

The Language Challenge in Nigeria's Public Sphere

Fred A. Amadi (PhD)

*Senior Lecturer on the Departmental Board of Mass Communication at the
Rivers State University of Science and Technology, Port Harcourt, Nigeria*

Abstract: *The debating activities of the public sphere stimulated the development of pre-modern Europe. So far, such activities had failed to do same for Nigeria – a country in dire need of development. This paper investigates why public discourse in Nigeria has so far failed to develop Nigeria. To do the investigation, I purposively selected eight textual exemplars from stories which three Nigerian newspapers wrote when they covered the 2005 National Political Reform Conference in Nigeria. I presented the selected textual exemplars on a text box and then subjected the texts to interpretation using the method of critical discourse analysis. When I triangulated my interpretation with comments I got when I interviewed the journalists behind the interpreted texts, I found reasons why the mass media, as presently organized, cannot constitute an appropriate arena for development-boosting public discourse in Nigeria. On this light, I suggested some re-adaptation in a way that could motivate intellectuals into fashioning credible arenas for development discourse activities.*

Keywords: *Premises, reconditioning, public sphere, mass media*

I. Introduction

Habermas has done a seminal work on the concept of public sphere (Habermas, 2001). Doubt also exists as to whether his work about the concept describes a historical reality that existed or whether he was describing a set of ideas that are yet to be put into practice (Gripsrud, 2002). Whatever the case, it is generally accepted that the activities of the classical public sphere pressured pre-modern European feudal lords into granting civil liberty to their citizens.

The first of what is known as public sphere was the plebeian public sphere (Gripsrud, 2002).

Repressive excesses and feudal vanity marked their proceedings. The plebeian public sphere later transformed into the literary public sphere. The literary public sphere was an arena where learned men (men of letters) confronted feudal and papal oppression with logical argumentation/debate.

When the bourgeoisie joined forces with the literary public sphere, that move restricted the membership of the public sphere to only learned and rich men (Gripsrud, 2002). The restriction was meant to ensure that nobody in the public sphere owed their livelihood to an employer. The restrictive move also premised the belief that only rich men could be free from the fears of losing their means of livelihood. The thinking was that men who entertained no such fear were the ones who could muster the courage to express their views without hindrance. Adherence to the twin conditions of financial independence and appropriate education was the reason women, artisans and other petit bourgeoisies were excluded in the bourgeois public sphere (Gripsrud, 2002).

Custodians of the pre-modern public sphere were never in doubt regarding the power of the spoken word (Gouldner, 1976). Commentators (Gouldner, 1976) agree that the linguistic activism expressed in the debates and argumentations of the pre-modern public sphere was what changed the conscience of the feudal oppressors and readied them for a liberal outlook on the world and on their fellow men. In fact Lerner (1958) attributes the contemporary affluence of the western world to the liberating ideas that flowed from the activism of the classical and bourgeois public spheres. Lerner's (1958) faith in the efficacy of the public sphere compelled him to urge third world countries to replicate the debating activism of the pre-modern public sphere.

The Problem

Many developing countries in Africa have attained independence for more than 45 years. During this period, much dialogue and other forms of linguistic activism have been taking place. Nigeria is an example. Many observers agree that there has been much discussion on a range of issues in Nigeria (Onojovwo, 2008; Ogbondah, 2005). Despite this agreement, commentators (Nwakanma, 2010) believe that Nigeria has nothing to celebrate in terms of development after 50 years of independence. A closer look at many other African countries might yield comments that decry lack of development. Lack of development, despite much debates and argumentations, constitutes a problem. Using Nigeria as a setting, this paper examines the proceedings of the 2005 National Political Reform Conference that was organized by the then Obasanjo's administration in Nigeria. The examination is designed to ascertain whether the use of language during the conference undermine, in any way, the principle of rational discourse.

The Public Sphere in the Era of Community

The communal set-up of the pre-modern world was humane. That era could be explained in the context of Toennies' "*Gemeinschaft*" or community (Mayhew, 1997 p. 15). The communal set-up of *Gemeinschaft* brimmed with natural will. Natural will in the pre-modern community created a solidarity that was based on fellow-feeling. Natural will summoned men to be their brothers' keepers. *Gemeinschaft* or community made men to believe that life here on earth could be improved for everybody through human knowledge and more so when such knowledge is deployed in rational discourse (Gouldner, 1976).

The community life of the pre-modern era called on men to transform their convictions into actions. It reminded men that they were the foci of power and that by virtue of such endowment they had a moral responsibility to change their community in a rational manner (Gouldner, 1976). The determination of people to change their life in the pre-modern community was seen as a sacred labor and a reformed kind of politics. In the pre-modern era, men joined politics not because of personal aggrandizement. In the pre-modern public sphere, activists of change saw themselves as involved in a disinterested kind of politics. Influence in that kind of politics was defined solely from the standpoint of group interest rather than the standpoint of enjoyable privilege which its possessor would consume privately. The politics of pre-modern era presumed that rhetoric was its starting mechanism (Gouldner, 1976).

In the pre-modern public sphere, speakers did not give one another orders because of the relative equality they shared. Men in that public sphere were opulent. That meant that such men would only be persuaded through a rational process. Such men were not compelled since their opulence shielded them from compulsion (Gouldner, 1976). The rule for discursive activity in the pre-modern public sphere was based on rational discourse. Rational discourse is an honest and ethical method in a communication encounter. It is a special kind of communication where a speaker's statement is challenged to make communication become a systematic argument that makes a special appeal to demonstrate the validity of a claim (Littlejohn, 1996; Gouldner, 1976).

Public Sphere and the Ascendancy of Narcissistic Culture

Toennies' analysis of the concept of "*Gesellschaft*" or society (Mayhew, 1997, p.15) explains why mass media public sphere has not stimulated development in Africa. The structure of human relation fostered by *Gesellschaft* is based on artificial will. Artificial will is bereft of fellow-feeling. In *Gesellschaft* or society, unlike in community, ties are based on calculation of interests. A social system that operates on the principle of interest-calculation produces a culture of "narcissism" (Tucker, 1998, p. 158). Citing Tocqueville, Tucker informs that narcissistic culture produces "democratic despotism" (Tucker, 1998, p. 158). Quoting Tocqueville, Tucker describes democratic despotism as a recipe for producing passive and atomized citizens. Atomized citizens cannot establish ties with one another. In a situation where citizens cannot establish such ties, they also cannot muster an attachment to public good. Instead of striving for such attachment, people wittingly or unwittingly embrace selfishness in a manner that makes general indifference look like public virtue (Tucker, 1998). When selfishness and general indifference are enthroned, "narcissistic mentality" firms up to make public officials see the world as a dangerous place where people, except close family members and friends, are regarded as untrustworthy (Tucker, 1998, p.158).

What the narcissistic culture of modern society destroys is society's way of communicating. According to Mayhew (1997), instead of embracing the classical model of public sphere where rational discourse is prized, communication in modern society has opted for "new publics" (Mayhew, 1997, p.6). Unlike in the pre-modern public sphere where the mode of communication was strictly shaped by rational discourse, the model of communication in the new publics is marred by manipulation (Fairclough, 2001). In the new publics, manipulative communication manifest in different ways. An aspect of such manifestation is that of couching brief bits of symbolic information in a manner that avoids questions. Another aspect is a style that promotes speaking in structured situations. Many scholars refer to a style that promotes speaking in a structured situation as a "restricted variant/code of expression" (Gouldner, 1976, p.59; Littlejohn, 1996, p. 197; Gripsrud, 2002, p. 32; Verschueren, 1999, p. 118 and Griffins 2000, p. 344)

Mayhew (1997) has explained why communicators and their audiences do not bother about this distorted model of communication. Mayhew made his explanation in the context of what he refers to as "economics of information" (Mayhew, 1997, p. 14). The economics of information cajoles rational actors to accept information shortcuts or "information token" in order to save time, money and other resources.

According to Mayhew, both encoders and decoders accept a low-cost approximation of what they would discover if they spent more time and effort searching for rational details. This laidback style of communicating has degenerated into an irrationality which claims that "the symbols we use to communicate no longer have referents" (Mayhew, 1997, p.276). What this wrong claim now promotes is the idea that communicators should no longer bother with a redeeming real-life referent in messages so long as a message evokes "expected underlying values and sympathies of the audience" (Mayhew, 1997, p. 275).

In Nigeria, this perverse trend in communication is on the rise. Early in 2009, for instance, the Nigerian government vowed that Nigerians would enjoy 6,000 megawatts of electricity at the end of the year. By August of the same year, the minister in charge of power came up with a statement countering the vow made earlier in the year (Abati, 2009). In a similar vein, the minister in charge of transport had declared in July 2009 that the contract for the second Niger-bridge, purported to have been awarded during Obasanjo's administration, was a hoax. According to him, all the media hype about the contract was a mere façade designed to make an impression (Okocha, 2009). Since these instances are many, I have on the text Box below, presented more empirical data. The data are used to explore what transpired in a typical Nigerian public discourse.

II. Methodology

The textual exemplars presented as data in the text box below were purposively selected from three leading Nigerian national newspapers. The textual exemplars were selected from the stories the newspapers wrote when they covered the National Political Reform Conference staged in Abuja between February to July 2005. Newspaper coverage of the proceedings of that conference is considered a worthy source of data for this paper because proceedings in that conference marked a special instance where Nigerians gathered in a good number to engage one another in a debate. The three leading Nigerian newspapers from which the textual exemplars were selected are *Guardian*, *Punch* and *Vanguard*. This sampling choice reflects the notion that sampling in a qualitative research is often done with a small sample "purposively selected for its typicality as the best example that represents or reflects the other samples that were left out," (Maxwell, 1996, pp. 71 &79; Wodak& Meyer, 2006, p. 18; Silverman, 2006, p. 308; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 181; Cresswell, 2007, p. 125). This choice is also informed by a need to pick textual exemplars that exemplify how contemporary media discourse in Nigeria is yielding ground to the erroneous belief that "a message does not necessarily need to have a concrete real life referent" (Mayhew, 1997, p. 125). Choosing the selected exemplars as data is also done in the context of the notion that "a one-word quotation or a lengthy story-like description could count as data in qualitative research," (Keyton, 2001, p. 70).

Given the view that spoken words are not neutral, Critical Discourse Analysis was used to analyze the textual exemplars (Wodak& Meyer, 2008). Critical discourse analysis is widely viewed as appropriate for describing, interpreting, analyzing and critiquing social life as reflected in texts (Luke, 1997). Critical Discourse Analysis is also useful for revealing the discursive sources of power, dominance and inequality (Vandijk, 1988).

When researchers use Critical Discourse Analysis, what they do is to "attribute a class of phenomena to segments of text," (Fielding & Lee, 1998, p. 41). The need to check possible interpretative bias made me verify my interpretation of the textual exemplars with the journalists and media organizations that wrote and/or published the interpreted text. I did this verification along the line of the standard procedure for data triangulation in qualitative research. It is a well-documented view that the use of a variety of data sources in the way I did in this paper "injects more validity in the findings and conclusions of a study/paper (Keyton. 2001, p. 77; Jankowski and Wester, 1991, pp. 62-63).

BOX 1: Contradictory and Manipulation Texts

S/No	Newspapers	Textual Exemplar	Date
1.	Guardian	Up till now, I have not seen the document; I remember it very well that the draft constitution was in the bag given to the delegates at the inauguration (p. 23).	24/4/05
2.	Guardian	When the conference started, we had directives and mandates but there was nothing about this constitution, it wasn't part of the document put in our folder, it was not part of any memoranda that we received (p.3).	26/4/05
3.	Vanguard	...The draft constitution argues for a single term of six years for the president with clear proviso that anyone who has completed two terms under the current constitution is not qualified to stand (p. 14).	24/4/05
4.	Punch	Kukah said the conference would continue to be transparent and would shun any surreptitious move at teleguiding it (p. 2).	27/4/05
5.	Punch	I'm not Obasanjo's spy (p. 14).	5/3/05
6.	Vanguard	Obasanjo said the issue of funding for the conference has been taken care of (p. 14).	16/2/05
7.	Punch	Here is a president doing well for his nation, I don't know why we should be making noise about adding extra two years to his tenure (p. 3).	26/4/05
8.	Punch	But he made it clear that there was yet no evidence that any delegate was campaigning for an extension of the stay of the present administration (p. 2).	27/4/05

Sources: *Vanguard*, *Punch* & *Guardian* newspapers of Nigeria, February – July 2005.

Analytic Interpretation

Textual exemplar 1 of Box 1 was uttered by the secretary to the conference. The first thing to note about that exemplar is the contradiction in the place the speaker claimed he had not seen the document and at same time claiming also that he remembered very well that the draft constitution was in the bag given to the delegates at the inauguration. How can somebody be so sure to claim that what he had not seen was in a bag given to them at inauguration?

More disturbing though is how the entailments of exemplar 1 contradict those of exemplar 2. While the secretary to the conference was, in exemplar 1, affirming and denying at the same time that the draft constitution was part of the document given to the delegates at the commencement of the conference, Bola Ajibola an eminent Nigerian Lawyer who uttered exemplar two, was in that exemplar, contradicting what the secretary to the conference was affirming in exemplar 1. The amazing thing about the whole conundrum is that the reporter who reported the secretary's utterance cited in Box 1 as exemplar 1 met the secretary the following day and wrote another story carrying the same contradictions on page four of the same *Guardian* newspaper without being aware of these contradictions. Perhaps, oversight like this might have prompted, scholars (Udoakah, 1993, p. 92) to groan that journalists' style of handling information often confuses the audience in ways that compel the audience to come to terms with new realities in old ways and old realities in new ways. This resonates with Kunczik's (1995, p. 143) view that "journalists have but very shallow knowledge."

Amazingly, when I asked the *Guardian* to comment on whether the contradictions they ignored helped their readers to understand the game the delegates were playing with the discredited draft constitution. The responses I got from the news editor and one of their correspondents were.

1. Yes, absolutely. The first was by Mathew Hassan Kukah, co-secretary to the confab and the second by Bola Ajibola (SAN). If nothing else, both statements must have conveyed to the readers the confusion and uncertainty at the conference

Source: Interview on June 26th 2007 with News Editor of *Guardian*

2. Somebody should have done a follow-up.

Source: *Guardian* correspondent

When I observed that the failure of somebody to follow up demonstrated the newspaper's indifference to the audience's right to be properly informed, the response from the correspondent was:

2. Not that we were indifferent. Remember, *Guardian's* interest was neutrality. We reported everything the way we saw them, the audience was left to discern.

Source: Interview on July 25th 2007 with *Guardian* correspondent

Furthermore, the entailments of exemplar 3 of Box 1 above further highlights why the issue of the draft constitution needed detailed reporting. The person who uttered those words was the person suspected of smuggling in the illegal draft constitution that was intended to legitimize president Obasanjo's third-term bid. The manipulative sting in that exemplar is the "lexically-specific" (Simpson, 1993, p. 172) phrase: *current constitution*. By *specifically* mentioning current constitution, the utterer dribbled the reporters and hoodwinked them into representing his utterance in a manner that made both the reporters and the readers to overlook the fact that if the draft constitution he smuggled into the conference had been accepted, that he and his sponsors would have used the *current constitution* phrase to justify/legitimize President Obasanjo's ambition to be the first person to run the first six-year term canvassed in the smuggled constitution.

When I asked *Vanguard* newspaper why they did not feel uncomfortable with the 'current constitution' phrase, the responses I got from the news editor and the newspaper's correspondent to the conference were:

1. You do not prescribe answers to your interviewee in press interview.

Source: Interview on June 23rd 2007, with News Editor of *Vanguard*

2. What is at issue is the amendment of the 1999 constitution and it is important to emphasize this fact for the readers. The paper could not afford to assume that everybody would appreciate this fact easily.

Interview on May 30th 2007 with *Vanguard's* chief correspondent to the conference

My take on the significance of those waffled responses from *Vanguard* is that it typifies how journalists fail to take to heart a useful view expressed by Julia Penelope as cited in Littlejohn (1996, p. 243). Commenting on manipulative use of language, Penelope informs that:

Whether we are speaking or listening, writing or reading, being conscious of the functions of linguistic structures when we try to communicate or interpret someone else's utterance enables us to identify immediately and in context, uses of language that are dishonest, misleading or manipulative... if we are to protect ourselves against insidious uses of English, we have to be able to identify such uses and challenge them when someone tries to coerce us linguistically.

The entailments of exemplars 4 and 5 on the text Box above is interpreted in the context of how they fell prey to a discourse flaw known as “modal categorical claim to truth and knowledge,” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 105). Modality is always expressed by modal auxiliary verbs like may, might, must, should, can and so forth. But aspects of modality that occur without the usual modal auxiliaries are the ones that newspapers often latch themselves to and by doing so, succumb to a news-framing flaw which supports a view of the world as transparent – as if the news-framing style signals its own meaning to any observer without a further need for interpretation. Modal categorical claim to truth and knowledge manifests in contexts where a commentator (a news source) in saying things, makes excessive truth commitment in his/her proposition (Fairclough, 2001; O,Shaughnessy and Stadler, 2007, p. 120).

In the light of the above, did Hassan Kukah's utterance in exemplar 4 not sound as though he was absolutely sure that there was not and would never be attempts, in any guise, to manipulate the proceedings of the conference? But the entailments of exemplar 3 in the Box show that what Kukah tried to deny with the categorical certainty in exemplar 4 was already going on when he made his categorical denial. Another proof that Kukah's categorical statement was flawed came up when Jerry Gana's categorical denial that he was not a spy as cited in exemplar 5 of the Box turned out to be the opposite.

To a lay reader, the statement cited as exemplar 5 in the Box is brief and clear. But to a critical reader, it might not be too difficult to realize that the statement was a subtext used to conceal other texts. The concealed text (meaning) surfaced when President Obasanjo's outburst against the chairman of the conference, as reported in the *Punch* newspaper of June 27th 2005, revealed Jerry Gana's mission in the conference. That outburst also revealed what Jerry Gana was concealing when he made the categorical denial that he was not Obasanjo's spy.

In a *Punch* newspaper report of June 27th, 2005, Obasanjo had expressed disappointment that the chairman of the conference was keeping him (Obasanjo) in the dark in respect of the proceedings at the conference. The *Punch* report went further to quote Obasanjo saying that if not for his special delegate – Jerry Gana – that he (Obasanjo) would have been in the dark regarding proceeding at the conference.

When Obasanjo's outburst is squared with Jerry Gana's modal categorical text as embodied on exemplar 5, the hypocrisy and distortive potential of modal categorical texts in mass media public sphere becomes quite glaring. When I asked the journalists involved in this report to comment on whether their representing Jerry Gana's utterance in the style under review did not help Gana to hide his ulterior motive of being a presidential delegate during the conference, the editor of the *Punch* newspaper waffled thus:

No! We are only trying to expose him. It won't help him. It's just to expose his thought to the nation. That's what he called himself, he said he was not a spy, but it's e-e-e- it's now left to the public to judge him. Because he was involved in the smuggling of that document and for him to say he wasn't a spy. It's now in e-e-e public court to decide. As I have told you, in the punch, we report as it is. That's exactly what we do. We try to avoid imputation. And we leave the public to judge. They can read between the lines and beyond.

Source: Interview on 6th July 2007 with Editor-in-Chief of *Punch*

My position on *Punch* editor's comments is that his faith in the ability of the audience to judge is exaggerated. This view resonates with those of many scholars. Ang (2001, p. 182) has already expressed the view that the condition under which the audience is summoned to give alternative reading is too over-determined. According to her, this makes it almost impossible for the audience to avoid the preferred meaning. Citing what he calls “populist ventriloquism” Grossberg (1991 p. 139) informs that the word-choice used to couch media messages makes it almost impossible for the masses to avoid preferred or dominant reading/meaning in mass mediated texts. Condit (1991, p. 365) makes this view clearer when she said that “audiences are not free to make meaning at will from mass media texts.”

Obasanjo's utterance as embodied in exemplar 6 of the text Box exemplifies a disturbing use of language in a restricted code/variant. The restricted variant of expression has a narrow range of options. The restricted code of expression does not allow speakers to expand on what they mean. It thrives on shared sense of assumption. It orients towards a social category for which everybody has the same meaning. It reduces the number of alternatives for participants. Where such restriction is rife, manipulation becomes easy (Gouldner, 1976, p. 56; Littlejohn, 1996, p. 197; Gripsrud, 2002, p. 32; Verschueren, 1999, p. 118; Griffins, 2000, p. 344).

Given the high frequency of official corruption in Nigeria and also given the controversy which the source of funds for the conference generated, it would have been better if newspaper readers were told precisely what Obasanjo meant when he said that the issue of funds for the conference had been taken care of. When I asked both *Vanguard* editor and its correspondent to the conference why they failed to go the extra mile of ascertaining what Obasanjo meant in that restricted expression, their responses were:

1. But you cannot force Obasanjo or anyone for that matter to divulge what he wants to withhold because there is no freedom of Information Act to force such compulsion.

Source: interview on June 23rd 2007 with News Editor Vanguard.

2. I do not think the readers' curiosity was sated by this story; clearly a lot could still have been done to enlighten the public. It was a story with a short coming.

Source: interview on May 30th 2007 with vanguard's Chief correspondent to the conference.

Take a look at exemplars 7 and 8 in the Box. If you have done so you probably would have noticed a glaring case of *structural amnesia*. Structural amnesia is a flaw that instantiates how the audience are denied critical perspectives on issues/events because of a failure on the part of journalists to "ask all necessary questions of newsmakers" (Kunczik, 1995, p. 161). In exemplar 7, the *Punch* newspaper (re) presented Greg Mbadiwe, one of President Obasanjo's appointees to the conference, making the proposition embodied in that exemplar. In exemplar 8, on the other hand, the same *Punch* newspaper allowed Hasan Kukah, the co-secretary of the conference, to be constructed as denying what the same newspaper had reported Greg Mbadiwe doing only a day before. The most intriguing thing here is that the reporter who reported what Kukah was denying was the same reporter who reported the entailment of exemplar 7 just a day before.

Amazingly, when I sought *Punch* newspaper's opinion on why the reporter did not draw Kukah's attention to the reporter's earlier story where a delegate as prominent as Greg Mbadiwe did what Kukah was denying, the responses I got were.

1. E-e-e it's assumed that Kukah must have read it himself. It's not the duty of the reporter to show another source. Yes! It's not his duty! What he should have done as a reporter was to ask question that in the light of what Greg Mbadiwe said yesterday, what would be the opinion of Reverend Kukah. But he missed that aspect.

Source: interview on 6th July 2007 with Editor in Chief of *Punch* newspapers

2. Perhaps to get concrete position on the issue from Hassan Kukah since he was a principal officer of the conference. Kukah's position would have been more authoritative than Mbadiwe's especially if the conference received such request for extension.

Source: Interview on May 24th 2007 with *Punch* newspaper's special correspondent to the conference

III. Conclusion

There are two intriguing statements by Kunczik (1995, p.53). The first statement is that "the worst thing threatening every society's social equilibrium is its mass media." The second is that "the real battle for freedom of speech is the freedom of the informed from the informers." This study's recommendations are presaged with these two statements because of their interface with the reasons that prompted Kunczik to make those statements. Amongst these reasons is journalists' illusion of their work as that of "free, independent and objective professionals who report selflessly in service of humanity," (Kunczik, 1995, p.35f). This illusion does not only make journalists to believe that they are born and not made (Kunczik, 1995, p.234) but worse still, this illusion makes journalists believe that they know more than the audience what the audience's media need should be (Kunczik, 1995, p.119f).

The recommendation this paper makes premises the rejection of journalists' claim that they understand more than the audience, what draws audience's interest in the media. Against this backdrop, this paper recommends that journalism school intellectuals should stop, as suggested by Rosen, (1999, p.301), seeing journalism the way journalists see it. The way of achieving this goal is to raise the consciousness of journalists and journalism-school academics. Consciousness is targeted because consciousness is seen as the centre from which power radiates (Gouldner, 1976, p.84). The raising of consciousness in this context must be targeted at language. It must target how language contributes to the domination of some people by others and how language-consciousness can, also, constitute an emancipatory tool. Journalists who are conscious of the manipulative potentials of language would be able to check the myopia of assuming that asking news sources for detailed comments amounts to biased imputations by a reporter.

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