular attention to the Nigerian political environment. The findings indicate that opposition parties are subjected to various forms of suppression that constrain their effectiveness. Wahab concludes that a vibrant opposition is indispensable to the proper functioning of representative democracy because it strengthens accountability and governance. According to the study, opposition parties encourage greater citizen participation in public affairs, bring critical political issues to the attention of both government and the electorate, promote issue-based electoral competition rather than campaigns driven by ethnic, religious, tribal, or gender considerations, and providing a credible alternative government. The difference between Wahab (2013) and the present study lies in the fact that while the former focus more on the relevance of opposition political parties in the country, the latter focuses more on the transitivity patterns in the use of language in the manifestoes Atiku's manifesto in the build up to Nigeria's 2023 presidential elections.

Joshua (2020) also examined opposition political discourse through a Critical Discourse Analysis of Nana Akufo-Addo's manifesto in Ghana. The study investigated how the opposition leader strategically employed language to construct identity, foster solidarity with the electorate, and persuade citizens to endorse his

political vision and support his candidacy. Guided by Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA, the analysis found that the repeated use of personal pronouns such as I, you, we, and our, together with deliberate repetition, enabled the speaker to project a positive self-image, strengthen his relationship with the audience, and promote a sense of collective identity.

The present study chooses to use Van Dijk model of critical discourse analysis unlike the Fairclough's three-dimensional model of the theory adopted by the study above. Van Dijk's model places more emphasis on contextualization which is critical to an in-depth understanding of the social, political, and historical context within which the opposition party speeches are delivered. Besides, the present study is intended to do a critical examination of the use of language in the manifesto of a presidential candidate from opposition political parties in Nigeria unlike the study above which focused only a candidate in Ghanaian politics.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a fusion of Michael Halliday's Ideational Metafunction component of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Teun van Dijk's model of Critical Discourse Analysis, particularly his ideological square component. Ideational metafunction component of SFL, as described by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), is concerned with construing human experience through language. In this regard, ideational metafunction captures how language at micro level of analysis answers question pertaining to what is happening? Who is doing what? Who and what is affected? Who is saying, thinking, or feeling something? What is being described or identified? , Where, when, why and how does the event occur? While Halliday's ideational metafunction examines linguistic representation of the questions raised, Van Dijk model of CDA looks at other layer of meaning beneath linguistic representation of human experience in social engagement, more especially at the macro level of analysis. The model reveals more about the candidate's intentionality in the deployment of linguistic structures in a given discourse. The fusion of the two analytical tools is therefore appropriate in this study as intended messages in political manifestoes are conveyed through the use of language to construct social experiences of the target audience, and beyond this, the language used in manifestoes equally carries political ideological undertones of political candidates.

Methodology

This study adopts qualitative research design. Its analysis is anchored on a blend of Halliday's ideational metafunction of Systemic Functional Linguistics and Ideological Square of Teun van Dijk model of Critical Discourse Analysis. The choice of the fusion is to allow for micro and macro levels of analysis of the candidate's messages in the manifesto. The study focuses only the manifesto of Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, the presidential flag bearer of the Peoples Democratic Party in 2023 general election. The manifesto was downloaded from <https://www.nairaland.com>. Only six (6) excerpts focusing on spate of insecurity in Nigeria were analysed from the manifesto and the reason for this is that security threat is one of the major existential problems confronting the Nation. The data used were presented to identify ideational metafunction elements in the manifesto and how they help to construct the prevailing security challenges in the country. This was followed by analysis of ideological implications of linguistic representation of the problem by the candidate.

Data Presentation and Analysis

For more than a decade, Nigeria has been grappling with security threats in different parts of the country. The threats have assumed a hydra-headed proportion that has triggered lamentation in public discourse. As critical stakeholders, political actors, particularly from opposition construe the phenomenon as opportunity to score political points by faulting lackluster roles being played by political party in power in stemming the menace. In this connection, the presidential flag bearer of the PDP in 2023 general elections, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar in the party's manifesto ventilates his perspectives as follows:

Excerpt 1

National security is about ensuring the reign of peace and stability

All the three ideational metafunction elements of SFG are in the clause above. The participants are Carrier and Attribute/ Goal and an implicit Actor. The Carrier is the nominal group "National Security" while the Attribute/Goal is the quality or defining feature assigned to the Carrier which is: **"ensuring the reign of peace and stability"**. The implicit Actor is the unnamed entity which is to carry out the action of *"ensuring"* the attribute and goal mentioned in the clause (peace and stability) and this is an indirect reference to the political leadership which opposition party represent. **National security**, as a participant in the clause is foreground to indicate how central and important it is for the country to attain and concretize its fullest potentials. There are two process types used in the clause. These are relational process and material process. The relational process is the verb **"is"**. In the context of its use, the relational process is used in the manifesto to succinctly define what national security means, indirectly pointing out the symbiotic and complementary role of *peace and stability* before security can be achieved. The material process used is the gerund verb **"ensuring"**, an action-oriented verb which lexicalizes all that the relevant authorities need to do to make the country peaceful and stable

There are *three participants* in the clause. These are Carrier and Attribute and Goal. The Carrier is the nominal group **"National Security"** while the Attribute is the quality or defining feature assigned to the Carrier which is: **"the act of ensuring peace and stability"**. The attribute **"peace and stability"** is also the Goal of the verb "ensuring" The linguistic element under the classification of **circumstance** is the preposition *"about"*. In the context of its use in the clause, it creates and establishes a nexus between the Carrier "National security" and the Attribute "peace and stability". The process type and the participant elements in the clause construct the problem (e.g., National Security) and frame the necessary societal requirements to achieve it (e.g., Peace and Stability).

By this framing, national security is ideologically constructed as prerequisite for peace and stability in the country. Invariably, the opposition candidate conceives peace and stability as achievable for as long as the country vested authority activates conditions for its sustenance. In the framing, there is an underlying ideological representation of the ruling party as ineffectual as regards keeping the country stable and peaceful, and a construction of the opposition as better alternative capable of restoring enduring peace in the land. This amounts to indirect de-marketization of the ruling party and a positive –self representation of the opposition.

Excerpt 2

The current security challenges facing Nigeria can be attributed to a large number of factors including high rate of unemployment, especially among youth, illiteracy, extreme poverty, bad governance, discrimination and politics of exclusion and religious extremism.

Through the use of transitive structures in the ideational metafunction: **Participant** (*The current security challenges facing Nigeria*), which serves as *Carrier*; **Relational process** (can be attributed to) and the **Attributes** (*a large number of factors including high rate of unemployment, especially among youth,*

illiteracy, extreme poverty, bad governance, discrimination and politics of exclusion and religious extremism), the PDP in the excerpt above reveals **partisan and reformist ideologies**. By unveiling some of the root causes (the attributes) of insecurity in the country, the party positions itself as displeased with the current political leadership at the center, under whose watch the causative factors are allowed unaddressed. The displeasure represents **partisan ideology**. Through identification of the causative factors, the opposition party presupposes that the party is ready to uproot the factors and return the country to an era of sustainable peace and stability. This smacks of **reformist ideology** as it indirectly projects the opposition positive image while the ruling party is negatively represented.

In addition to the factors identified above and for which partisan and reformist ideologies are revealed, the PDP manifesto also reveals some ideologies in excerpt 3 which focuses some other causes of insecurity in the country as analysed below.

Excerpt 3

There are also the issues of climate change, porous nature of Nigeria borders, increasing population explosion, hardship occasioned by economic recession and illicit proliferation of small arms and weapons.

The transitivity structures in the excerpt above include: Existential process type in the verbal group “*There are...*”, the **circumstance component** in the additive adjunct “*also*” and the **Participant component** is the complex structure “*the issues of climate change, porous nature of Nigeria borders, increasing population explosion, hardship occasioned by economic recession and illicit proliferation of small arms and weapons.*” Issues raised in the excerpt through the transitivity structure above reveal two ideological positions of the opposition party (PDP). These are *Critical Ideology and Reformist Ideologies*. While climate change is a global phenomenon for which countries around the world have deliberated at several international fora on why nations should find ways of drastically reducing carbon emissions into the atmosphere to protect ozone layer to mitigate the change, other factors mentioned like porous borders, increasing population, economic recession and illicit proliferation of small arms and weapons are within the purview of what a responsible and responsive government should be able to tackle. By framing these factors as part of triggers of insecurity, the opposition is being **critical** about the past and ruling parties’ failure to have them tamed and managed. Porous borders for instance give room for infiltration of the country’s borders, facilitating the smuggling in of contraband goods including small arms and weapons with which unscrupulous elements torment the country. The porosity the borders raises questions bothering on efficiency of government officials detailed to man them and seriousness of government at the center to **wield big stick** where and when necessary to checkmate cases of sabotage from designated government officials in charge of the borders. In addition, while economic recession as a global phenomenon cannot be completely blamed on the country’s government alone, the impacts become more pronounced in the Nigerian context given the country’s fixation on oil as the main source of revenue. The concerns, as raised in the excerpt signify **Partisan ideology** on the part of the opposition party and by blaming the factors as part of causative agents, the party (PDP) indirectly constructs itself as **reformist** waiting to be given political opportunity to address the issues raised in the excerpt.

Excerpt 4

Our objective is to contain the current challenges of security in Nigeria through deployment of good governance, visionary leadership and politics of inclusiveness

The participants in the transitivity structure of ideational metafunction component of the excerpt above are: the possessive noun “*our objective*”, the nominal group “*...the current challenges of insecurity in Nigeria*” which represents the **goal** of the excerpt. There are two processes in the transitivity structure and these are:

the relational process “*is*” and the **material process** in the verbal group “*to contain*” The circumstance component of the structure is the adverbial structure of manner “*through deployment of good governance, visionary leadership and politics of inclusiveness*”

Through the agency of the transitivity structures, the opposition party in the excerpt shifts the blame of insecurity in the country from the known non-state actors and indirectly puts the fault on the past and the ruling party's door steps for not ensuring good governance, failing to be visionary and instituting politics of exclusion. By making its objective opposite of all these attributes, the party ideologically sounds **partisan** and constructs itself as embodiment of **reform** which entails the attributes---good governance, visionary leadership and entrenchment of inclusive government. Through convert **partisan and reformist ideologies** in the excerpt, the opposition party (PDP) ultimately positively represents itself and negatively frames the party in power.

Moreover, the PDP candidate identifies absence of cooperation and coordination among the security forces in the country as part of the factors responsible for the forces' inability to end the spate of insecurity in the country and proposes to reverse the order. Again, the lamentation and proposed remedy reflect some of the party's ideological tilts as explained below.

Excerpt 5

We intend to restructure and decentralize security institutions by tackling the issue of non-cooperation and coordination among security agencies through technology

There are 3 **participant** related elements in the transitivity structures of the excerpt above. These are: the inclusive pronoun “*We*” which serves as the senser in the excerpt. There is also the nominal group “*security institutions*” representing the **goal** of the clause, and another complex nominal group “*the issue of non-cooperation and coordination among security agencies*” The excerpt contains **a mental process**, “*intend*” and three material processes: *restructure, decentralize and tackling*” The **circumstance component** of the transitivity structure is the adverbial structure “*through technology*”

The transitivity structures as identified are used by the opposition party to lament on non-cooperation and coordination among security agencies and to this end, the party proposes to tackle the problem through restructuring and decentralization of the forces. The framing of the excerpt presupposes that the agencies have been operating at cross- purposes, representing a recipe for potential and actual failure being witnessed in their fight against the enemies of state. Beyond the surface message in the excerpt, there are two underlining ideologies. In this regard, through the use of processes “*restructure and decentralize*” in the excerpt, the party expresses **partisan ideology** by indirectly accusing the ruling party of keeping the security agencies in such a structure that prevents the nation from getting the best of their potentials. The partisan position is further heightened through the claim that there is a need to tackle the issue of non-cooperation and coordination, a portrayal of a security force in “**operational disarray**”. Besides, there is an ideological portrayal of the opposition party in the excerpt as **reformist** through the proposal to restructure, decentralize and forge synergy among the security forces to optimize their performance.

In addition to forging cooperation among the security forces in the country, the opposition party (PDP) proposes to expose the forces to contemporary trends in security management. This is captured in the excerpt below.

Excerpt 6

We intend to train and retrain all cadres of security personnel mandatorily to expose them to trends in contemporary security management.

The transitivity structures of the excerpt above include: the inclusive pronoun “*we*”, as part of participants, the nominal group “all cadres of security personnel” as **goal** and another nominal group “*trends in contemporary security management*”. As can be noticed, the excerpt contains three processes in the transitivity structures. These are: “*intend*” (**mental process**), “*train*” and “*retrain*” (**material processes**). The **circumstantial component** in the structure is the adverb of manner “*mandatorily*”

Together, the structures indicate that updating the combat readiness of the nation’s security personnel through training and exposure to trending security management strategy is the main focus of the excerpt above. The idea of training and retraining and the need to get the security personnel exposed to contemporary trends in security management, as framed in the excerpt presupposes that such training and exposure are lacking in the nation security architecture. This is an indirect indictment of the ruling party, and a demonstration of *partisan ideology* on the part of the opposition party. Moreover, the proposal in the excerpt paints a picture of an opposition bringing *reform* to the armed forces to ensure optimal delivery of security personnel’s mandate. To Nigerians, yearning for a permanent end to insecurity in the country, the party, through the reform proposed, is constructed as **messiah** capable of transforming the security personnel to world class security officers strong enough to rescue the nation from the clutches of the insecurity elements.

Conclusion

In this study, attempt has been made to prove that the true meaning of a text goes beyond its linguistic components and that language used by politicians carries far more ideological implications than what appears on the surface. It has been established through analysis of excerpts in the opposition party manifesto that while addressing existential realities, politicians use language in their political discourse to paint a positive image about themselves and at the same time de-marketize their political opponents through placing emphasis on perceived weaknesses of the latter. This study has therefore demonstrated how Atiku Abubakar’s 2023 presidential election manifesto employs discourse to construct political opponents and advance a particular ideological representation of Nigeria’s political situation. The analysis shows that the manifesto combines negative representations of the incumbent administration with positive self-representation of the opposition through strategies of criticism, comparison, evaluation and legitimization. These strategies enable the candidate to portray the existing political order as ineffective while presenting his political platform as a credible alternative. From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, the findings illustrate how linguistic choices in electoral manifestoes function beyond the communication of policies: they participate in ideological struggle, the allocation of responsibility and the construction of competing political identities. The study consequently highlights the value of examining political manifestoes as ideological texts through which candidates seek to influence citizens’ perceptions of political actors and social realities.

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