

The Language of Industrial Actions in Nigeria

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Abstract

Previous studies have focused more on ways of mitigating and avoiding industrial disharmony to the neglect of the use of the language of ideological representations during industrial actions. Focusing on the six months (1st July – 17th December, 2013) old strike embarked upon by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), this study describes the language use of industrial actions in Nigeria and its ideological representations. It makes use of the direct speeches and utterances made during the strike by the principal actors as indexed in two Nigerian daily newspapers – *Daily/Sunday Sun*, and *The Nation*. Privileging Critical Discourse Analysis, the study unearths the subtle and even some times blatant ideological representations in the language of employers and employees. In essence, it shows how ideology and identity shape discursive practices, and the strong affinity between language and ideologies. The findings also reveal the exploitation of the language of dominance, power, and authority by employers of labour; and the exploration of the language of collective bargaining, protest, struggle, and resistance against domination by the employees. It is further discovered that both the employers and employees employ the language of accusations and counter accusations, each always shifting and passing on the bulk of blame to the other.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, ideology, identity, language, power and strike

1. Introduction

The recent stories about industrial relations in Nigeria are not fascinating ones. The Nigerian socio-political system seems to be ridden with industrial disputes that ultimately culminate into industrial actions. This is evident in the incessant strike actions in almost all facets of our national life – education, health, power, to mention just a few. Strike is a period in which workers deliberately stop working because of disagreement with their employer(s). It used as protest tool by employees to register their grievances, and to demand better working conditions. Strike actions are the unhealthy consequences of poor industrial relations. By industrial relation I mean “all the activities in manpower management including the process of joint employment regulations between union and employers (labour management relations) and the intervening action in workplace relations by outside agents, i.e. the government” (Yusuf, 2008[Akpala, 1982]). Okaka and Eriaguna (2011) define industrial relation as “the pattern of interaction or relationship between employer and/ or management on the one hand, and employee and/ or trade unions on the other, including the activities of government in supervising and controlling the industrial relations system.” Simply put, industrial relation refers to the interaction between employers and the employees and the regulation of such interaction.

In Nigeria, industrial relation has received scholarship attention from mostly the social science disciplines (see Yusuf, 2006, 2008; Okaka and Eriaguna, 2011; Bello, Bello and Alabi, 2012). Each of the studies has emphasized the complexity of the system in Nigeria, and suggested possible ways of avoiding and mitigating industrial disharmonies and actions. For instance, Yusuf (2008) traces the evolution and development of the industrial relation system in Nigeria. The study reveals that the system has undergone different phases, with each phase influenced by the ideologies of the government in power. Such ideologies range from “laissez-faire”, “interventionism” (direct control occasioned by post-independence military era which was marked by several military promulgations and decrees), to “corporatism” period which is characterized by “dialogue, negotiation and compromise” (Yusuf, 2008).

Okaka and Eriaguna (2011) examine the role of government agents in the Nigerian industrial relation system. The study identified Federal Ministry of Employment, Labour and Productivity; Industrial Arbitration Panel, The National Labour Advisory Council, National Industrial Court, Boards of Inquiry as some of the government agencies saddled with the responsibility of assisting the government on labour related matters. It also shows that inexperience personnel, delay in the dispatch of industrial matters, among others are largely responsible for the poor industrial relation system in Nigeria.

However, few questions are yet to be formulated and addressed by scholarship in relation to the significance of the linguistic configurations of the principal actors of industrial actions. In order to fill this gap, this study focuses on the six months strike embarked upon by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) to examine the language use of industrial actions in Nigeria with the primary aim of exposing the ideological representations in them since “ideologies cannot be developed, sustained, or challenged except through communication. And communication cannot occur without reflecting the ideology of the speaking individual and the society of which (s) he is a member” (Hahn, 1998:14).

The Academic Staff Union of Universities embarked on an indefinite strike on 1st July, 2013; to make the Federal Government of Nigeria implement the FG/ASUU 2009 agreement. Among the contending issues were infrastructural development of Nigerian Universities and payment of Earned Academic Allowances (EAA).

The impetus for this study arises from the fact that there is a dialectical relationship between language and society, that is, the interdependence between language and society. In other words, the society influences discourse, and discourse in turn influences the society. This has earlier been espoused by Sapire (1949:160) that our world 'is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group.' This extreme view was however, reformulated in what we have as Sapire-Whorf Hypothesis of linguistic relativity. In essence, language is a social phenomenon that exhibits a close relationship with socio-political matters in all human societies. In other words, discourse is "inherently part of and influenced by social structure, and produced in social interaction" (van Dijk /[www.discourse.org.OldArticles/critical discourse analysis](http://www.discourse.org.OldArticles/critical%20discourse%20analysis)).

Consequently, linguists have continued to show renewed interest in exploring the linguistic configurations that transcend socio-political discourses. For instance, Chilwa (2006) studies the linguistic variation and ideological differences in the headlines of two Nigerian newspapers – *The Guardian* and *Punch*. His study reveals that "discourse is a product of social processes" Chilwa (2006:98) and the linguistic deployment reflects the newspapers' ideologies. Adesina (2009) focusing on a Nigerian Election Tribunal ruling reveals the ideologies of the judiciary – 'presenting it as a unique profession which warrants honour' (Adesina 2009). It also shows how the judiciary stresses its independence and supremacy in ensuring that its orders are obeyed to the latter. Odebunmi (2009) studies politeness in print media political interviews in Nigeria. He discovers that 'much of what transpires between participants in political interviews is informed by previously or spontaneously conceived opinions which may be presented directly, using politic, polite or impolite expressions' (Odebunmi, 2009:21). These features highlight 'the beliefs and tendencies that participants bring into the interactions' (Odebunmi, 2009:21).

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a discourse analytical tool that examines language function in relation to socio-political structure of a particular human society. CDA is a multidirectional and multidisciplinary approach that draws insight from linguistics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and sociolinguistics. It was started in the 1970s by the "critical linguists" mostly from the United Kingdom and Australia (Fowler et al 1979, Mey 1985, van Dijk /[www.discourse.org.OldArticles/critical discourse analysis](http://www.discourse.org.OldArticles/critical%20discourse%20analysis)). The assumption of these "critical linguists" was that the dominant formal linguistics of the 1960s and early 1970s was "asocial" and "uncritical", (van Dijk [www.discourse.org.OldArticles/critical discourse analysis](http://www.discourse.org.OldArticles/critical%20discourse%20analysis)) thus the need for a more critical analytical research tradition. In the words of van Dijk, CDA is:

a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality (van Dijk van Dijk /[www.discourse.org.OldArticles/critical discourse analysis](http://www.discourse.org.OldArticles/critical%20discourse%20analysis)).

CDA focuses on "the relationship that exists among language, ideology, and power. It is political in intent, viewing social practices and their linguistic realization as inseparable" (Adesina, 2009[Caldas-Coulthard and Coulthard, 1996: xi – xii]). By ideology, I mean 'a set of beliefs on which a political or economic system is based, or which strongly influence the way people behave' (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* 5th Ed). Within the ambit of Critical Discourse Analysis, "ideology is a set of beliefs, socio-political and cultural convention upon which people's actions or discursive practices are based" (Chilwa 2013:239[Polynton, 1985; Fairclough, 1989]). Ideologies are established to be used as tools for domination (Chilwa, 2006: 8 [Fairclough 1989]). Chilwa (2006: 89) observes that CDA "explains the relationship between language as a social process and ideology which is mediated by language." He goes further to state that "critical discourse analysis shows how language is used to affect people and confine them in some social and economic conditions as the society deems fit." And "like Systemic Functional Linguistics, CDA views language as social constructs, showing how discursive events influence the context in which they occur and how context in turn influences the discursive events" (Chilwa 2013:238).

At the time CDA was developed, especially with the work of Fowler, interest was on class distinction, and the hegemony that existed among the different classes of people. Its basic aim is to raise the people's consciousness and interpret texts based "on the member resources (MR) that produced it" (Adesina 2009 [Fowler 1996, Fairclough 2001]) by looking critically on "the experiential, relational, and expressive values of words and grammatical features, and the interactional conventions used" (Adesina 2009). Critical discourse analysis

examines how language use of any text becomes a linguistic thumbprint of socio-political identities. The background ideology, that is, the underlying beliefs and how such is justified by people is of primary importance to CDA. CDA seeks to examine how “discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of *power* and *dominance* in society” (van Dijk). It is a cognitively oriented analytical approach that shows the ideological underpinning of discursive practices. In a nutshell, the basic tenets of CDA as summarized by (van Dijk [Fairclough and Wodak 1997:271 – 80) could be presented as follows:

1. CDA addresses social problems
2. Power relations are discursive
3. Discourse constitutes society and culture
4. Discourse does ideological work
5. Discourse is historical
6. The link between text and society is mediated
7. Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory
8. Discourse is a form of social action

From the foregoing, it becomes obvious that CDA is an appropriate linguistic tool in the analyses of the language of industrial action as a social problem, social action and ideological imprint.

3. Methodology

The major preoccupation of this research is to examine the ideological representations in the language of industrial actions in Nigeria from a critical discourse analysis perspective. However, it is not possible to analyse the language of all the industrial actions in Nigeria that have been found to espouse ideological representations. Therefore, our scope is limited to the six months (1st July – 17th December, 2013) old strike embarked upon by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). The import is to ascertain the ideological representations of the Federal Government (employer) and ASUU (employee). This particular strike is selected based on the national and international attention it attracted. For instance, it was the only strike that a sitting president met personally with the union leaders for about fourteen hours. A total of 20 direct speeches on the strike by the principal actors from both sides, that is Federal Government and ASUU representatives were sampled through purposive sampling from two widely read Nigerian national dailies – *The Nation*, and *Daily/Sunday Sun*.

4. Analysis and Findings

The language of industrial action in the context of this study refers to the language use by the Federal Government of Nigeria (the employer) and Academic Staff Union of University (the employee). This form of language use is significantly important since it shows the ideological representations of both parties.

The findings of this study reveal that employers of labour use the language of accusations. Through language, the employer’s ideology and belief in the principle of the one who hires has the power to fire at any time is enacted. In other words, he/she who pays the piper dictates the tune. The study also observes that the employees deploy the language of accusations against their employers and assert their ideologies of struggle, firmness, collective bargain, and patriotism.

4.1 Employer’s Ideological Representation

The Federal Government (the employer) in asserting the unequal power relation between her and ASUU issued threats and directives to members of ASUU to return to work. A few instances can be cited from our data:

Example 1:

Mr. Nyesom Wike (Supervising Minister of Education): Government has reviewed the entire situation and came to the conclusion that the continuation of the strike is an attempt by ASUU to sabotage all efforts to address the issues. As a responsible government, we cannot allow the continuous closure of our public universities for this length of time (five months), as this poses danger to the system, the future of our youths, and national development. Consequently, the Federal Government has directed as follows: All vice-chancellors of Federal universities that are currently on strike should immediately reopen for academic and allied activities as directed by their pro-chancellors. . . . Any academic staff, who fails to resume on or before the 4th of December, 2013 automatically ceases to be a staff of the institution.

(*The Nation*, Friday, November 29, 2013: 61)

In the above extract, Mr. Nyesom Wike, the supervising minister of education spends quality time to explain government’s concerted effort to end the lingering strike. This was to justify the government’s ultimatum given to the striking lecturers or face dismissal. He goes further to accuse ASUU of being saboteurs and irresponsible people who are insensitive to the plight of the majority of Nigerians. The overriding intention is to win public sympathy and incite the masses against ASUU. It also asserts the underlying ideology of the government as being responsible and having more power and authority above ASUU. This is explicitly expressed in the

illocutionary act of directives: ‘All vice-chancellors ... should immediately reopen.... Any academic staff, who fails to resume on or before the 4th of December, 2013 automatically ceases to be a staff of the institution’

Example 2:

Dr Doyin Okupe (Senior Special Assistant to the President on Public Affairs): The negative disposition of the ASUU leadership is unarguably a pre-conceived and calculated treacherous plot pointedly intended to undermine the Presidency and subvert the Federal Government of Nigeria. This is clearly the hallmark of a leadership that is determined to employ subterfuge in an attempt to hold government, students and their parents and other stakeholders to ransom in a reckless and irresponsible display of insensitivity, lawlessness and absolute lack of patriotism and even fear of God.... Given the fact that government had reached [an] agreement with ASUU to make available N100 billion for the provision of infrastructure on campuses 61 universities, with a further commitment of another N200 billion over the next two years, and N40 billion of the N90 billion Earned Allowance demanded by the lecturers, one would have expected them to reconsider their stand....This is why we make bold to say there is nothing dictatorial, draconic or undemocratic in the order by the Federal Government for striking lecturers to return to work or face dismissal....

(*The Nation*, Monday, December 2, 2013:4 & 53)

Again in example 2 above, the government representative, Dr Doyin Okupe attacks and accuses ASUU of recklessness, lawlessness, irresponsibility, insensitivity, recalcitrance and dishonesty. He further alleges that the leadership of ASUU is deliberately holding the ‘government, students and their parents and other stakeholders to ransom’. He gives detail account of government’s commitment with the ultimate intention of presenting ASUU as inconsiderate victimizers and therefore, enemy of the people; while government and the masses are presented as the victims of ASUU’s ‘negative disposition’. He presents the government as responsible, and therefore, friend to the people. To re-enact government – ASUU asymmetry power relation, where the government is seen as having more power, Okupe justifies and reiterates government’s ultimatum to the striking lecturers to resume work or be sacked. In essence, government asserts its power to hire and fire. This is no doubt a representation of ideology of superiority and supremacy.

Example 3:

Mr. Nyesom Wike (Supervising Minister of Education): The decision to shift the date of compulsory resumption of federal universities for academic activities is now Monday, December, 9. This decision has been taken as a result of the respect we have for the former ASUU President.... The Federal Government appreciates the need to revive infrastructure in our universities and other tertiary institutions, hence the government has put in place the process to effectively address the challenges identified by the NEEDS Assessment report voluntarily initiated by President Goodluck Jonathan.

(*The Nation*, Wednesday, December 4, 2013:1)

Wike manipulates with language to present the Federal Government as being sympathetic with ASUU for the death of its former national president, Professor Festus Iyayi, who died in a road accident on his way to attend ASUU’s national executive meeting. Hence, the shift in the date of ‘compulsory resumption’ is a mark of respect and honour the Federal Government has for ASUU and its late past president. Also, scheming with linguistic resources, he presents the Federal Government as being very objective and responsible in appreciating ‘the need to revive infrastructure in our universities and other tertiary institutions’. However, he subtly reiterates employer’s ideology of supremacy, whose orders must be obeyed by the employee through the lexical choices (e.g. compulsory resumption) he makes.

Example 4:

President Goodluck Jonathan (the president of Nigeria): The way ASUU has conducted the matter [strike] shows they were extreme and when Iyayi died they now said the strike was now indefinite. Our children have been at home for over five months. We didn’t give them ultimatum. It was the Committee of Vice Chancellors that took that decision. The supervising minister of education only passed on the decision. What ASUU is doing is no longer trade dispute but subversive action.

(*Sunday Sun*, December, 2013:8)

The President’s statement is an outright accusation of extremity and concerted effort to run down and destroy the Federal Government of Nigeria, against ASUU. He weeps up sentiments in the use of the plural possessive pronoun, ‘our’ to present himself as one of the victims of the strike. Here, the President asserts that as a president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, he is a father to all, hence, he is concerned about the welfare of all. Like other Federal Government spokesmen, the President is also caught in the game of blame shifting. We see this when he denies that the ultimatum came from the Committee of Vice Chancellors, not the government; and

that the supervising minister of education only conveyed the committee's decision. What remains unclear in this denial is whether or not the supervising minister of education is the press secretary or spokesman of the Committee of Vice Chancellors. Also, the Committee of Vice Chancellors consists of people who are not ASUU members, but directly answerable to the Federal Government, and therefore, within the context of this study are subsumed under Federal Government. Given the immediate foregoing, the Federal Government still gives orders.

4.2 Employee's Ideological Representation

There is an avalanche deployment of linguistic resources to project the ideologies of struggle against subjugation; resistance, collective bargain, and patriotism. A few instances will lay credence to these findings.

Example 5:

Dr Nasir Issa Fagge (ASUU National President): Dear Comrades, as the struggle to save Nigerian Universities system is being pursued, I'll like to salute all our members for their resoluteness in ensuring that the 2009 ASUU/Government Agreement is implemented in accordance with the Roadmap defined by the 2012 MoU. We believe very strongly that the rot and decay in the University System is not only arrestable but also reversible.... What government has so far been doing is no more than a repeat performance of one-act-play: all the deceptions, propaganda, lies, mischief and such other Shenanigans were tried by previous Governments, including Military Juntas, but our resolve to save the University System and our Country remained unwaivered. We will continue to carry this banner of struggle to its logical conclusion. I urge all our members to maintain the spirit of camaraderie remain firmly resolute in ensuring that our patriotic struggle succeeds. United we Bargain, Divided we Beg!

(The Nation, Monday, December 2, 2013:4)

In the above example, Dr Nasir Issa Fagge, invokes the spirit of solidarity among ASUU members and reminds them of their patriotic struggle to 'save Nigerian Universities system.' He accuses the employer (Federal Government), past and present of unrepentant display of deceit and unwillingness to invest in quality education. Underpinning the employees' ideology of collective bargaining as an indispensable survival mechanism to employees, Fagge concludes 'United we Bargain, Divided we Beg!'

Example 6:

Dr Ademola Aremu (ASUU National Treasurer): With the latest action, [i.e. the sack threat handed down to lecturers by the Federal Government] the Federal Government has shown that they are not committed to all they have been saying.... We are saying show commitment to the resolutions. They should address the issue we sent to them in the letter and we are not demanding extra kobo. Under the military it did not work. This is another long path to make the strike linger more than necessary.

(The Nation, Friday, November 29, 2013: 4 & 61)

In the extract above, Dr Aremu launches an attack on the Federal Government, accusing it of insincerity. He reiterated ASUU's undaunted stance on the implementation of the agreement, hence underscoring the ideology of protest, struggle and firmness. He, through the illocutionary act of directive warns that the threat was capable of worsening the situation and thereby prolonging the strike.

Example 7:

Dr Tony Monye (Chairman of UNIBEN ASUU): They can't force us back. The Minister did not send us on strike. Let us see how they are going to enforce it.

(The Nation, Friday, November 29, 2013: 61)

Example 7 above is indeed a striking display of ideology of resistance against perceived oppression. Monye in saying, 'The Minister did not send us on strike' implies that lecturers are loyal to their national body, and not the Federal Government. His predominant use of the plural pronoun, 'us' is deliberate to underpin the ideology of collective bargaining and responsibility.

5. Conclusion

This study has shown, through the analysis of data, using critical discourse analysis that the language of industrial actions in Nigeria is characterized by ideological representations. The employers' and employees' ideologies are carefully encoded in their linguistic configurations. The preponderance of the language of dominance and superiority by the employer (FG) is largely informed by the belief that the one who hires has the power to fire. It is also used by the FG to assert its position as the highest authority in the land. While the predominance of the language of protest, struggle, resistance and collective bargaining used by ASUU is anchored on the belief that it is only through collective bargaining that the employees' survival is guaranteed. However, the study discovered that both employer and employee engage in the language of blame shifting, thus

exposing the belief of denial of responsibility among employers of labour and their employees during industrial actions. Though this study presents succinct information on the ideological representations of the Federal Government and Academic Staff Union of Universities using a discourse tool of critical discourse analysis, further studies can also study the language of industrial disputes and actions at the state, local and even private establishments to examine their ideological representations.

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