

A SPEECH ACT ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC SPEECHES OF THREE AFRICAN PRESIDENTS AMID COVID-19

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ABSTRACT: *Public speaking affords a leader an opportunity to address the people he is leading. Using the theoretical framework of Speech Acts, the researcher analyzes the speeches of three African Presidents namely: Muhammadu Buhari (of Nigeria), Akufo-Addo (of Ghana) and Cyril Ramaphosa (of South Africa). The speeches selected were delivered during the coronavirus pandemic. The result of the study showed that the three presidents used performative and constative acts to command, request, urge, appeal, direct and inform their people on the issue of covid-19, its damaging effects and the measures that would help to combat the disease. It was discovered that some of the performative acts were carried out under essential and sincerity conditions.*

KEYWORDS: speech acts, public speech, coronavirus disease, performatives, sincerity conditions

INTRODUCTION

Speech act theory assumes that utterances are actions in themselves capable of producing enormous and far-reaching results or consequences on the hearer. Such acts can affect our whole lives, deny us or restore our freedom, make us to be committed to a course of action, urge us to carry out a piece of instruction or change an existing state of affairs (Ezeifeke, 2018). It is based on such assumptions that the present researcher undertakes the onerous task of analyzing the speeches of three African Presidents-Muhammadu Buhari (of Nigeria), Cyril Ramaphosa (of South Africa) and Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo (of Ghana). It must be pointed out that language is the vehicle through which speech acts are performed. The three presidents employed the English language to address their citizens on issues that relate to the coronavirus pandemic, the ravaging effect of Covid-19, the precautionary measures to be taken in order to avoid the continual spread of the virus.

The present researchers therefore, investigated how these African presidents have performed verbal actions such as performative utterances (implicit and explicit) and their uses of constatives, so as to identify the type of speech act; locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts used. The rationale behind the study therefore was to discover how the use of language have helped these presidents to instruct, direct, and inform the populace and the attending semantic and pragmatic effects of such speeches. To achieve the purpose of the study, the researchers also

analyzed the public speeches of these presidents so as to identify the textual and contextual (felicity) conditions necessary for realizing performative utterances. Given the importance of public speaking, a study of this kind is imperative since the speeches were delivered at the time the countries were undergoing the ravaging effect of covid-19 pandemic.

Conceptual Framework

Public Speaking

It was Lucas (2007) who captured vividly the essence of public speaking when he said:

In classical Greece and Rome, public speaking played a central role in education and civic life. It was studied extensively. Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, composed during the third century B.C.E., is still considered the most important work on its subject, and many of its principles are followed by speakers (and writers) today (6).

Lucas buttressed that 'throughout history, people have used public speaking as a vital means of communication. ...one who forms a judgement on any point but cannot explain it clearly might as well never have thought at all on the subject (4)'. Public speaking is the act of delivering a speech to listeners and it can date back to ancient Greece 2,000 years ago. This kind of speech is deliberately consisted of three general purposes: to inform, to persuade and to entertain. Public speaking is generally concerned as formal, face-to-face speaking of an addresser to a numerous of listeners (LIN Haoming, 2019). Public speaking therefore, is a vital means of civic engagement. It is a way to express one's ideas and to have an impact on issues that matter in a democratic society. Considering the role of language in speech delivery, the present study examines how the three Presidents-Muhammadu Buhari (of Nigeria), Cyril Ramaphosa (of South Africa) and Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo (of Ghana) have employed pragmatic and syntactic techniques to deliver their speeches in their various countries. The research is a form of comparative linguistic analysis to determine how the three presidents have used language in their bid to cushion the ravaging effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

Role of Language

Language is a means of communication but what is normally conveyed in language use is not words and sentences but a message. The implication is that language cannot stand on its own apart from the function of conveying messages. Ugwuanyi and Omeje, (2013), affirm this fact when they said that:

With the increasing status of English in this period of globalization, English has become an important tool without which it is impossible to open the door of many opportunities that are available to us. The lubricants and characteristics of globalization technology and the domineering position of the English language in the new world order. To participate in the global world, nations, institutions, groups and individuals have to prove that they qualify (37).

The English Language is an indispensable tool for national unity, integration and global communication. Baldeh referred to it as "a window on the world" (7). The three countries under investigation: Nigeria, Ghana and South Africa use English as a second language due to the

multilingual nature of the nations and English performs a unifying role. In Nigeria, Ghana and South Africa, English language serves as a national official language, a language for general and specialized education, a language for assimilation and a language for integration. English is the language used by the three presidents to address their nation. During Covid-19 pandemic, President Buhari addressed Nigerians on 27th April, 2020, President Cyril Ramaphosa addressed South Africans on 15 March 2020, while President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo addressed Ghanaians on 10th April, 2020.

Language therefore, in its spoken and written form is a means of communication. It is the means of giving and getting different amounts of information and various characters and qualities of communicated messages at one time, which is conditioned by many factors such as the time, place and subject matter of what is being transmitted from the addresser to the addressee in a particular situation. The essence of language is communication but the manner in which language communicates appears to be interlinked with individual experiences in terms of linguistic attitude, cultural influences and personal perception. Since this study depends largely on the field of political discourse (register), it is therefore expected that there should be peculiarities in the way the three presidents have used the English language. After the review of previous studies, the researcher discovered that no study has been carried out on the speeches delivered by the three African Presidents during the coronavirus pandemic. This is indeed, the gap in knowledge which the present study has come to fill.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Speech Acts

Speech act theory forms the theoretical framework for the present research. This theory was introduced by Oxford philosopher J.L. Austin (How to Do Things with Words, 1962) and was further developed by American philosopher J.R. Searle. In linguistics, a speech act is an utterance defined in terms of a speaker's intention and the effect it has on a listener. Speech acts are verbal actions happening in the world. In his debate with Searle, Derrida (1982) stressed the degree to which language is independent of the intentions of its speakers. What Derrida calls the *iterability* of language means that because any given utterance must draw on a pre-existing linguistic system and thus can never be fully determined by or confined to the specific circumstances in which it is uttered, it is always vulnerable to being taken out of context, being cited rather than used, taken in jest rather than in seriousness, and so forth.

According to David Crystal (1997), several categories of speech acts have been proposed, viz. directives (speakers try to get their listeners to do something, e.g. begging, commanding, requesting), commissives (speakers commit themselves to a future course of action, e.g. promising, guaranteeing), expressives (speakers express their feelings, e.g. apologizing, welcoming, sympathizing), declarations (the speaker's utterance brings about a new external situation, e.g. christening, marrying, resigning). J.R. Searle, speech-act theory considers the levels of action at which utterances are said to perform: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary.

Locutionary act is the act of saying something with meaning and truth value. It is the speaker's intention to say something that is meaningful. The acts involved here are: phonic act (with regard to phones; phonetic), phatic act (with regard to vocabulary) and the rhetic act (with regard to meaning). The illocutionary act is the action one performs in saying something. Here, utterances could be tilted towards: directing, commanding, promising, persuading, ordering etc. perlocutionary act on the other hand, deals with how the speaker tries to affect his listener/audience. The present researcher bearing these acts in mind, analyzes the speeches of the three African presidents.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher analyzes the speeches delivered by three African presidents during the coronavirus pandemic. Buhari's speech focused on '*The Cumulative Lockdown Order of Lagos and Ogun States as well as The Federal Capital Territory On Covid- 19 Pandemic*' delivered on Monday, 27th April, 2020. The Ghanaian President's speech delivered on 10th April, 2020 was captioned: '*Akufo-Addo's sixth address on measures taken against spread of coronavirus*' while the South African President's speech was captioned: '*South Africa's answer to Covid-19*' and it was delivered on 15th March 2020. The researcher analyzes such speeches using speech act theory.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Phonetic Dimension

LIN Haoming (2019) stressed that 'like many singers and actors, speakers always pay a lot of attention to the rhythm, tone, stress, stop of an expression, while fluency is also an important factor (76)'. Aside the production of phonemes, there are supra-segmental features that accompany speech. These are stress, intonation, and rhythm. The speeches analyzed embody these phonetic features. The use of alliteration, metaphor, repetition etc

Use of Metaphor

In an essay entitled 'What Metaphors Mean', Donald Davidson (1978), claims that 'metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation mean and nothing more (quoted in M. H. Abrams, 2012)'. The question of metaphor is pragmatic, not semantic; that is, it is the use of a literal statement in such a way as to suggest, or intimate, or lead us to notice what we might otherwise overlook (214). However, Lakoff and Turner (1979), view metaphor as 'a projection and mapping across what they call conceptual domains, that is, its use is basically a cognitive mental process, of which the metaphorical word, phrase, or sentence is only the linguistic aspect and expression'. A conceptual view of the term 'metaphor' claims that the ordinary use of language is pervasively and indispensably metaphorical and that metaphor persistently and profoundly structures the way human beings perceive, what they know, and how they think. In consonance with his overall speech act theory, Searle proposed that to explain metaphor, we must distinguish between word and sentence meaning (what the word or sentence means literally) and a particular speaker's utterance meaning (the metaphorical meaning that a speaker uses the literal word or sentence meaning to express).

The Ghanaian president's introductory remark is somewhat metaphorical when he said: *Today is the sixth time I am coming into your homes*. One wonders when the president visited each of his citizens. However, the president makes an indirect reference to the public speeches he has delivered so far since the outbreak of covid-19. This remark ushers in the fact that the president was delivering his sixth speech since the outbreak.

Buhari employed this device in his statement: *You have shown in our collective fight against the biggest health challenge of our generation*. The fight which the Nigerian president refers is not a physical combat; however, it is one that involves the human race in battling with covid-19. Like the Ghanaian president, Buhari uses metaphor to project the pandemic that has been ravaging his country. However, the south African president used the technique of 'comparison' to refer to covid-19 as an emergency which is more 'deadlier' than what the world has suffered in the past: *The world is facing a medical emergency far graver than what we have experienced in over a century*. There is an allusion made here as a result of a direct reference to a past experience. Again, the second statement of the Ghanaian president equally points at this combat: *I have, first of all, to tell you how proud and privileged I am to be your President, not just to fight not just to fight for you, but also to fight with you, and to help shepherd our country out of this crisis*.

Syntactic arrangement of words

The way words are arranged helped to drive home the theme of the speeches. For instance, Akufo-Addo syntactically arranged his sentences to capture the essence of his speech.

We will, as much as possible, be guided by the data, with our focus on the 3-Ts, i.e. tracing, testing and treatment.

Clearly, until we have the situation fully under control, we cannot, at this time, open our borders. *I have, first of all*, to tell you how proud and privileged I am to be your President...

His use of the punctuation mark –comma plays an integral role in the achievement of a stylistic effect. The use of comma does not make the sentences/language redundant, but it helps to achieve a pragmatic effect. The coinage 3-T's has a pragmatic import as it concerns: *tracing, testing and treatment* and these three relate to covid-19. Hence, covid-19 would be traced, tested and treated; this is indeed a commendable way of tackling the virus.

Cyril Ramaphosa on his part uses alliteration to stress the dangers of the disease by pointing out that: *Given the scale and the speed at which the virus is spreading, it is now clear that no country is immune from the disease or will be spared its severe impact*. The repetition of the sibilant 's' in 'scale', 'speed', and 'spreading' reveals the dangers associated with the virus.

Each president uniquely chooses words and arranges his sentences to refer to the virus. For example, Buhari refers to the virus as: *the biggest health challenge of our generation*, Ramaphosa refers to it as: *a medical emergency far graver than what we have experienced in over a century*. Akufo-Addo addresses it as 'crisis' in: ...our country out of this crisis. However, in order to provide solace to his people, Akufo-Addo views the whole issue as people who are dramatizing: *...Government's policy in this entire drama will be largely driven by science*. The last excerpt

portrays a euphemistic way of presenting a serious issue. This linguistic device provides ‘relief’ and ‘humour’ to the nation.

The use of the words: ‘Fellow Ghanaians’, ‘Fellow Nigerians’ and ‘Fellow South Africans’, in the three speeches shows solidarity, unity, involvement and commitment. While ‘Fellow Ghanaians’ appeared three times in Akufo-Addo’s speech, in Buhari’s speech, ‘Fellow Nigerians’ is used twice, while in Ramaphosa’s speech, ‘Fellow South Africans’ appeared five times. These were aimed at achieving a stylistic effect. Akufo-Addo’s use of repetition has a pragmatic import. The italicized words are repeated:

Government will fully absorb electricity bills for the poorest of the poor, i.e. for all lifeline consumers, that is free electricity for persons who consume zero (0) to fifty (50) kilowatt hours a month for this period. In addition, for all other consumers, residential and commercial, Government will absorb, again, fifty percent (50%) of your electricity bill for this period, using your March 2020 bill as your benchmark.

Performatives and Constatives

Austin stated that much of what we say embody some actions. This implies that by making an utterance, we ‘perform’ something. Therefore, words that are used to perform something are performatives. Constatives on the other hand, are declarative sentences which can be true or false. In other words, the truth value of such sentences can be determined or verified. Performatives and constatives appeared in the speeches of the three African presidents. For Buhari in his address used performatives to carry out some verbal actions as in:

I commend the State Governors for the activation of State-level Emergency Operation Centres....

I have instructed that the personnel of all the security agencies....

I mentioned that Federal Government will develop strategies and policies....

However, constatives can be identified in Buhari and Ramaphosa’s speeches:

...the measures we have put in place thus far have yielded positive outcomes against the projections.

It is true that we are facing a grave emergency.

I have great trust that our people will respond positively to this call to common action.

The veracity or otherwise of his last statement can be determined. The constative above also contains performatives ‘put in place’ which means ‘establish or build’. Akufo-Addo’s speech embody performative acts:

...as we continue to implement

I have come to you this evening to ask for your continued patience.

Government will absorb water bills for all Ghanaians....

Performatives can also be identified in Ramaphosa’s speech:

But it is up to us to *determine* how long it will last

We *thank* the leadership and the people of Polokwane and Limpopo

We are *responding* as a united nation to a common threat.

We *congratulate* them on the outstanding work they have done.

Performatives can be explicit or implicit. Explicit performatives contain ‘speech act verbs (SAVs)’. The words: ‘*commend, instructed, and mentioned, continue, implement, determine, thank, responding, congratulate, have come, absorb*’ are the SAVs in the performatives above.

...*I urge all Ghanaians to exercise discipline in their use of water and electricity* (the act of requesting).

I urge all potential beneficiaries to exercise patience (requesting/asking). Meanwhile, the three acts are evident in the sentence:

I urge all potential beneficiaries to exercise patience as we continue to fine tune our logistical and distribution processes....

Performative verbs were also used to express ‘sincerity and essential conditions’ in:

I am using this opportunity to express our deepest condolences to the families....

Such conditions abound in Ramaphosa’s speech as evident in:

We thank those people who suspected...

We thank the medical teams around the country....

We thank the repatriation team for the task they performed.

We thank the military health officials, pilots, cabin crew....

We thank the leadership and the people of Polokwane and Limpopo....

Sincerity conditions require that the speaker must be truthful and mean what he says. Ezeifeke (2018) opines that performative acts are effective only if the speakers are doing so sincerely and that they are not lying, otherwise the sincerity condition would be flouted and the speaker is guilty of what Austin calls ‘abuse’ (57).

Locutionary, Illocutionary and Perlocutionary Acts

A locutionary act is the performance of an utterance, the actual uttering of something and its ostensible meaning. Illocutionary force is the pragmatic force that accompanies an utterance while perlocutionary act has to do with how the speaker’s utterance affect the audience. The analysis reveals that the three presidents performed locutionary acts, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts through their speeches. Any speech act is thus the performance of several acts. Austin pointed out that ‘every time we direct language at some audience/person, we perform several acts simultaneously’. some of the illocutionary acts identified in the speeches are:

Let us maintain good hygiene and respect the social distancing protocols (requesting)

I want to assure all Nigerians that your safety and security remain our primary concern (assuring)

In essence, we are calling for a change of behavior amongst all South Africans (requesting).

Avoid close contact with anyone with cold or flu-like symptoms (commanding).

Wash their hands frequently with soap and water or hand sanitizers for at least 20 seconds (commanding).

We appreciate the economic, religious, and cultural significance of social...(appreciating).

I want to assure you that the culprits will be brought to justice (assuring).

We must minimize physical contact with other people (commanding).

...the Federal and State Governments have jointly and collaboratively worked hard (testifying).

I appeal to you, let us, in the meantime, continue to comply with the measures (appealing).

There is also a perlocutionary act demonstrated in the speeches as the three presidents tried to affect their listeners/audience. The following lines from Akufo-Addo's speech are notable and quite commendable:

Government will fully absorb electricity bills for the poorest of the poor, i.e. for all lifeline consumers, that is free electricity for persons who consume zero (0) to fifty (50) kilowatt hours a month for this period. In addition, for all other consumers, residential and commercial, Government will absorb, again, fifty percent (50%) of your electricity bill for this period, using your March 2020 bill as your benchmark.

Consider also another excerpt from his speech:

...if your electricity bill was one hundred cedis (GH¢100), you will pay only GH¢50, with Government absorbing the remaining fifty cedis (GH¢50). This is being done to support industry, enterprises and the service sector in these difficult times, and to provide some relief to households for lost income. Nevertheless, I urge all Ghanaians to exercise discipline in their use of water and electricity.

The perlocutionary effect of the statements above will be that of solace and comfort on the part of Ghanaians. To drive further his speech, the speaker resorted to codeswitching to further show his commitment:

Mesr? mo, as?m aa makai, mondi su. Me ma mo afehyia pa

Min kpa ny? fai, nibii ni nk?, ny? ye n?. Afi oo afi.

Buhari also performed the three acts in his statements below, although the perlocutionary effects on his citizens differ from those of the Ghanaians:

In keeping with our Government's promise to improve the welfare of healthcare workers, we have signed a memorandum of understanding on the provision of hazard allowances and other incentives with key health sector professional associations.

From the analysis of the speeches, it was discovered that the three presidents performed verbal actions in addressing their citizens. Locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts were performed by the speakers. Such acts were performed to show actions like requesting, commanding, assuring, testifying and appealing to the audience. Again, it was found out that speech act verbs (SAVs) were employed to signal performatives and constatives.

CONCLUSION

The importance of language in human spheres of life cannot be overemphasized. Functionally, it is used in political, social, educational and economic sectors. The three African presidents used language uniquely to address their citizens in order to combat the coronavirus disease. Each speech was delivered at a particular point in each of the nations. President Buhari presented his third speech during the coronavirus, President Akufo-Addo's was his sixth speech while the South African president-Ramaphosa did his first speech. The tone, manner and language used depended on the experiences of each speaker and the purpose for which the speech was designed to achieve. Bearing this in mind, each speaker utilized language to achieve a pragmatic effect. The study therefore, explicated the use of language in public speech delivery and the analysis revealed that

the speakers in their performance of speech acts such as commanding, instructing, requesting, displayed their individuality and characteristic way of using language.

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