

## **A Multimodal Analysis of Some Visual Images in the Political Rally Discourse of 2011 Electioneering Campaigns in Southwestern Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the visual agency in political campaign discourse in south-western Nigeria by analysing some visual images that are used for political communication in the political rally context. Data for the study were obtained from 12 political rallies, two each of the six south-western Nigerian states. Systemic functional multimodal discourse analytical framework and Barthes' conception of the interaction of signs encapsulated in the concepts of "anchorage" and "relay" provide the theoretical perspective for the analysis of the data. Data analysis reveals that the discourse participants use semiotic artefacts such as vests, ankara and head wears to communicate messages relating to the visions, ideals, abilities and promises of the political parties and politicians to the electorate in order to gain their acceptance. The paper reveals further that the visual signifiers in the discourse were also used to give aesthetic and affective appeal to the discourse. The paper concludes that the visual resources communicated political meanings and highlighted certain cultural and social factors in the Nigerian environment.

### **Introduction**

Communication in the modern world has assumed a new dimension as the near exclusive reliance on verbal expression of the past is being enriched by multimodal communication. One major cause of this change is globalisation and the wide access to the digital space, which have impacted greatly on how human beings communicate. The digital space and all the forms of technology in use have undermined the supremacy of verbal language in the conception of literacy, as diverse aspects of visibility have been incorporated into literacy. Another major reason is the fact that verbal and non-verbal language cannot actually be separated. Communication is thus increasingly becoming multimodal across different contexts as text producers draw on a wide range of semiotic resources for the projection of meaning. Natharius (2004:2) says that "in human history, the visual image has never been more dominant than it is now".

The popularity of visibility in contemporary human communication has contributed to a growth of scholarship in visual communication. According to Machin and Mayr (2012:6), the entrenchment of visibility as a subject of scholarly enquiry can be traced to the "late 1980s and 1990s when a number of authors who had been working in linguistics began to realise that meaning is generally communicated not only through language but also through other semiotic modes".

Although multimodal texts are used in diverse contexts such as advertising, service delivery, classroom

discourse, sports, among others, they are becoming increasingly popular for discourses of public engagements. Such discourses include political discourse, protest discourse, discourse of civic engagements, among many others. The growth in the use of multimodal resources in the latter contexts is connected with the publics' awareness of the potentiality of multimodal texts to convey clearly important meanings of public relevance. For the present purpose, our focus is on the use of multimodality in the political context.

Visuality is an important feature of political expression. All over the world, politicians employ visual resources for their popularisation preparatory to elections. Similarly, visual images are used in media representations or constructions of politicians, political parties, their attitudes to the public or the effects of their actions and inactions on the public. This politics of visualisation is rooted in the thinking of text producers about the ability of visual images to provoke deeper feelings in people than spoken or written language. Therefore, there is the general belief that visual resources can stir the people to certain required actions than verbal language. The Nigerian political environment manifests the deployment of visuality for political purposes even though there has not been much scholarly engagement with the subject matter. In fact, one aspect of the political process in the country which witnesses tremendous use of visuality is political campaigns.

Since political campaigns are tied to elections, which determine the individuals who lead the people, they

attract a lot of attention as politicians seeking elective positions invest enormous financial resources, energy and time into them in order to appeal positively to the electorate. It is common to see posters, billboards and banners with multimodal features being used to project certain politicians or political parties for public acceptance. This aspect of visuality in political communication has been reasonably researched (See Opeibi 2006; Awonusi 2008; Olujide 2011; Ademilokun and Taiwo 2013, etc.). Political rallies which constitute an important part of political campaigns are also characterised by the use of multimodal resources for persuasive political communication. In Nigeria, just as it is in many other countries, politicians use visual resources such as vests, head wears, dance, surrogate language, among others to communicate meanings in the discourse with the central theme of seeking political support for certain politicians or political parties. However, not much has been done on the semiotic implications of the multimodal resources highlighted above in the Nigerian context. This study therefore seeks to examine and analyse some of such multimodal resources used in political rally discourse in Nigeria focusing on the political rallies for the 2011 elections in Southwestern Nigeria.

### **Political Campaigns in Nigeria**

Since the independence of Nigeria in 1960, political campaigns in the country have reflected the tense nature of the nation's politics. Shortly after, there were electoral crises and ethnic violence which led to the military seizure of power from the civilians. However, the crises that

greeted the nation's independence continued in the politics of its second republic, third republic and in the current fourth republic, as politicians engage different means whether legal or illegal to prosecute their political ambitions. Whereas "an election is supposed to be a peaceful and open discourse of persuasion" (Bratton 2008:1), which is based on logical presentation of arguments justifying the candidature of a particular politician, in Nigeria just as it is in many other countries, it is seen as a ticket to ostentatious lifestyle and access to unlimited wealth and power. Therefore, political violence becomes inevitable as individuals struggle to control power willy-nilly.

One major factor responsible for political violence in Nigeria is the nature of political communication in the country. Political communication in Nigerian is often marked by the use of harsh words, abusive words and character defamation. Ademilokun and Taiwo (2013:438) capture this trend when they remark that "most platforms for debate and other political communication are often turned to platforms for verbal threats, insults, intimidation, coercion, blackmail and hate speech". The consequence of this trend in the nation's politics is that politicians often heat up the polity with their remarks, causing conflicts between political followers and at times ethnic groups, especially so that ethnic affiliations still hold in the political arrangements in the country.

However, beyond the uninhibited nature of Nigerian political campaign discourse, one realises that the discourse is

often characterised by a great deal of creativity and resourcefulness. Posters, banners and billboards are imbued with different semiotic resources such as colour, graphology, gaze, posture, among others to project politicians and their plans for the people in order to enlist the people's support for such politicians in preparation for elections. In this sense, Nigerian political campaign discourse is characterised by the use of people described by van Dijk (1989) as "symbolic elites" who are professional journalists, copywriters or creative artists who are knowledgeable in public knowledge, ideologies, norms and beliefs and use them in creating compelling adverts and images for the projection of certain politicians over and above others in electoral campaigns.

It is however arguable that the hub of political campaign discourse in Nigeria is political rally discourse. In Nigeria, political rallies had been organised as far back as the First Republic during the era of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Dr Nnamdi Azikwe, Alhaji Tafawa Balewa, amongst others. Therefore, the political rally genre of political campaign discourse in Nigeria has a rich history even though much of it was not subjected to rigorous linguistic and discourse analysis until recently.

One communicative phenomenon that becomes popular in political rally discourse due to the flamboyant nature of political rallies is visuality. The discourse is characterised by a wide array of artefacts. This paper focuses on this aspect of political rally discourse with the intention of analysing some of the visual resources in order to espouse their semiotic

imports and impact on political communication and mobilisation in South-western Nigeria.

### **Methodology**

Data for this study were obtained purposively across the six South-western states of Nigeria (Osun, Oyo, Ondo, Èkìtì, Ogun and Lagos) in 2011 from twelve political rallies by the researcher and/or his research assistants who had been instructed on how to collect such data. The political rallies were the Action Congress rally in Ilé-Ifè, People's Democratic Party rally in Osogbo, ACN rally in Ìbàdàn, PDP rally in Ìbàdàn, ACN rally in Abèòkúta, PDP rally in Abèòkúta, Labour Party rally in Ondo, PDP rally in Ondo, ACN rally in Lagos, PDP rally in Lagos, PDP rally in Èkìtì and ACN rally in Èkìtì. The researcher focused on the listed political rallies because they were those of the strongest political parties in the South-western part of Nigeria prior to the elections and sufficiently represented the contemporary political rally culture in the region in Nigeria.

This study adopts a systemic functional approach to multimodal discourse analysis. Multimodal discourse analysis in itself involves the investigation of texts constructed through diverse modes of communication, i.e., multimodal discourses or texts. Systemic functional multimodal discourse analysis is rooted in Halliday's systemic functional linguistics. According to Halloran (2008:445), "the major strength of SF theory for MDA is Halliday's metafunctional principle which provides an integrating platform for theorising how semiotic resources interact to create meaning". Thus, the concern in a

multimodal analysis from the perspective of SFL is to explicate aspects of ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings in visual or multimodal texts. Lemke (1998) calls them presentational, orientational and organizational meanings.

While adopting an SFL perspective in the analysis of data for this paper, we also bring in Barthes' (1977) concepts of anchorage and relay into the analysis in order to demonstrate clearly the syntagmatic relationship between the verbal and the non-verbal in the discourse being studied. According to Barthes, *anchorage* refers to the linguistic message used to direct the readers of an image to a particular meaning as being central to a semiotic orchestration among a diverse range of signifieds produced by the signifiers in a semiotic ensemble. Barthes asserts that "Anchorage is the most frequent function of the linguistic message and is commonly found in press photographs and advertisements" (40-41). It is the most meaning-delimiting element, as it serves as the semiotic/discursive limitation of the possible meanings of another element, usually of the image by the text.

*Relay*, on the other hand, refers to accenting relations between signifiers in a semiotic construction in which a linguistic message interacts with other signifiers in a complementary manner to produce a holistic meaning. According to Barthes, with *relay*, "text and image stand in a complementary relationship" (41).

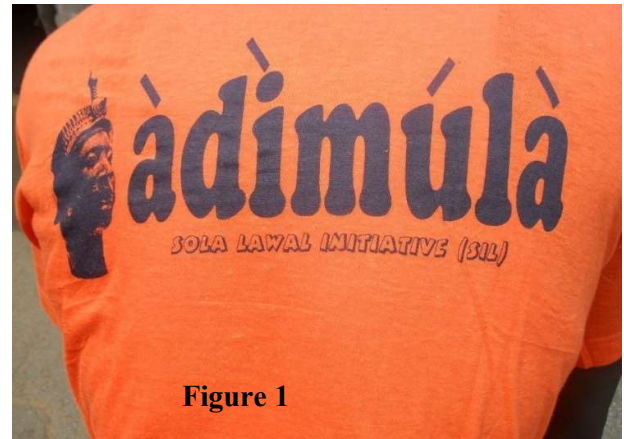
### **Data Analysis**

In this section of the study, we attempt to interpret selected semiotic

resources in the discourse, focusing on the communicative imports of the visual resources toward the goals of the discourse, which is to present certain politicians and political parties to the electorate for acceptance. However, we first attempt a categorisation of the overriding semiotic artefacts within which the actual data are subsumed. We identify vests, head wears, *ankara*, and surrogate languages as signifiers.

### Vests as Signifiers

Vests can be said to be the commonest type of semiotic artefact in the discourse environment. The proliferation of vests in the discourse environment can be attributed to its smartness on the bodies of its wearers, perhaps its immense capacity for conveying graphical information and its relatively cheap cost. Vest or T-shirt as it is also called originally was a hidden undergarment worn under the shirts. However, in recent times, according to Kpolugbo and Ogbebor (2009), in the uses made of it, the t-shirt has transformed to “being a work of art, a political statement, or something simply comfortable to wear”. In modern times, the t-shirt is used to make statements in the domain of sport, religion, politics, among many others. In political rally discourse in South-western Nigeria, it can also be discerned that vests are common because they are affordable to the parties who often give out souvenirs and other materials to as many people as they can appeal to in order to secure their chances of winning elections. The texts below offer a good illustration of the use of customised vests in the discourse environment:



**Figure 1**

**ACN Rally in Ile-Ife**

**Figure 2**

**ACN Rally**

**in Ile-Ife**

Once one sees the discourse participant in the discourse environment, it is easy to tell his political alliance. The broom imprinted on the vest, the name of the party (ACN) boldly inscribed on the vest, among others, clearly betray the political leaning of the wearer of the vest. The colour of the vest is suggestive of the commitment of the discourse participant photographed and in fact the entire political group to the locution being made. The orange colour generally symbolises energy, enthusiasm, creativity and determination, showing that the Action Congress and its political followers are parading themselves as the party with the right amount of energy, determination, creativity and enthusiasm required to steer the affairs of the Nigerian nation, and thus the party to be voted for by the people. It is even interesting that most of the wearers of the vest were youths, a group which symbolises energy, activity and strength. These meanings were given force in the discourse as the environment was filled with “orangeness” to accentuate the amount of features of “orangeness”

possessed by the political party represented to the extent that an average onlooker is forced to ponder on the choice of the colour orange for the vests.

Other indexical signs that convey similar meanings as the “orange” colour in the text are the tick in vote, the broom and the firmness of the hand holding the broom. The mark substituting “v” in the text is generally used among the youths in Nigeria to give approval to things. In other words, it is a sign of correctness and endorsement. One can also say that the symbol signifies victory. For the political party to have victory in the elections, it needs the votes of its supporters and other members of the electorate. That explains why the political party plays on the sign on the vest. The broom essentially is a tool for cleaning the rot in society, a commitment the party offers itself as dedicated to, and which the public would want in any emerging government.

Barthes’ concepts of *anchorage* and *relay* manifest quite clearly in the visual texts above. The imperative “Vote ACN” on the vest is a written reinforcement of the meaning conveyed by the other semiotic features in the discourse act. It is the anchorage of the entire visual communication, as it conveys the central signified in the image. The linguistic message tells everything that the visual image is all about. Relay also features in the text. The cognomen of “Àdimúlà” which we have already interpreted as a marker of valiancy of the party, the information on the visual text that the party involved is ACN, the broom logo of the party, which indicates creation of a new and just society and the information

on the sponsor of the semiotic artefact, all provide complementary information which enables one to interpret the text wholly. The image below further illustrates how vests are used to mean in the discourse:



**Figure 3**  
**PDP Rally**  
**in Osogbo, 2011**

Through the vest in the image above, a particular political aspirant is offered to the public to be voted for. The attitude of the political follower is also manifest in the confidence and pride he exudes putting on the vest. The interesting thing about the visual text is that the verbal language accompaniment of the semiotic artefact is creatively presented. The verbal expression which serves as the anchorage in the text is used to present Fajoriji to the electorate as the best choice. The tone of the text is assertive as the political aspirant is imposed on the electorate. The producers of the text are not begging the audience to vote for the candidate, but they seem to be saying that if you want the best for yourself, you would rather vote for

Faforiji. The exclamation mark at the end of the text reflects the passion and emotion with which the speaker made the declaration. Exclamation marks are used at the end of vigorous questions, statements and commands. Furthermore, the orthographical presentation of “is your” is significant, as it is foregrounded specially to make the electorate note that, Faforiji is the best for them.

The lettering of the text, the colours and the symbol of the PDP constitute the relay of the visual text as they interact with the verbal language for meaning production. The mark of correctness or approval on the vest is a reinforcement of the declarative “Faforiji is your best choice”. The choice of colours for the vest is also remarkable. The colours white and blue are indexical of tranquility, peace and nobility. Apart from giving an aesthetic appeal worthy of beholding, the colours portray the party and the candidate, i.e., Faforiji, as believing in the ideals of peace, integrity and nobility.

### **Semiosis of Head Wears in the Discourse**

Caps are another item of costume used for visual communication in Nigerian political rally discourse. Perhaps, one can rationalise the preponderant use of the items in the discourse as a result of its fashionability. Caps usually appear beautiful on wearers and complement their dressing. In addition to this, a cap is greatly used in the discourse due to the foregrounded message they present. A cap attracts immediate attention from people, especially when messages are conveyed through it. Caps, especially in the discourse in focus, are indexical as well, as

the wearing of a political party’s customised cap reflects the wearer’s political leaning in the discourse environment. The confident and healthy appearances show that they are not just being offered to the people, they are happy to be offered and are ready to deliver services to the people. Below is a cap with utilitarian and aesthetic significance in the discourse:



**Figure 4**

The indexical semiotic artefact is used to present the PDP to the public as the political party to vote for while the wearer himself reveals his alliance with the party. The wearer portrays himself as someone that is sophisticated by his folding of the sides of the hat. The hat could have been worn in a manner that shows that the wearer is not self-conscious. But this hat is worn with style in the discourse, showing that the wearer is indeed excited to identify with the PDP and appear in the brand of the party. Furthermore, the hat is similar to the kind of cap worn by “cow boys”. Cow boys are fun seekers who go on holidays during which they ride horses and enjoy themselves. Therefore, through his appearance, the discourse participant identifies with youth culture, being a youth himself, while injecting fun into the discourse. The text offers a good example of the use of verbal language as a *relay* as the names “Goodluck” and “Sambo” interact with the colour of the People’s



Democratic Party, the cowboy cap to project the party and the aspirants of the party to the public. Below is another kind of cap used in the discourse:



**Rally in Lagos, 2011**

The cap in the image above is no doubt aesthetically compelling. It convinces one that the producers of the semiotic artefact not only were conscious of the utility of a cap but also its aesthetic appeal. Through the use of the cap, the producers and wearer identify strongly with the *Eyo* Festival in Lagos, as caps of this nature are actually part of the paraphernalia of *Eyo* worshippers in Lagos during the annual *Eyo* Festival. Therefore, since the party was going to Lagos for a rally, they decided to make caps that would look like what Lagosians cherish and are quite familiar with in order to appeal positively to the people and gain their acceptance. The aesthetic sense of the text producers and the party further reflects in the simple but colourful nature of the cap, as there are no verbal inscriptions or labels of the party that produced the item on it. The colours on the cap which signify the political party

represented thus function as the most significant signifier in the text interacting with its resemblance with the *Eyo* festival cap.

### ***Àńkára* for Political Communication**

There can be no meaningful description of political rally discourse in Nigeria in the South-western part of the country without an exhaustive discussion of the use of *àńkára* for political communication. *Àńkára* is a popular textile especially among the Yorùbá marked for class and taste. It appears in different shades and colours and from different makers. Although this textile material has long been in use to communicate political messages in Nigeria, it can be said that there has never been a time that political parties and politicians have pervasively deployed the textile material for costume and consequently political communication as the present time. Hardly can one attend a political rally especially in Southwestern Nigeria without noticing the large use of *àńkára* fabrics. The use of *àńkára* at political campaign rallies engenders feeling of oneness and commitment in political leaders and their followers. In fact, the use of *àńkára* at the rallies is a people-oriented approach that politicians, especially political leaders use to get close to the people they are leading or whom they hope to lead by looking or appearing the way those people also appear, even though they have superior affluence, influence and fame. It should be remarked that in Nigeria of today, beyond the political arena, *àńkára* as *aṣọ-ẹbí* is now greatly used by families organising events such as funeral ceremonies, weddings, etc., in order for everyone to appear equal at



such occasions. It is common for the wealthy who could afford expensive clothing to wear *ànkàrá* fabrics that even sell for as low as a thousand naira in Nigeria, especially in the South-western part of the country.

*Ànkàrá*, in Nigerian political rally discourse, also bears party colours, logo, manifesto, pictures of candidates, etc. Therefore, it functions as a mode of advertisement just as a billboard, newspaper or television advertisement. It however surpasses all these other modes because it is mobile. Wherever the cloth is worn, the advert performs its function. Moreover, it is utilitarian. Even those who do not like the party would be glad to have a piece of the cloth gratis! At least, if they decide not to wear it to public places, they can use it as bedspread, table cover, pillowslip, etc.

It should be stated that *ànkàrá* is offered to party members by political parties or politicians in certain instances as a way of mobilising them. As our data will subsequently reveal, sponsors of *ànkàrá* or any other attire used at political rallies, e.g., t-shirts are indicated for the people to know, and in most cases, they are people seeking one form of political office or another. This indeed is an aspect of Nigerian politics which critics have condemned on the grounds that it is a manifestation of the prevalent political corruption culture in Nigeria.

The use of *ànkàrá* at Nigerian political rallies also gives a great deal of colour to the political rallies. It is usually the case at political rallies that one sees a sea of people in a particular colour that is associated with the party. The condition is

usually remarkable as the visual resonance and appeal is always immense. Below is a text in which *ànkàrá* is used for communication at a political rally:



**Figure 6**

**PDP  
Rally in Osogbo,  
2011**

Apart from the visual appeal of the *ànkàrá* in the image above, the material also serves communicative purpose. Through the attire, the individuals whose pictures are given are presented to us as the persons to vote into power. Also, the logo of the party gives the visual device some certification as a tool for political communication by the party and its followers. It performs a similar function to a signature. The choice of green as the background colour for the attire is also significant as it is a major component of the logo of the party. The colour depicts renewal or recrudescence, reinforcing the

commitment of the political party to the consistent growth of all aspects of the Nigerian nation. The written texts on the fabric constitute the anchorage emphasizing that through the text, the message was being conveyed that people should vote for the party and the political aspirants of the party inscribed on the fabric. The colour of the party and the umbrella symbol of the party thus interact with the written language, functioning as a *relay*.

Furthermore, women add elegance to the discourse and gain tremendous visibility through their use of *ànkàrá*. Generally speaking, women are more sensitive to fashion than men, and this reflects in the way they appear at public functions. A great deal of glitz and glamour is added to political rally discourse in South-western Nigeria through the use of *ànkàrá* by women. The women use the fabric tastefully by making different styles with their *ànkàrá* materials such that it is almost impossible for one not to notice them especially when they appear in multitudes in the discourse environment. Let us consider the text below:



**Figure 7**

**PDP Women's  
Rally in Lagos, 2011**

The text above reveals women of Southwest Nigeria in *ànkàrá* at a political rally. The beauty of *ànkàrá* is enhanced in the text through its different uses by the women. While some use it as a wrapper, some make flowing gowns from it, and some women make skirt and blouse from it. When the women appear at the rally in this manner, they usually command attention as they become the cynosure of all eyes while adding colour and grandeur to the discourse. Let us consider another image of the use of *ànkàrá* in the discourse:



**Figure 8**

**ACN Rally in Abèòkúta, 2011**

As can clearly be seen from the image above, the scene was captured from an ACN political rally in Abéòkúta. The ACN being a rival party to the PDP does not shy away from using ànkára at political rallies for indexical information. The appearance of the persons in the image in the ànkára portrays them as avowed people or members of the ACN. One is not left to wonder as to their political leaning upon sighting them as the acronym “ACN” is inscribed on the flowing gown (*agbádá*) made of the ànkára material. Furthermore, the persons in the image brand themselves in a way that is tandem with the philosophy of their party which is “Omoluabi” (the well-behaved Yorùbá person) by appearing in an attire of an elderly, comported and distinguished Yorùbá man.

The particular pattern of ànkára can also be said to be emblematic of the party both in its colour and design patterns, as the politicians in the party had been wearing such ànkára to different political outings. The apparel makes the persons appear like persons worthy of being voted for as they command respect in their appearance, which is a typical quality of a real Yorùbá man.

### Conclusion

This paper has tried to explore aspects of visibility in Nigerian political rally discourse, analysing the meanings that are expressed through some semiotic artefacts deployed for political communication in the discourse. The paper attempted to show that politicians in South-western Nigeria consciously use visibility to appeal to the electorate in view of its positive effects. To achieve this, the

study focused on the use of vests, head wears, *ankara* and *agbada* which are mostly aspects of the culture of the people of South-western Nigeria where the rallies held. The analysis of the semiotic resources revealed that the semiotic codes drawn upon in the discourse interacted in various ways for the projection of meaning in the discourse. Even though verbal language consistently served as anchorage in most of the texts, there were times that it functioned as relay, showing creative composition of signifiers in the discourse. The paper concludes that semiotic resources in the discourse potently communicate political meanings while highlighting certain cultural and social factors in the Nigerian environment.

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