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Textual Analysis of President Muhammadu Buhari's Address during the 2020 Nigerian EndSARS Protest

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Abstract

The study was carried out to analyse the address presented by President Muhammadu Buhari during the 2020 Nigerian EndSARS protest. The researchers adopted the textual analysis method and applied Van Dijk's triadic model to unravel the macrostructure, superstructure and microstructure of the address. Findings from the study revealed that, although, the macrostructures of the address were the 2020 EndSARS protest and the moves made by the government to meet the needs of teeming Nigerians, the speech was guilty of *political claptrap*. Findings also showed that the address had a good superstructure while the microstructure can best be said to be somewhere in between good and bad. Based on the findings, the researchers concluded that the address, on the whole, straddles between good and bad and recommended, amongst others, that, the President should avoid indulging in *political claptrapping* in his subsequent addresses.

Keywords: President, Address, EndSARS, Protest, Nigeria, President Muhammadu Buhari

Introduction and Motivation for the Study

The month of October in the year 2020 can best be described as a very chaotic and turbulent one for Nigerians. This is because amidst the COVID-19 pandemic which was still taking a huge toll on every sector of the country at the time, Nigerians trooped out en masse to protest against the unprofessional activities of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a unit of the Nigeria Police Force. Although, the protests have been gathering momentum since 2017, especially on a social medium such as Twitter, it was the viral video of the shooting of an innocent young man in Delta State that finally sparked up the protest (Malumfashi, 2020; Mohammed & Asemah, 2021).

In just a matter of hours, there were tweets and retweets of the said video on Twitter, with many a Nigerian condemning in very strong terms the unethical practices of EndSARS officers. Hours eventually spiraled into days and on the 7th of October, 2020, the protests

spilled into the streets of Lagos. The popular Lekki Toll Gate served as the rallying point for the protesters who were mainly youths between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five (Ayandele, 2021). Like a wildfire, it did not take hours before the protests spread to other states of the country as well as the Federal capital Territory, Abuja. The protesters brandished placards and made a five-point demand which included the disbanding of SARS, the immediate release of arrested protesters, justice for victims of Police brutality, prosecution of accused SARS officers, and the psychological evaluation of non-culpable SARS officers before redeployment (The Cable, 2020).

In its early stage, the protests were extremely peaceful and the protesters did not have any official leader. However, Nigerian celebrities such as Falz, Mr. Macaroni, Burna Boy, Davido and Tiwa Savage were prominent in the movement and expressed their unflinching support for the protesters on social media like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The protesters also received international sympathy and support as renowned leaders such as Antonio Guterres, the UN Secretary-General and Mike Pompeo, the US Secretary of State, tweeted in support (Uwazuruike, 2020; Bossey & Asemah, 2021). Moreover, the hashtag #EndSARS was the number one trending topic on Twitter on 9th of October, 2020 (Bamidele, 2020).

Albeit, the Federal Government bowed to pressure and scrapped SARS on 11th October, 2021, the protesters did not rest on their oars. They moved beyond their initial five-point demand to seek for good governance, accountability and the betterment of the lives of teeming Nigerians. Nevertheless, the most memorable and disturbing incident of the EndSARS protests occurred on the night of Tuesday, 20th October, 2020. That night, staff of the Nigerian Army were alleged to have stormed into the protest ground at Lekki Toll Gate and opened fire on the unarmed protesters. Many were reported dead while others were seriously injured. With the Lekki shooting, the protesters became enraged and the days that followed were characterised by attacks on supermarkets and shops, police stations and media houses (Bossey & Asemah, 2021). There was also mass looting, arson and mass killings as the protests were later hijacked by hoodlums (Bamidele, 2020).

With the country in a state of total chaos, disarray and topsy-turvy, many Nigerians home and abroad eagerly awaited an address from the incumbent President, General Muhammadu Buhari. Amongst other things, such an address would help douse the already heightened tension in the minds of the furious protesters. After all, it is said in African parlance that it is only an irresponsible father that goes to sleep when the roof of his house is on fire. It is pertinent to state at this point that anticipating an address from the number one citizen of the country at the time was not out of place for Nigerians. It is the custom of presidents to deliver speeches to their citizenry in times of crisis or civil unrest (Asemah & Edegoh, 2012; Cart, 2014).

For instance, when economic recession swept America off its feet in the year 1982, the then President, Ronald Reagan, delivered a speech in which he allayed the fears of the people and underscored plans made by his administration to tackle the challenges head-on. Similarly, when the removal of fuel subsidy in Nigeria in January 2012 sparked up mass protests from the citizenry, it was via an address that the then President, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, announced a reduction of fuel price from ₦147 per litre to ₦97 per litre.

Thus, on 22nd October, barely two days after the massive shooting at Lekki Toll Gate, General Muhammadu Buhari presented an address to Nigerians. It is at this juncture important to state the reason for the researchers' choice of the President's address amidst countless addresses delivered by past presidents of the country. The reason is that General Muhammadu Buhari is the incumbent President and as such, arguably enjoys much popularity at the time of study; then comes the next question: why pick the address he delivered during the EndSARS protest? First, attempts made in the past by researchers to analyse the President's speeches have primarily been on his inaugural speech. Examples of such are studies conducted by Sharndama (2015) and Peter & Ojukwu (2020).

Aside from the inaugural speech, other researchers have beamed searchlight on the President's other addresses. For example, Anyanwu (2020) did a stylistic analysis of two of the President's addresses during the Covid-19 pandemic while Aboh & Agbede (2020) undertook an in-depth analysis of some of the President's popular utterances. Although, the aforementioned studies are laudable, they incontrovertibly leave a huge lacuna in the body of literature, especially as it concerns the President and the EndSARS protest. It cannot be gainsaid that the protest, till date, leaves a bitter taste in the buds of many Nigerians, especially with the shocking revelations that came with the recent report released by the Lagos State Judicial Panel. It is such gap in literature that this study sought to fill. Therefore, it was the aforesaid that propelled the researchers to analyse the address delivered by President Muhammadu Buhari during the 2020 EndSARS protest.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Determine the macro or thematic structure of President Muhammadu Buhari's address during the 2020 Nigerian EndSARS protest.
2. Analyse the super or schematic structure of President Muhammadu Buhari's address during the 2020 Nigerian EndSARS protest.
3. Identify the micro or semantic structure of President Muhammadu Buhari's address during the 2020 Nigerian EndSARS protest.

Conceptual Review and Review of Related Literature

In the field of political communication, speeches or addresses are regarded as veritable tools through which political gladiators gain power, prestige, interest and loyalty from their followers. This is because politics is essentially the struggle for and the use of state power by individuals and socialist groups (Ekhareafo & Ambrose, 2015; Asemah & Edegoh, 2012). Therefore, there is a strong and inextricable link between politics and communication (Sharndama, 2015; Anyanwu, 2020; Edegoh, Ezebuenyi & Asemah, 2013). Ekhareafo & Ambrose (2015) aver that the political communication process is largely driven by the use of language in persuading the electorate and other political observers. Arguing in this line, Davis & Gardner (2012) state that a political leader must be able to use speech or rhetoric to his/her greatest advantage to anticipate, address or mediate crisis. Cart (2014) and Edegoh, Ezebuenyi & Asemah (2013) opine that presidents of various countries use speeches as a governing mechanism to stimulate and galvanise

public support for their policies. In the same vein, Andrews (2011, p. 6) stresses that “while in office, presidents often use the permanent campaign to keep the public focused on issues important to them and to maintain a positive image in the media.” Therefore, there is always a quintessential marriage between politics and speeches and a leader whose intends to remain at the helm of power must be adept at delivering lapidary and mesmeric speeches. For instance, dexterity at speech presentation has been adduced as one of the chief factors behind Barack Obama’s success as the President of the US (*Washington Post*, 2016).

SARS was established in 1992 as a unit of the Nigeria Police Force. It was specifically set up to combat armed robbery in Lagos and environs under the command of Officer Simeon Danladi Midenda (Malumfashi, 2020). Thus, during its first ten years, SARS operated only in Lagos (Mohammed & Asemah, 2021). Nevertheless, in 2002, SARS was replicated in all the thirty-six states of the federation as well as the Federal capital Territory just as its responsibilities were expanded to include the arrest, investigation and prosecution of armed robbers, kidnappers and other suspected criminals. Uwazuruike (2020) notes that soon after its expansion, SARS acquired a notorious reputation and was consistently accused of human rights violations, torture, unlawful arrests and detention as well as extortion and extrajudicial killings. Between January 2017 and May 2020, over 82 cases of torture, ill-treatment and extrajudicial killings by SARS officials were documented (Amnesty International, 2020). Besides, a 2019 elaborate report had revealed that police officers in Nigeria were the most likely of all civil servants to indulge in bribery and corruption (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019).

A good number of studies have been done to analyse presidential addresses. For example, Madkur (2018) analysed the speech made by President Joko Widodo at the CEO Summit in Beijing, China on 10th November, 2014 using the Van Dijk’s triadic model. Madkur analysed the thematic, schematic and semantic features of the speech and concluded that the President was successful in stating the theme, creating scheme and expressing semantics in the speech. Munawar (2018) also analysed Donald Trump’s first presidential speech using Norman Fairclough’s three levels of discourse and found that the President did well with regards to the ideas expressed in the speech.

Nearer home, Sharndama (2015) did a Critical Discourse Analysis of President Muhammadu Buhari’s inaugural speech using Norman Fairclough’s three-point model and found that the speech essentially comprised appreciations, expression of the government’s plans and a subtle criticism of the previous administration. Also, Anyanwu (2020) embarked on a stylistic analysis of two of President Muhammadu Buhari’s addresses during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that the President utilised language properly to convey his messages. Findings also showed that the President effectively deployed epidemiological and medical register in the addresses. Lastly, Peter & Ojukwu (2020) engaged in a process type analysis of President Muhammadu Buhari’s inaugural speech using MAK Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar and found that mental and material processes were mostly used by the President in accepting the mandate given to him by Nigerians.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the narrative paradigm. Narrative paradigm is purely a rhetoric theory developed by Walter Fisher in 1978. The theory sees all forms of human communication as fundamentally stories and claims that communication occurs via storytelling or reporting of events (Hoppin, 2016). The theory assumes that people's past experiences influence our need for communication as well as our behaviour in communication (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011; Trexler 2013). Thus, in order to be rational, a story must have narrative probability and narrative fidelity.

The theory has five basic assumptions which include: (a) people are essentially storytellers (b) we make decisions on the basis of good reasons (c) history, biography, culture and character determine what we consider good reasons (d) narrative rationality is determined by the coherence and fidelity of our stories (e) the world is a set of stories which we choose and this constantly recreates our lives. The theory is important to this study because the President's address during the 2020 Nigerian EndSARS protest is, at best, a story necessitated by the experiences of Nigerians as well as the feelings of the government towards the protest. The President, as a storyteller, certainly employed some rhetorical devices with a view to achieving narrative probability and narrative fidelity. In telling or narrating the story, the President also sought to appeal to the rationality of Nigerians. Therefore, the theory constitutes a very solid foundation for analysing the President's address with a view to bringing to the fore its thematic, schematic and semantic features.

Methodology

The researchers adopted the textual analysis method and applied Van Dijk's (1997) triadic model which includes the macrostructure (thematic), superstructure (schematic) and microstructure (semantic) to bring to the fore critical issues in the President's address. Dijk's model was preferred over other textual analysis models such as Norman Fairclough's three-point model and Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach because, as Madkur (2018) notes, Dijk's model is primarily a socio-cognitive one and is characterised by the interaction between cognition, discourse and society. The primary data for the study is the full text of the President's address retrieved from <http://www.pulse.ng>.

Data Presentation and Analysis

(a) Macrostructure of the President's address: Thematic

The President's speech has two macrostructures or themes. The first is the EndSARS protest and the second, which is tied to the first, has to do with measures put in place by the government to address the plight of youths and other vulnerable members of the society. The President's words in paragraph 2 point in the above direction; paragraph 2 reads: "I must warn all those who have hijacked and misdirected the initial, genuine and well-intended protest by some of our youths in parts of the country, against the excesses of some members of the now-disbanded Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). The EndSARS, as a major theme, also runs through paragraphs 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 22, 23, 24, 25 and 26 of the President's address. On the measures put in place by his administration to address the

growing concerns of youths and other vulnerable members of the Nigerian society, they are explicitly stated in paragraphs 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16 of the speech although, other paragraphs such as 17, 18, 19 and 20 also allude to such a theme. In paragraph 12, for example, the President categorically states that:

Government has put in place measures and initiatives principally targeted at youths, women and the most vulnerable groups in our society. These included our broad plan to lift 100 million Nigerians out of poverty in the next ten years; the creation of ₦75 billion National Youth Investment Fund to provide opportunities for the youths and the Micro, Small and medium enterprises (MSME) Survival Fund, through which government is: (a) paying three months salaries of the staff of 100,000 micro, small – and medium – enterprises (b) giving a grant of ₦30,000 (c) giving a grant to 100,000 artisans; and (d) guaranteeing market for the products of traders.

However, it is pertinent to state that though it was expected that the mass and sporadic shooting at Lekki Toll Gate would form the macrostructure of the address (especially as the address came barely two days after the tragic incident), the address is dead silent on the issue. \

b. Superstructure of the President’s Address: Schematic

Superstructure has to do with the frame of a text, such as opening, content and closing. The superstructure of the President’s address is presented under the headings below.

Opening

Paragraph 1 constitutes the opening of the address and in it, the President recognised the fact that he was first a Nigerian before he was a President; hence, the use of the phrase “Fellow Nigerians.” After the greeting, the President immediately moved ahead to express the necessity that birthed the address as he mentioned that he had heard so much from many Nigerians and had recently concluded a meeting with his security chiefs.

Content

The content of the speech begins in paragraph 2 and runs through to paragraph 26 which is the last but one paragraph. In the content, the President primarily addressed the developments that came with the very troubling EndSARS protest. He as well acknowledged the right of Nigerians to demonstrate. In paragraph 4, for example, the president stressed that:

The choice to demonstrate peacefully is a fundamental right of citizens as enshrined in Section 40 of our Constitution and other enactments; but this right to protest also imposes on the demonstrators the responsibility to respect the rights of other citizens, and the necessity to operate within the law.

In paragraph 5, the President stated that his administration has meticulously evaluated the five-point demands of the protesters and in paragraph 6, he mentioned that

SARS had already been disbanded. In paragraph 7, the President notes that Nigerians have largely misconstrued the administration's intentions and in paragraph 8, he highlighted some of the disastrous acts the protests have left in their wake. In paragraphs 9 and 10, the President voiced his pain that the protest had now assumed a negative dimension and decried the fact that there was a lot of falsehood and misinformation, especially on social media.

In paragraphs 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16, the President outlined some of the remarkable things his administration had done to ensure the well-being of the citizenry and in paragraphs 17, 18, 19 and 20, he reaffirmed the commitment of his administration to improve governance and ensure the protection of citizens' right. In paragraph 21, the President craved the indulgence of the international community to sieve facts from fiction before taking a stand.

In paragraph 22, 23 and 24, the President appealed to protesters to take advantage of the well-thought-out plans of his administration and sheathe their "swords." Paragraph 25 focuses on a tribute to police officers who had lost their lives in the process just as the President enjoined security agencies to continue to protect the lives and property of citizens. Paragraph 26 dwells on the President's appreciation of State Governors who have restrained their followers from taking the laws into their hands.

Closing

The closing of the address is in paragraph 27 and in it, the President restated his administration's commitment to guarantee the rights and liberties of the citizens, after which he thanked and prayed God to bless the country.

c. Microstructure of the President's address: Semantic

Microstructure encompasses the local meaning of a text and this can be understood from the angle of word choice, sentence type and structure, and language style. As Madkur (2018) and Aini & Widodo (2018) note, the semantic aspect of a text can further be broken down to include the semantic, syntactic, stylistic and rhetorical aspects. Thus, the researcher presents the analysis of the microstructure under the following headings.

Semantic

The President, in the address, used some words which indicated that he put himself in the shoes of Nigerians. This came to light in the very first paragraph where he addressed them as "Fellow Nigerians." In paragraph 2, 5 and 24, he used the phrase "our youths." In paragraph 21, he used the phrase "our neighbours" and in paragraph 27, he uses "our nation." However, certain parts of the address point to the fact that the President was more dictatorial rather than democratic. For instance, his constant use of the first person personal pronoun, "I" rather than "we" in paragraphs 2, 3, 6, 9, 24 and 25 sends a very bad signal to the protesters as well as every other listener of the address. This is because the President is not the sole person who makes up the Nigerian Government; we have the executive, the legislature and the judiciary at the local, state and federal levels.

Similarly, the President's use of the determiner "some" in paragraphs 7 and 22 carries with it a demeaning and denigrating undertone. This is especially true in paragraph

22 where he referred to some Nigerians as “some subversive elements.” Although, idea the President was trying to bemoan the misinterpretation of his administration’s intention by some Nigerians, he should have picked another word that would help him hit the nail on the head and not make people subject his comment to multiple meanings. This is very important because the “some” could actually mean “some madmen,” “some foreigners,” “some animals,” and so on. The meaning of the word “some” was not clear at all.

Syntax

The President used more of the coordinating conjunction “and” to join his words, phrases and clauses together. Examples of such usage are found in paragraphs 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 21, 22, 23, 25 and 27 of the address. The President also used the coordinating conjunction “but” in paragraph 4. “Also,” as a conjunction, was used repeatedly in paragraphs 4 and 26 while the compound conjunction, “as well as” was used in paragraphs 19 and 20.

Stylistic

The President used a simple diction or language in his address. However, some grandiloquent or high-sounding words such as “unpatriotic,” “vandalised” and “disruptive” were found in the address. The President also used a lot of register on government such as “unpatriotic,” “constitution,” “security chiefs” and “international community” in the address. However, the President sounded very authoritarian or dictatorial in the address. A good example of this stylistic feature is found in paragraph 2 and it reads:

I must warn those who have hijacked and misdirected the initial, genuine and well-intended protest of some of our youths in parts of the country, against the excesses of some members of the now-disbanded special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS).

With regards to sentence structure, the President used more of compound and compound-complex sentences as against simple and complex sentences. A typical example of a compound-complex sentence is found in paragraph 22 and it reads:

In the circumstances, I would like to appeal to protesters to note and take advantage of the various well-thought-out initiatives of the administration designed to make their lives better and more meaningful and resist the temptation being used by some subversive elements to cause chaos with the aim of truncating our nascent democracy.

Rhetoric

The President in his bid to persuade the EndSARS protesters to shed their swords, used more of logos and pathos as there was virtually no trace of ethos in the address. Paragraphs 12 and 13 are replete with logos as the President went ahead to highlight a number of things his administration had done to better the lives of Nigerians. An example of pathos is found in paragraph 8 in which the President mentioned some the tremendous losses that came with the protest. Herein, the President was appealing to the emotions or empathetic responses of the protesters. The President also used lots of metaphor in the address. In

paragraph 4, for example, he says “The choice to demonstrate peacefully is a fundamental right of citizens ...” In paragraph 5, he used the metaphorical phrase “as a democratic President” and in paragraph 9, he used another metaphorical phrase, “these tragedies.” Also, “deliberate falsehood” used in paragraph 10 and “subversive elements” used in paragraph 22 are all metaphorical expressions.

Lastly, the President employed denial as a rhetorical tool. He implicitly denied the fact that the protest was borne out of the incompetence and failure of his administration by boldly enumerating some of the things his administration had done to better the lives of Nigerians.

Discussion of Findings

Findings from the study revealed that the macro or thematic structures of the President’s address were the 2020 EndSARS protest and the measures put in place by his administration to tackle the challenges of the youth and other vulnerable Nigerians. However, it was also found that the address was dead silent about the mass shooting at Lekki Toll Gate by members of the Nigerian Army. Since the address came barely two days after the extremely ugly and tragic incident, it was expected that the issue would form the kernel of the address. In other words, it was expected that the macrostructures of the address would be a plausible explanation of what actually culminated in the shooting, an unreserved apology to the protesters, the government’s promise to foot the medical bills of the injured as well as the administration’s commitment to provide financial succour to the families of those who had lost their lives in the process. Thus, the President’s failure at this makes the address guilty of *political claptrap*. *Political claptrap* is a tactic often used by political orators or gladiators to dodge what people actually want them to address. *Political claptrap* is akin to an escape strategy many individuals use when they find themselves in a dilemma or distress, especially without wanting to tackle the issue head-on.

With *political claptrap* being a major part of the address, it can be said that the President’s storytelling or narration was not well done. This is because, according to the narrative paradigm, a good story must have narrative probability and narrative fidelity. Scholars like Cart (2014) and Madkur (2018) have also rightly posited that any presidential speech that falls short of societal expectations, especially in crisis-laden times, is, at best, a bad speech. Also, it is pertinent to state that the above finding contrasts sharply with those of Sharndama (2015), Anyanwu (2020) and Peter & Ojukwu (2021) whose findings clearly showed that the President did well stylistically and otherwise in his other speeches.

It was also found that the super or thematic structure of the address is very much in order. The President started with a good and empathic opening after which he moved through the content from paragraphs 2 through 26 and wrapped up the address with a promise-filled closing in paragraph 27. This finding greatly aligns with those of Sharndama (2015), Anyanwu (2020) and Peter & Ojukwu (2020) whose findings clearly showed that the structure of the President’s other speeches is good. Thus, from the angle of the narrative paradigm, it can be said that the President’s story or narration, though lacking a good theme, has a good frame or organisation. Findings also showed that the semantic aspect of the address dabbles between excellent and terrible. Granted, the President’s use of phrases

like “Fellow Nigerians” shows empathy but his authoritarian tone as well as incongruous use of the modifier “some” carries a bad signal. Syntactically, it was found that he used conjunctions like “and,” “also” and “as well as” more often and seldom used “but.” Stylistically, it was found that the President used a simple diction, employed a government-based register and used a blend of compound and compound-complex sentences. While these can be seen as good, the President’s dictatorial tone is considered a major shortcoming.

With regards to rhetorical devices, it was found that the President used more of *logos* and *pathos* while the address was void of *ethos*. Since *ethos* basically deals with the background, character and credentials of a speaker, not including it in the address may be a deliberate thing on the President’s part. This is particularly because during the protest, the protesters hinged their anger and pain on the incompetence and insensitivity of the President’s administration. Furthermore, while the President’s dominant use of metaphor may be considered good and bad, especially when he refers to some Nigerians as “subversive elements,” his use of denial is, at best, execrable. Suffice it to say that when the aforementioned is juxtaposed with the narrative paradigm, it can be said that the President’s story is somewhere between good and bad. Moreover, the findings align with some aspects of those of Sharndama (2015) especially when it was concluded that the President used some good persuasive strategies in his inaugural speech. However, the findings largely differ from those of Anyanwu (2020) and Peter & Ojukwu (2020).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study has revealed the macrostructure, superstructure and microstructure of the address delivered by President Muhammadu Buhari during the 2020 Nigerian EndSARS protest. While the speech primarily focused on the protest as well as moves made by his administration to tackle the needs of teeming Nigerians, its dead silence on the mass shooting at Lekki Toll Gate is considered a huge shortcoming. The speech also had a good superstructure. Although, the speech possessed some good microstructural features, the President’s use of a dictatorial tone, incongruous use of modifiers, not-too-good use of metaphor and outright denial constitute some shortcomings. Thus, on the whole, the President’s address straddles between good and bad. In view of the conclusion, the researchers recommend that:

1. The President should avoid indulging in *political claptrapping* in his subsequent addresses. This is because *political claptrapping* makes a leader lose credibility in the eyes of his/her followers.
2. The President should adopt a democratic tone in his subsequent addresses and carefully pick his words so that people would not subject them to multiple interpretations.
3. The President should use modifiers and metaphors appropriately in his subsequent speeches.
4. In his bid to persuade his audience, the President should consider using *ethos* as a rhetorical device just as he ensures that his subsequent addresses are devoid of denial.

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