

PSYCHOLOGICAL MANIPULATION IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE: A CASE STUDY OF FACEBOOK POSTS ON URHOBOLANGUAGE CURRICULUM

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Abstract: Texts, either written or spoken, are of varying types and serve different functions, including serving as a means of socially influencing people through underhanded tactics. In the present study, patterns of how the language used in social media-based political discourse reflects psychological manipulation tendencies on the part of netizens are examined. The goal is to investigate the psychological manipulation types and functions embedded in the texts. The study draws on insights from the perceived role that Facebook posts, comments, replies, and reactions had in the approval of the Urhobo Language Curriculum (UCL). The data for the study was collected from Facebook posts on the subject matter of the Urhobo language curriculum (ULC) made between 2015 and 2016. The discussion in the study is descriptive and leans on inference from addressees' (evaluative) responses to the identified posts. These responses include comments, replies, and reactions. The approach adopted is based on the assumption that "... the perlocutionary effect of the addresser's statement is represented in the addressee's statement" (Boboshko 2015:64). It is argued that the texts used in social-media-based political discourses serve two functions: (i) informing; and (ii) brandishing emotions with the intention of manipulating a target into doing what one wants.

Keywords: *Text; social media; urhobo language curriculum; psychological manipulation; political discourse*

INTRODUCTION

Political discourse refers to the discourse practices engaged in by all political actors (politicians, organizations, citizens, etc.) in a political process (Taiwo, 2010). It is a recounting of events with some form of political undertone. According to Apter (2001, p. 11644), political discourse deals with the narrative interpretation of events and ideas, logical and mythic, and establishes criteria and context for comparing and evaluating political systems. Studies have shown that manipulative tendencies and rhetoric are intrinsically embedded in political discourse (Sunstein, 2016; Condor et al., 2013; Beard, 2002; Lenart, 1994; Ng & Bradae, 1993; Bell, 1991). Language is a powerful tool that can be used in a manipulative way to influence people, that is, to change the behaviour, perception, or opinion of people. Thus,

different rhetoric/strategies are often used by discourse participants to construct persuasive arguments with the aim of exerting some form of influence on recipients (Noggle, 2020; Braiker, 2004; Nordlund, 2003).

According to Asya (2013), in the context of the theory of linguistic manipulation, the word "manipulation" has a lot of creative potential and is particularly pertinent. Key components of "manipulation" include the speaker's "negative" intention and the influencer's covert (not obvious to the listener) nature. This is a broad and somewhat hazy semantic field. Discourse manipulation produces a hidden, obscured layer of linguistic information that is difficult to distinguish from genuinely informative content. If the topic of interaction touches on something that has already happened, confirmation

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with objective reality is given greater weight than the pragmatic aspect, depending on the nature of the utterance (its direction towards past or future or the frankness of the speaker whose speech is associated with the future).

He further noted that any verbal interaction that is viewed from the perspective of its motivation and achieved by the subject (speaker) and the object (listener) of communication is considered linguistic manipulation in the broad meaning. A speaker controls his listener's behaviour by encouraging him to start, change, or complete an activity whenever the situation calls for it. In order to shape specific emotions and perceptions that the speaker desires, the speaker can either direct indirect influence or appropriately respond verbal or nonverbal action. These perceptions are expected to eventually order the listener's behaviour in the direction the speaker intended. We want to shape a person's conduct to suit our needs by exerting influence over him.

As rightly opined by Noggle (2021), political theorists and philosophers have suggested a wide range of explanations for manipulation, including deceptive influence, covert influence, influence with covert intent, presenting false justifications, and changing the external circumstances. While there are aspects of manipulation that each of these systems gets right, there are also significant problems with each. In linguistics, psychological manipulation may be situated within the theory of speech acts. According to Asya (2013), speech act theory, amongst other things, accounts for the influence exercised upon a human being or a group of people through speech and related non-verbal means by the speaker in order to achieve definite aims in the course of verbal interaction.

The advent of social media has opened up an opportunity for netizens to participate in the political discourse of their nation. This is made possible given the fact that social media sites can facilitate the production, dissemination, and exchange of content of varying types on platforms and

within networks that accommodate interaction and collaboration (Owen, 2017; Davis & Owen, 1998). Thus, much more than ever before, more citizens now participate in issues centred on politics. As noted by Baum (2001, p. 1840), the purposes of citizen participation include communicating information, developing relationships, developing the capacity to act, and preserving or changing conditions, and different levels of power can be used by citizens to accomplish these goals.

According to Owen (2017), the diversity of content disseminated by new media has created opportunities such as the ability for more voices to be heard, especially in political-related matters. This is done through wider information dissemination and estimative reaction and/or responses to the information. In the current study, an attempt is made to examine the functions of political discourse texts used in the social media space. It draws on data from selected Facebook texts on the subject matter of the Urhobo language curriculum (henceforth, ULC). The main body of text in Facebook is the post and is (optionally) accompanied by responses such as comments, replies, and reactions.

The ULC is a 9-Year Basic Education Curriculum of the Urhobo Language, developed by the Urhobo Studies Association, an association which aims at carrying out research and developmental efforts on the Urhobo language, literature, and culture, to ensure the proper teaching and learning of the language at all levels of education. Implicitly, the curriculum was developed to actualize the language provisions of the National Policy on Education for the use of the mother tongue/language of the immediate environment at the lower primary level.

The Nigerian language policy as couched in the National Policy on Education (NPE) document "...assigned different functions to the many Nigerian languages in the nation's education at various levels. The policy stated that every

child shall learn in the language of the immediate environment in the first three years while English language shall be taught as a school subject. However, in the interest of national unity among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria, every child shall require to learn one of the three national languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba)” (Ibrahim & Gwandi, 2016, p. 2). The policy states that the first three years of basic education be taught in either the student's mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment. The language of instruction beginning in the fourth year will be English, with subjects in the mother tongue and French being taught. At the secondary level, French and one of the three major Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo, or Yoruba) other than that of the immediate area will be taught in addition to English as the language of instruction. These necessitates the need to develop curricula for the mother tongues.

According to reports, the idea of developing the ULC was first nurtured in 2008, when the association decided that a standardised curriculum for use in primary and secondary schools should be developed; an idea that was achieved in part through collaborative efforts with the National Education Research and Development Council (NERDC) and the Joint Consultative Committee on Education (JCCE). This was necessary as the lack of a curriculum can be an obstacle to the effective teaching of a subject (Cf. Folorunsho & Iyanda, 2022). The curriculum standardises learning objectives and provides a clear path for students to advance from one grade to the next, as well as establishing shared goals between teachers and students; thus, its significance.

The National Council on Education (NCE) subsequently approved the curriculum in October, 2014, and it was published in three volumes, viz., Primary 1-3, Primary 4-6, and JSS 1-3, in December 2015. In a bid to domesticate the published curriculum for use in primary and early secondary education in the immediate community where the language is spoken,

the association wrote to the Delta State Government (henceforth, DSG) for approval. Efforts to get approval a year later were not yielding results, probably as a result of bureaucratic bottlenecks and lack of willpower (Bolaji et al., 2015). This opened up a subject of discourse on social media. It is this discourse that this study seeks to examine, by investigating the patterns of the posts and comments. The study also investigates the manipulative strategies used by the post maker(s) of the various posts chosen for this study.

METHOD

The data employed for this study consists of selected Facebook posts on the issue of language curriculum made between 2015 and 2016, as well as the associated comments, replies, and reactions to these posts. Although six posts were found on this subject matter, only three were used for this study. This is because only the three posts were relevant to the objectives of the study. All the posts were accessed October 2-4, 2017. The first of these was made September 30, 2016 and has 35 reactions and 3 shares; the second was made October 3, 2016 and has 64 reactions and 4 shares; while the third was made July 31, 2016, and has six reactions and 7 shares. Thus, a total of twenty-seven (27) texts were used for the analysis. The theoretical basis of the analysis leans mainly on inference and on text analysis, logic, rhetoric, and psychological manipulation.

Our choice of inference is premised on the assumption that “linguistic meaning encompasses a rich typology of inferences” (Tieu et al., 2019). In a bid to comprehend spoken language and written text, readers and listeners draw numerous inferences, to, among other things, extrapolate an intended message from a text. For instance, responses and comments on social media posts are often estimative, that is, they are based on inference about the central message and purpose of the posts. Thus, assigning purpose and meaning to texts are often driven by inferences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the data collected for the study are examined within the tenet of text analysis using inference. Text is understood to be a language unit which has a definable communicative function (Crystal, 2008). It is a coherent stretch of language that may be regarded as an object of critical analysis. Texts may be spoken, written or, multimodal, and are of varying types as well as play different functions depending on context and purpose. Text is a communication system whose function may be inferred from its context. Its intended function can be inferred from the text itself or from the estimative response(s) of the recipient(s) of the text.

Example (1)

- (a) Post: Urhobo Language Curriculum awaits Delta State Government's approval a year after the Federal Government approved it.
- (b) Reaction: 33 Likes, 1 Sad face, and 1 Angry Face
- (c) Comments:
 - i. Thank you all for the giant strides you have made in documenting our cherished language and culture. The task is not easy, but I am sure with all of our collective efforts, we will get there.
 - ii. The Federal Government's decision supersedes the State. Go ahead.
 - iii. Are you serious?
 - iv. Wetin dey hold dem?
 - v. Great work. Kudos to everyone who was part of this work.
 - vi. What is delaying State Government from giving approval?
 - vii. What is holding them na? Na waooo.
 - viii. What for na? This is wrong... So sad.

The post in Example (1a) is a sort of announcement of the approval of the UCL

by the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) and the delay in getting the Delta State Government (DSG) to approve it. Thus, the two main messages in the post are:

- a) there is now a UCL that has been approved by the relevant Federal Government Agencies; and
- b) the curriculum is yet to be approved for use in schools by the state government despite approval from the federal government.

Both information functions to arouse two distinct emotions, the first, a positive one which seeks to draw appreciation from the recipients of the message over the development of a curriculum for the Urhobo language, and the second a negative emotion which seeks to draw inward feelings of disgust for the non-approval of the curriculum for use in schools. The above inference is supported by the accompanying comments and reactions to the post. For instance, in comments (i) and (v), the efforts of the designers of the ULC were appreciated, while the other comments express negative emotion.

However, there were more expressions of negative feelings. This probably suggests that the ultimate function of the post was not necessarily to inform but to elicit negative feelings of sympathy and disgust from the recipients of the message. This may then aid in raising 'foot soldiers' that will join in 'the fight' of ensuring that the ULC is approved by the state government. In most social-media-based political discourse in which citizens... present [a] series of images or arguments that favour their particular interests, the first attempt has been to raise support for their course.

To achieve this, the event was presented using sharpening technique of event reporting, which entails summing up a message and selecting what angle to use (Asp, 1986). For instance, the post reflects what happens (unnecessary delay in the approval of ULC) and who the doer is (DSG) but not those affected by what is done (the teachers and the students who are

the end users). Following Fowler (1991), the choice of a structure of a report depends on for example how blame or credit is to be distributed among the participants of an action. This further supports the fact that the information in (b) stated above is the principal essence of the post; hence, the structure of the post foregrounds the doer.

The post also attracted 37 reactions. Although reactions to Facebook posts may pose interpretive uncertainty in general, the reactions to the post in example (1) may be conveniently divided along the two lines of information embedded in the post. The reaction consists of 33 likes, 1 sad face, and 1 angry face. The 'like' is a commendation reaction, probably for the efforts of the group that put the curriculum together or the effort of the 'poster' in notifying the public of the state of affairs on the ULC, while the sad face and angry face are reactions toward the state government's delay.

Example 2

(a) Post: LET THE SENSELESS REGIME IN DELTA APPROVE THE URHOBOLAN LANGUAGE CURRICULUM NOW! Is it true that the mediocre, wishy-washy, rudderless, and senseless Delta regime has refused to approve [the] Urhobo language curriculum ONE YEAR after the Federal Government has done so? Is it true that one ethnic bigot so much hates Urhobos to the far-reaching extent of going against the curriculum? Is it also correct that Urhobo legislators in the House of Assembly are intimidated on this very serious issue? ...Now, let it be absolutely clear. We will not plead for our children to learn our language. Our parents did not plead for us to be taught the language in schools. It is [a] right; not a privilege. Trying to kill our language is a serious existential threat. If the non-negotiable approval does not come immediately, we reserve the right to challenge that ethnic bigotry and existential threat in court. Such a

case will unravel the extent a senseless rigger is willing to go to 'deal with' Urhobo and whoever opposed his electoral theft in 2015. One had taken the Bola Ige 'sidon look' option to this disoriented regime. It seems that option not to "distract" them, as they often say, is not appreciated. Now, we must go after it on all cylinders, as democracy permits. Enough of this SENSELESS MEDIOCRITY (in the name of government) borne out of SENSELESS RIGGING!

(b) Reaction: 64 Likes

(c) Comments/Replies:

- i. This is serious.
- ii. What is the Speaker doing about this issue? My children will speak the Urhobo language even if they did not learn it in school.
- iii. This is a great awakening. The Speaker is just there as an embezzler. He has been in government from time immemorial doing nothing.
- iv. God bless you real good Sir. This issue is sacrosanct.
- v. God bless you real good for this awareness. Most of us do not know what is happening to our revered heritage.
- vi. Thanks Sir well written.
- vii. Enough is enough. I think this is one of the things I have been expecting all these while. My good people of Urhobo, this miscreant who call themselves leaders in our state did not only try to stop (Urhobos), they present themselves first before us. If you want to confirm what I am saying, please, check the 2015/2016 NYSC state programme, you will see how they were counting tribes in Delta State and Urhobo was said to be number 6 while other tribes occupied number 1 to five. See, this nonsense must stop not tomorrow but now. The fight

- must begin with you and me.
- viii. I never knew PDP will turn out to be this way in Delta State. Divide and rule system of government.
 - ix. No one can delete the blood of Urhoboness in us! The language is unstoppable.

The post in example 2 is in some sense an upshot from the first post, which emphasized the state government's delay in approving the UCL and is directed towards the 'doer' in the first post. It attracted 64 likes and 8 comments. This high number of likes may be interpreted as a demonstration of total support for the post which challenges the government to live up to its expectation. The users that liked the post on Facebook after reading through the content have performed a positive evaluation of government failure.

The post and the accompanying comments express negative emotions of disgust over the delay in approving the ULC. This was achieved through the use of different manipulation strategies. For instance, the post as well as comments (vi) and (vii) employed vilification, that is, saying or writing unpleasant things about someone or something in order to cause other people to have a bad opinion of them (Simon, 1996).

Another manipulation strategy employed in example 2 is projecting the blame (the act of blaming others). In comment (ii), the blame is extended to the legislative arm of government, especially the leader (the speaker) of the house who incidentally is of Urhobo extraction. Though it is the responsibility of the executive arm of government to approve the curriculum, the user believes that the legislative arm can influence the process to the advantage of the people through lobbying. Thus, the attack of the speaker is a typical case of projecting the blame. Comments (iii), (iv) and (v) commended the author of the post for the awareness it created. Here, not many are aware that the curriculum for the language

has been produced, approved by the FGN, and awaiting the state government's approval. Comment (vi) provides a detailed experience of how the government has made efforts in the past to suppress the Urhobo, the largest ethnic group in the State by relegating it to the sixth position. It called on the Urhobo people to resist further humiliation from the government. Comment (vii) expresses disbelief over the state government's attitude of condescending to playing politics of ethnicity, while comment (viii) expresses optimism that nothing can stop the development of the language.

Example 3

- (a) Post: BREAKING NEWS: JUKUN LANGUAGE CURRICULUM PRINTED The Jukun Language Curriculum of Taraba State has been printed. The information was contained in a letter to the Urhobo Studies Association (USA), Delta State University (DELSU), Abraka by the director, Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), Abuja, Dr. (Mrs) Chinyere Nwagbara. Dr. Nwagbara wondered why the Urhobo Language Curriculum has not been printed. "I hope you have not forgotten the printing of the Urhobo Language Curriculum. Jukun Language Curriculum has been printed & delivered to them. The Urhobo Language Curriculum went through the Joint Consultative Council on Education (JCCE) and the National Council on Education (NCE) before the Jukun Language Curriculum". She tasked the USA to expedite action in ensuring the printing of the Urhobo Language Curriculum. "Please, don't allow your efforts to be ignored because of little money. Already the cost of printing has gone a bit higher than what it was last year. I advise you conclude this assignment." It would be recalled that several appeal letters for

- financial support by the USA to Urhobo individuals and cooperate organizations have not received positive results
- (b) Reaction: 6 Likes
- (c) Comments:
- i. We must value our language and culture.
 - ii. You see why we still lag behind in so many areas of our life as a people?
 - iii. If I may ask, don't we have representatives at the National and State Assemblies? What are they representing if not the interest of their people? Our children must learn how to speak our tongue.
 - iv. We have written and distributed over 500 appeal letters for financial support but nothing yet.
 - v. How much is involved? Let us come in to assist, please. Because we must place value in sustaining our own language away from danger.
 - vi. Oniovo, God bless you for this post.
 - vii. All these our 'wayo' and unpatriotic Urhobo leaders and stakeholders una dey hear am so... I heard that it is just N1.8 Million that will solve the Urhobo Curriculum matter and up till now, nothing ever happened. Shameful acclaimed leaders!

In example 3, the post expresses fear that it was not likely that any positive approval for the ULC would be achieved soon. It further attempts to create a bandwagon effect. In the bandwagon effect, a 'manipulator' confronts his target by claiming (whether true or false) that many people have already done something, and the target should as well (Simon, 1996). Thus, by providing a report on the completion of the Jukun Language Curriculum (JLC), it is expected that the state government will also approve the ULC.

In the accompanying comments, recipients of the post responded along the two lines of information and emotion brandishing. In comment (vi), the 'poster' is commended for the information, whereas comment (iii) questions the priority of elected Urhobo lawmakers, another example of projecting the blame. Comment (iv) provides background information on failed efforts to source for financial assistance for the project, which in itself is an effort to provide more information that will elicit further negative emotions. That this is the case is shown by the comment that follows (comment vii), in which the responder describes the inability of Urhobo leaders to provide the money needed for the project as shameful.

CONCLUSION

There is a shift in contemporary civic participation in political discourse, especially amongst youths. Given that they are more internet savvy, their participatory culture in governmental affairs involves the use of social media. In most cases, such participatory culture employs psychological manipulation. This is the typical case of the role played by citizens in ensuring the domestication of the ULC in schools where the language is spoken. Given that language use is instrumental to political participation in general, and psychological manipulation in particular, the choice of language is often not polite. This is evident in the three Facebook posts sampled in this study. This is further supported by the resulting estimative comments and replies on the selected posts by the recipients.

The resultant effect of the posts, comments, and replies on the target hinges on the psychological vulnerability of the 'principal victim' (the state government). The vulnerability exploited in the examples in this study is ethnic loyalty. As noted by Salami (2005, p. 2037), it has been observed that ethnicity or loyalty to one's ethnic group is one major bane of Nigeria's polity. Although there are social and political problems in Nigeria that are not necessarily related to ethnic and linguistic differences

and attitudes, camps can often be pitched along these lines in most political and developmental issues in Nigeria (Adegbija, 1994), and this is often used in most social-media based political discourse. The vulnerability of the "principal victim" itself has some correlation with the sociological concept of face-saving. Efforts aimed at ensuring domestication of the ULC were driven primarily by the desire not to "lose face" given the strong languages employed by 'manipulators' in vilifying the DSG and in projecting the blame to the legislative arm, the ruling party, and the speaker of the house of assembly. One implication of this is that it has the potential of brandishing sufficient emotional intensity and rage against the principal target, which in some cases, may force them into saving face by attending to the issues raised by the 'manipulator(s)'.

Face-saving is an attempt aimed at retaining one's own sense of self-image, dignity or prestige. In the English-speaking world and the West, the expression "to save face" describes the lengths that an individual may go to in order to preserve their established position in society, taking action to ensure that one is not thought badly of. According to Goffman (1967), the term face itself may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself or herself by the line others assume he or she has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self, delineated in terms of approved social attributes. Implicitly, manipulative language in citizens' political participation is deemed to have achieved its aim when the target makes an effort to save face.

In brandishing emotion, the interest of the 'manipulator' is advanced by the recipients. The power of emotions to influence judgment, including political attitudes, has been recognised since classical antiquity. Emotional arousal is critical to persuasion. "The orator persuades by means of his hearers when they are roused to emotion by his speech; for the judgments we deliver are not the same when we are

influenced by joy or sorrow, love or hate." (Frijda, 2000, p. 1). In some cases, reasons are jettisoned for the sake of emotions; hence, manipulative tendencies are often aimed at targeting the emotions of the recipients (Cf Klenk, 2021).

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