

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Funeral Speeches in Kenya: A Case of Junior Odinga's Speech

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Abstract

The objective of this paper was to critically analyze the political undertones and the socioeconomic allusions in the funeral speeches in Kenya with a case study of a speech delivered by Junior Odinga during the requiem mass for Fidel Odinga. This study employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA henceforth) by Norman Fairclough (1995), especially the assumption that texts are open to diverse interpretations. The purposefully selected corpus of the speech reveals that Fidel, as eulogized, lived in a very harsh socio-political environment, yet he hailed from an economically able family. Most importantly, the study reveals that the deceased had two phases of life contrary to popular beliefs of the political elite in Kenya. What attracted this research is the urge to explore the dynamics of funeral speeches in the Kenyan context. This study found out that funeral speeches in Kenya are carefully crafted to carry very heavy social, economic and political undertones. Furthermore, the study established that funeral speeches in Kenya overlap the eulogy boundary and spills over to other spheres of life not only of the deceased but to the elite political class. The study recommends further research in the area of the concept of face and face threatening mitigation strategies in funeral discourse. In addition, this study recommends an in depth study of the contextual forces behind eulogy speeches in Kenya.

Keywords: Political speech, political, discourse, funeral speech, Raila Odinga, Junior Odinga.

1. Introduction

Funeral services and requiem masses in Kenya are often used as platforms to issue political statements by politicians, their supporters, their family members, their sycophants and even their sympathizers (Habwe 1999). During the requiem mass for Fidel Odinga, who is the son to the revolutionist and a doyen of opposition politics in Kenya, Raila Odinga, several politicians took to the podium "to condole with the family and eulogize the deceased." As their characteristic way of making political speeches, many politicians made a number of politically sensitive statements. One would have expected that in the context, being church, people would generally stick to the script of eulogy. Arguably, there was some toning down on politics by those who gave their speeches albeit. It was, however, the unexpected carefully worded speech from Junior Odinga that attracted the interest of this research. The speech by Fidel's brother moved the congregation not only by its emotional appeal but greatly by its political undertones and socioeconomic allusions. Given the enormous reactions the speech received in the mass and social media, it is important to decipher the political undertones and socioeconomic allusion contained in the speech. First, some background information may suffice.

The family of Fidel Odinga is a highly political one. The grandfather, the late Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, was the first vice president of the republic of Kenya and was heavily involved in the liberation of Kenya from the British colonialists. Raila Amolo Odinga, the father to Fidel Odinga (the late, who was being eulogized), was also groomed by the father to become a politician. In fact, Raila grew up to be one of the most fierce politicians Kenya has ever had in history. He was involved in the second liberation of Kenya. He has arguably had a rough political path. He was under house arrest for 76 months following the failed coup attempt in 1982, and which he was closely associated with (Babafemi, 2006). Raila was later charged with treason in a controversial court proceeding and when judgment was passed, he was detained for six years in jail. During his detention, Fidel was grown up under the care of the mother, Ida Odinga, and other family members. One year after his detention, Raila was rearrested alongside others like Kenneth Matiba, Charles Rubia and was, again, detained for one year. All this time, the political climate in Kenya was building up, more resentment against the dictatorial government regime continued. Raila, a Germany trained civil engineer took exile in Norway upon his release from detention.

He was later to come back to Kenya and continue with the struggle for reform in the government system. He teamed up with others in the opposition and continued with a very active political life. Raila Odinga was viewed, by many in the government, as a hard oppositionist against the then Kenya African National Union (KANU) ruling regime and was closely monitored by the government machinery. Raila was considered not only an antigovernment, but also a threat to the status quo of the ruling political class.

In a highly tribal political environment, Raila vied for the presidency in many unsuccessful attempts. His family experienced very harsh government attributes. Such was the environment that Fidel Odinga grew up in. Fidel, coming from a rich family in all respects, did not join active politics as many had expected. In the Kenyan political scene, most of the politicians are people who have succeeded their fathers. Politics in Kenya has a sense of inheritance to it. It was against the expectation of many that Fidel, the first born son to Raila Odinga, did not join or even vie for a political office. However, Fidel was hailed in the eulogy to have had a silent eye in politics as the father's adviser and silent campaigner. Even so, he was not a politician and preferred to remain focus in business, a career that saw him become the darling of many across the political divide. It is no wonder his funeral mass brought many together regardless of tribe and political affiliations. The tribal equation in Kenyan politics cannot escape any one's attention; politicians and linguists alike. It is on this basis that the speech we focus on ends in a statement made in a native tongue. To linguists, this speaks an element in discourse. Notably, the sampled speech contains political undertones that can only be understood in a political environment. Although Junior Odinga was not giving a political speech in a political rally, the political implications of his speech are inferred and implied. Implications and inferences are key elements in discourse analysis.

1.2 Problem Statement

It is without a doubt that the subject of discourse has attracted the attention of many linguists; from social linguistics to pragmatics, and generally to applied linguistics. Many articles in journals, books and postgraduate theses have also been written on this area. Some of these include, Habwe (1999, 2010, 2011), Msanjila (1989), Walubengo (2010), Matei (2013) among many others. A close look at literature reveals that there is either a deliberate neglect or lack of interest in the funeral discourses in Kenya. This is why this research tries to delve in the otherwise "no man's ground" to try bridging the gap in knowledge in this interesting area.

1.3 Research Questions

This research was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the socioeconomic undertones in the speech delivered by Junior Odinga in the eulogy speech he gave during the requiem mass for Fidel Odinga?
2. What are the political undertones in the speech that is characteristic of Kenyan funeral speeches evident in Junior's speech?

1.4 Scope

This research was limited to funeral discourse and, specifically, a speech delivered by Junior Odinga during his brother's requiem mass at All Saints Cathedral, Nairobi, Kenya. The research addressed political and socioeconomic undertones evident in this particular speech.

1.5 Theoretical Underpinnings

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA henceforth) as espoused by Norman Fairclough (1995) who developed a three dimensions approach in handling discourse analysis. These included:

1. The object of analysis (including verbal, visual or verbal and visual texts).
2. The processes by means of which the object is produced and received (writing/ speaking/designing and reading/listening/viewing) by human subjects.
3. The socio-historical conditions which govern these processes.

In Fairclough's opinion each of these dimensions needs a different kind of analysis such as:

1. text analysis (description),
2. processing analysis (interpretation),
3. social analysis (explanation).

What is useful about this approach is that it enables us to decipher many meanings from an otherwise meaningless utterance/text. In this view, we may need to understand the following key concepts in CDA:

1.5.1 Discourse

According to Titscher et.al. (1998: 42), discourse is a wide term that refers to a whole spectra of meanings. This definition indicate that discourse is not just finding a meaning in a text or an utterance, but rather finding many meanings that can be deciphered from a text. Fairclough (1989: 24) defines discourse as a process of social interaction. Here, the interaction is not just restricted to a text but an utterance too. Of key important to this study is that an utterance is also a text, which may be written or unwritten.

1.5.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis finds its roots from the critical theory of language, which in essence views language as a social phenomena. This is not one approach, but rather a combination of approaches. Several linguists may define it variedly. We, however, use the definition provided by Fairclough (1993: 135) thus;

discourse analysis which aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practice, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony.

Fairclough, as demonstrated in the foregoing observations, provides us with the framework of analyzing the speech by showing the relationships and the connectedness to social practices and events. In the speech in question, one may ask what is really critical in its analysis. In discourse, to provide a critical analysis is to find out the hidden meanings, the interactions of power and how it shapes peoples' thinking. There are a number of researchers who have investigated the concept of power and ideology. In this study, the two concepts are not of central concern though. What we seek to achieve in this paper has been summarized by Batstone (1995) thus;

Critical Discourse Analysts seek to reveal how texts are constructed so that particular (and potentially indoctrinating) perspectives can be expressed delicately and covertly; because they are covert, they are elusive of direct challenge, facilitating what Kress calls the "retreat into mystification and impersonality." (Batstone 1995: 198-199).

1.6 Literature Review

Matei (2014) analyzed the concept of power as portrayed in Wamitila's novel; *Unaitwa Nani?*. In this analysis, Matei looks at the power differences and the way characterization in the novel is based on gender differences. This work may differ in methodology and approach, but is quite significant to us in understanding the social relations of power.

Walubengo (2010) studied politeness as revealed in the circumcision songs among the Bukusu community of western Kenya. His major concern was how the songs save face of the hearers. The major thesis was that the songs carry very sensitive messages yet are often sang publicly. Walubengo (2010), therefore, concludes that strategies of indirectness among others are key in saving public face. The focus and data of this study differ significantly with Walubengo's work although the social aspects of his investigation may be of great use to the current research.

Habwe (2010) handles honorifics as one of the ways of face saving in naturally occurring conversations in Nairobi. He concludes that honorifics make Kiswahili conversations fruitful and they contribute to less conflicts in interactions. Evidently, Habwe's research is different from the present study but it will be useful to the current research in several aspects.

Habwe (1999), on the other hand concentrated on political speeches. Although he draws his data from natural speeches from the campaign rallies, the data on the funeral discourse situation as used in this study may have a political angle. Consequently, Habwe's investigation and the present study are different. In addition, Habwe's concern was on cohesion and coherence while our concern, in this study, is the political and socioeconomic undertones in a funeral eulogy speech.

It is also of central concern to us to refer to Holme's work of (1997) and Lackof (1998) which are important works in discourse. Although these two studies are different, they informed our research in terms of methodology of data analysis. These two works informed this research in the manner they handled the data.

1.7 Methodology

As mentioned earlier this research employed the CDA in analyzing data. The data was identified on purpose. The various segments of the speech were isolated and analyzed within the premises of the CDA. We employed the arguments espoused by Fairclough (1995).

1.8 Data Analysis and Discussion

The data analyzed in this study are excerpts from Junior Odinga's eulogy of Fidel Odinga.

Excerpt 1:

- a) "...Fidel would probably be a general in the army, if he was not an Odinga..."

Discussion:

The expression '(If) he (Fidel) was not an Odinga, he would probably be a general in the army' gives room for several inferences through a critical analysis.

1. 'an Odinga'....this means; Odinga is a brand that is associated with left wing tendencies (In left-right

politics, left-wing politics are political positions or activities that accept or support social equality and egalitarianism, often in opposition to social hierarchy and social inequality. They typically involve concern for those in society who are perceived as disadvantaged relative to others and an assumption that there are unjustified inequalities that need to be reduced or abolished (see Wikipedia/29/1/2015). The leftists are usually anti-governments. Therefore, they, and their associates, are seen as threats to the government. They may never be recruited to any government agency, let alone the army. Most importantly, an Odinga brand being leftist, cannot be allowed to come close to security information that may be accessed whilst serving in the army.

2. 'a general in the army.' In the army, a general is a higher rank in the pecking order. Being associated with an Odinga, even if Fidel would have secured a position in the army, he would probably not have been allowed to rise to the rank of a general.
3. Another inference that can be made is that of Odinga's association with the 1982 coup attempt in Kenya. These are historical events that cannot be wished away in the history of Kenya where Odinga features prominently.
 - b) '...when we were younger...those of you who remember V.O.K (Voice of Kenya)...just before the news, there was the national anthem, Fidel would make us stand at attention as he goes around matching in the living room...'

Several inferences can be made from the foregoing statement:

- 1) Flash back statement; 'those of you who remember V.O.K (Voice of Kenya)...VOK was a government owned media house.' At the time (in context), the station was highly controlled by the government and almost all the news items keenly checked before they could go on air. This statement was carefully crafted and placed in this particular speech. It was meant to make the audience reminiscence the dark days of lack of freedom of expression (see our introduction).
- 2) '... just before the news, there was the national anthem, Fidel would make us stand at attention as he goes around matching in the living room...'. This second part of the speech was targeted at reinforcing the previous assertion of Fidel having the attributes of being an army officer, a position which, because of his being an Odinga, he could never get.
- 3) Fidel is also portrayed to have had attributes of patriotism. Whenever the national anthem was sung, just before the news, he made his siblings to stand at attention in obedience to the national flag. The flag and other national symbols at the time were used by the presidency to control and ensure loyalty to the head of state. All these are informed by the sociopolitical environment at various times in the history of Kenya.
- c) "...through Fidel, we got to know a good number of our relatives, as he made a point of knowing all our cousins and relatives in Sakwa, Gem and beyond..."
A critical analysis of this statement shows some of the social undertones present in the speech in question. Fidel was a social person who connected well with relatives. This is contrary to the popular belief in Kenya that children from prominent and rich families snob their relatives and the general public. Most importantly, this expression exposes the fact that Fidel had a social network that went beyond tribe and family.
- d) "...he was human and he had his own flaws...indeed it would be a mess to portray him as a saint...one thing we agree though, is that he had a big heart at times to a fault..."
This statement begins as thought the speech maker would want to introduce something negative that then would reveal the human part of Fidel Odinga. However, the speech maker uses a humorous oxymoron and proceeds with a very positive statement. This must have been very intentional for the speaker to identify with the flaws of humanity and make his audience comfortable during his speech event.
- e) "...the physical and emotional scars Fidel bore are a testimony that Fidel loved life and lived it with a big spoon...be it from chasing Rosemary around the house in Kileleshwa and sliding into the glass door in the process, to falling off a guava tree in Migori and being rescued by an ambulance...which was a wheelbarrow being pushed by Bill..."

In a well crafted metaphorical language full of figures of speech, Junior Odinga robustly reveals two socioeconomic sides of Fidel. First, that Fidel was raised in a well to do family that lived in the rich areas of Nairobi (...around the house in Kileleshwa). Kileleshwa is (and especially during the time in context) among the high end areas of Nairobi. This is still the case currently. Only the well to do people could and can afford the housing facilities in these areas. This is an economic undertone that has been figuratively rendered. Secondly, it seems Fidel was also familiar with the challenges of life that others went through in Kenyan rural areas. This is expressed in 'falling off a guava tree and being rescued by an ambulance, which was a wheelbarrow'. This expression reveals the hard socioeconomic life of the rural folk in Kenya, represented here by Migori and a

guava tree. In the rural areas, as expressed in this speech, an ambulance is a luxury that only exist in a dream to the rural folk.

As though to show the glamour and privileged position that Fidel enjoyed, Junior Odinga extends the second part of this excerpt by saying that ‘...he was known to be the first kid with a chopper bicycle with gears, his love for tools and toys extended to his adult life as evidenced by his passion for his cars, watches and his licensed firearms...’ This extension gives further the economic strength of Fidel. Junior Odinga concludes this speech by listing some of the nicknames given to Fidel as; Hatari (Swahili word for Danger), Denof, Man Didi, Gagolo. Nicknames play a special role in Africa and are usually meant to communicate special attributes of a person. It is also a way of showing social closeness between people. Junior, in this case may have wanted to let his audience realize how close he was with the deceased.

In concluding his speech Junior Odinga addressed the dead and his parents in his native language; Dholuo. This occurrence was also of key importance to this study. Observably, in so doing, the speech maker intends to show that he belongs to some tribe and hence he is not a social outcast. This is also extended to the dead; the late Fidel Odinga, whom he also addressed in the native tongue; Dholuo.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussions on the case we studied, we observe that funeral discourses in Kenya have a number of socioeconomic and political undertones. These may be contained in the eulogy narrative in the speeches delivered during requiem masses. In Kenya, politics feature prominently in funerals. Funerals are platforms that are, more often than not, used to issue political statements that touch both the rich and the poor. In eulogizing the dead, politicians and non politicians alike find themselves in situations of making political assertions. Junior Odinga’s speech, although not made for a political audience, has political implications than a eulogy per se. Funeral masses are political platforms for making references to the current and past political ills in society. Socioeconomic implications also feature prominently in eulogy speeches in Kenya. The use of metaphors and other figurative language structures are useful styles in eulogy discourse. Due to constraints of time and other related resources, we recommend that future research should be carried out on the areas of dirges and their role in funeral discourse.

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