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Discursive Construction of Synonymous Relations in Political Speeches: the Case of Some President Olusegun Obasanjo's Speeches

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Abstract

Existing studies on political discourse have investigated the role of language in propaganda, the emotive use of language by politicians, the ideological undertone of modal verbs in political speeches, often ignoring the discursive use of synonyms, especially in the Nigerian context. This paper thus examines the discursive construction of synonyms in selected speeches of former Nigerian president, Olusegun Obasanjo with the aim of identifying the ideological implication of the synonymous construction in the speeches. Obasanjo is seen as a nationalist who has fought for the unity of the country, handed over to a civilian government in realisation of his promise, and, thus, become a major player in the governance of the country. His speeches are worth studying as he was the first military head of state to be elected a civilian president, thereby leading the country on two good occasions. Twelve speeches were purposively sampled comprising those he made as a military head of state and as a civilian president. These periods are important in Nigeria's political history. The study adopted evaluative semantics and sociocognitive approach of critical discourse analysis as theoretical basis. The former accounts for the synonymous relations in the speeches and the latter, their ideological import. The findings show that the synonymous relations represent optimism and expectations from individual, society and institution. Synonyms related to optimism are characterised by government's commitment to positive change, transformation and hope, while synonyms that relate to issue of expectation from the individual, the society and institutions are characterised by societal development, forbearance, disorder, healthy information management and dissemination, and negative practices and values. Thus, these synonymous relations, when considered together with the co(n)text, reflect Obasanjo's reformist agenda.

Keywords: *political speeches, evaluative semantics, sociocognitive model, synonyms, reformist agenda.*

Lexical relations play a pivotal role in linguistic expressions. They are concerned with what the words of a language denote (Pustejovsky, 1995). Lexical relations belong to the field of lexical semantics which is a subfield of linguistic

Introduction

semantics which accounts for the identification and representation of lexical items. According to Lobner (2013:1), linguistic semantics is “exclusively concerned with the meanings of linguistic expressions such as words, phrases, grammatical forms and sentences” Different types of lexical relations have been identified ranging from antonymy, synonymy, polysemy, homonymy, lexical collocation, etc.

Politics is one of the domains where these lexical relations serve as tools for expressing political ideas, thoughts, views and ideologies. Politics has been defined variously by different scholars working from different contexts, backgrounds and purposes (Chilton, 2004). Chilton (2004) argues that politics is a form of struggle between those who want to assert and maintain power and those who want to resist it. Both sides carry out their endeavours through discourse mastery and manipulation. Edelman (1988) claims that the purpose of political discourse is to present proposals that relate to actions which should or must be pursued. Language being the significant mode through which thought is conveyed is at the core of this engagement with discourse.

It is not surprising therefore that the role of language in politics has been the focus of scholars, especially those investigating the instrumentality of language in political discourse. Wilson (1990), Bullock (2003), Edwards and Valenzano 111 (2007) and Mazid (2007) examine the emotive use of language by politicians; Odebunmi and Oni (2012) investigate the use of language in wording the gloom of an African democracy; Oni and Oni-Buraimoh’s (2017) study is devoted to the deployment of political cartoons in legitimising and delegitimising the OTHER. Bader and Badarneh (2018) pay attention to the rhetorical implication of synonyms in parliamentary speeches in Jordan. These studies and others have revealed the usefulness of language in political discourse. Schaffner (1996: 201) echoes this fact when he argues that “in political discourse linguists have always been

interested in the linguistic structures used to get politically relevant messages across to the addressees in order to fulfill a specific function....” This view further buttresses the relevance of linguistic structures to broader societal and political framework. In other words, the deployment of linguistic choices and structures is a reflection of certain political exigencies and contextual requirements, since there is a nexus between linguistic choices and structures and the larger political contexts. Despite their focus on the linguistic object taking place in the arena of politics, these studies have largely ignored the vital role synonyms and its construction play in (political) message dissemination.

This study thus investigates the discursive construction of synonyms in selected political speeches of former Nigerian president, Olusegun Obasanjo with the view to identifying the cognitive undertone of the synonyms deployed in the speeches. The article adopted evaluative semantics, which is one of the branches of lexical semantics, and sociocognitive approach of critical discourse analysis to unearth the ideological values of the synonyms. Evaluative semantics and sociocognitive approach of critical discourse analysis are cognitively based and, as such, are veritable tools in unraveling implicit assumption cocooned in lexical relations. Consequently, the cognitive nature of the synonymous relations could be best handled by evaluative semantics and sociocognitive approach of critical discourse analysis.

Twelve speeches were purposively sampled from the speeches made by former president, Olusegun Obasanjo as a military head of state and, a civilian president. The speeches comprise: Speech at the Special Convocation Ceremony, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, (1977); “No Compromise with Apartheid,” (1977); “New Year Message,” (1978); “Address to Traditional Rulers,” (1978); “Address to Representative of the Mass Media,” (1978); “Inaugural Address to the Nation,”

(1999); “Independence Address,” (2000); “Second-term Speech,” (2002); “Inaugural Speech,” (2003); “Address to the Joint Session of the New National Assembly, (2003); “Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the National Political Reform Conference,” (2005) and “Foundation Stone Laying Ceremony of the Civil Service College,” (2005).

The choice of the speeches from the military and civilian eras in Nigerian political history is targeted at identifying how these periods and the political milieus impinged on the deployment of the synonyms in the speeches. Not only that, the study is interested in identifying how the gap between these eras impacts on the enactment of synonymous relations in the speeches and their ideological implications. Between 1976 and 1979, Obasanjo served as the military head of state. This period preceded the transition to civil rule after many years of coups and counter coups. His second coming was between 1999 and 2007. It is a period that is very significant in the Nigerian history as it marked the return to democracy after years of military rule. Based on these antecedents, it is worthwhile studying the speeches from these periods and, most especially, the discursive construction of synonyms in relation to the speeches from these eras.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted evaluative semantics and sociocognitive approach of critical discourse analysis. Evaluative semantics is one of the branches of lexical semantics (Malrieu, 1999). It is related to Geeraerts’s cognitive semantics which refers to the psychologically and cognitively oriented approach to semantics (Geeraerts, 2010). Cognitive semantics is a subfield of linguistic semantics that focuses on the identification and representation of the semantics of lexical items. Clausner and Croft (1999: 2) argue that “the most basic theoretical construct of cognitive semantics is the concept, that is, a basic unit of mental representation.” The cognitive

conception of language includes “a belief in the contextual, pragmatic, flexibility of meaning, the conviction that meaning is a cognitive phenomenon that exceeds the boundaries of the word, and the principle that meaning involves perspectivization” (Geeraerts, 2010:182). Hence, concepts do not occur as isolated, atomic units in the mind but are understood in a context of presupposed, background knowledge structures (Clausner and Croft, 1999, Odebunmi and Oni, 2012).

Furthermore, in cognitive semantics, lexical concepts are conveyors of encyclopaedic meaning as encyclopaedic meaning is informed by contextual factors (Evans, Bergen, and Zinken 2006). Evans, Bergen, and Zinken (2006:13) further argue that “meaning construction is equated with conceptualisation, a process whereby linguistic units serve as prompts for an array of conceptual operations and the recruitment of background knowledge”. They also identified a number of assumptions that make up encyclopaedic approach to semantics which are listed below:

- i) There is no principled distinction between semantics and pragmatics
- ii) Encyclopaedic knowledge is structured
- iii) Encyclopaedic meaning emerges in context
- iv) Lexical items are points of access to encyclopaedic knowledge
- v) Encyclopaedic knowledge is dynamic (Evans, Bergen, and Zinken, 2006)

Therefore, evaluative semantics, which is related to cognitive semantics, “proposes a strongly postmodernist theory of cognition, ideology and discourse, in which the structure and internal consistency of ideology resemble those of evaluative knowledge in the mind” Malrieu (1999: i). Evaluation is key to the understanding of lexical relations in evaluative semantics (Malrieu, 1999).

Sociocognitive approach is one of the major approaches of critical discourse analysis. Others

are socio-semiotic and discourse historical approaches. Critical discourse analysis is an approach that evolved to cater for the functioning of language in political and ideological processes (Fowler, Kress, Trew, and Hodge, 1979). It seeks to unravel ideologies that are usually opaque to text consumers. The proponent of sociocognitive approach is van Dijk. One of the important components of this approach is called mental model. A mental model refers to a subjective representation of specific events covered in discourse and it represents the personal Episodic Memory of individuals as it is identified with people's experience (van Dijk, 2001 and 2006a). Mental model also involves shared knowledge or belief and implicit information. Consequently, mental model is cognitively oriented and, as such, it underlies discourse production and comprehension. Therefore, a combination of evaluative semantics and sociocognitive approach (specifically the aspect of mental model) is capable of unearthing the ideological and cognitive imports of the synonyms in the selected political speeches.

Analysis and Findings

Synonymy is concerned with the notion of similarity of meaning. In synonymy, distinction is made between lexical synonymy and phrasal synonymy where the former refers to synonymy that exists between individual lexemes and the latter consists of expressions consisting of more than one lexeme (Riemer, 2010). Synonymy may be context-bound, where two words are synonymous in a specific context or context-free, where two words are identical in meaning in all contexts. In political discourse, the evaluative value of synonyms is better understood when related to co(n)-texts (Oni, 2012).

The synonyms deployed in the speeches project the reformist ideology and are characterised by optimism and expectations from individual, society and institution. A reformer, according to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (New 9th Edition) is a person who works to achieve

political or social change. It is in this sense that the reformist ideology is used in the context of this study. Below are examples to substantiate this position.

Synonyms Suggesting Optimism

Optimism, according to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (New 9th Edition) refers to a feeling that good things will happen and that something will be successful. In the context of this study, it refers to government's commitment to positive change, transformation and hope for a better Nigeria. The issue of positive change is typified by synonyms related to optimism. Obasanjo's illustration of positive change is captured by the following contextual synonyms: 'painful and difficult', and 'difficulties, shortcomings and setbacks'. The issue of transformation is implied by these synonyms. For example, in his 2000 Independence Address, Obasanjo says:

Ex. 1

...I solemnly commit myself to do everything necessary, even at the risk of offending a few interest groups, to make Nigeria a country, which in the future we can all be proud of. I know how *painful* and *difficult* change always is, but I also know that with patience, with determination and by the grace of God, we shall all overcome. And we will all be beneficiaries of the fruit of the positive change.

(Independence Address, 2000)

The lexical items, 'painful' and 'difficult' are related in meaning. The relationship between 'painful' and 'difficult' pictures the challenges that come with change. This is expressed in the same speech where the speaker points out that "the following years are fraught with challenges". These challenges are anticipated and for that reason are unspecified in the speech. The speaker's disposition towards these challenges is

based on shared knowledge that change always comes with some challenges. Thus, 'painful' and 'difficult' represent the speaker's opinion about change. The synonyms further reveal that even though the experience of change is usually not palatable, it is necessary. This indicates that, though the task of bringing about change is an onerous one, the speaker is not deterred because he knows that the outcome of such change will be positive in the long run.

Also, optimism is portrayed through the issue of positive change as implied in Obasanjo's 2000 Independence Address where he notes:

Ex. 2

I know there will be some of us who will on this anniversary be wondering whether or no we have any reason to celebrate. The many *difficulties*, *shortcomings* and *setbacks* on the road to national development provide good grounds for this cynicism. (Independence Address, 2000)

The challenges on the road to national development are described by the synonymous relation in 'difficulties, shortcomings and setbacks'. The political context is responsible for the enactment of 'difficulties', 'shortcomings' and 'setbacks' in the extract – the fourth democratic dispensation was relatively new at the time the speech was delivered. So, the synonyms 'difficulties, shortcomings and setbacks' represent the challenges to national development and, as such, are responsible for people's skeptical views about the fortieth anniversary celebration of Nigeria's independence. The skepticism is the outcome of the shared background knowledge about the number, forty – where a fool at forty is seen as a fool forever. Consequently, the synonyms 'difficulties', 'shortcomings' and 'setbacks' serve as good ground for cynicism as indicated in the co-text. Irrespective of the negative views exhibited by 'difficulties',

'shortcomings' and 'setbacks', optimism is implied in the face of the challenges.

Furthermore, optimism is characterised by synonyms related to government's commitment and achievement. The issue of government's commitment and achievement relates to the obligation of the government and its accomplishment in the nation. This is characterised by synonyms that reflect improvement. For example, in his 2005 speech at the foundation stone laying ceremony of the civil service college, Obasanjo comments that:

Ex. 3

Let me recall that the purpose for which I sought the mandate of the Nigerian electorate was the *commitment* and *dedication* to serve our nation. As a result, since 1999 this Administration has been committed to providing the highest quality of service to this nation. (Foundation Stone Laying Ceremony of the Civil Service College, 2005)

'Commitment' and 'dedication' are context-free synonyms that could replace each other in all contexts. The synonyms 'commitment' and 'dedication', as used in the extract, are seen as the major reason the speaker sought the mandate of the Nigerian electorate. Thus, he uses 'commitment' and 'dedication' to reveal the major objective of his administration. This objective, as indicated in the co-text, is to provide the highest quality of service to the nation. The speaker's opinion about his unalloyed service to the nation is based on his knowledge of leaders who, after getting the electorate's mandate, forget their election promises.

The issue of government's commitment is also reechoed in the goal of the national political reform conference as shown in the speaker's use of 'dismember' and 'disintegrate'. These are context-bound synonyms. By implication, they are unlikely to be identical in other contexts. Such

context-bound synonyms are illustrated in the speech where the speaker pointed out that

Ex. 4

The National Political Reform Conference is NOT designed to *dismember* or *disintegrate* Nigeria. (National Political Reform Conference, 2005)

Denotatively, ‘dismember’ is to divide a country, an organisation and so on into smaller parts or units. Similarly, ‘disintegrate’ is to break into smaller parts or pieces and be destroyed. Consequently, the similarity between these synonyms is a reflection of the speaker’s led government in ensuring that the entirety of Nigeria is united. The concept of unity is grounded in Obasanjo’s background information in relation to the diversified nature of Nigeria. Hence, the enactment of the synonyms is geared at showing his government’s commitment in ensuring the unity of Nigeria despite her diversities.

In a similar vein, the issue of achievement and positive change brought into the judiciary is represented in the next extract.

Ex.5

Today, our courts are *free* and *independent* enough to deliver judgments that are respected both at home and abroad. (Second-Term Speech, 2002)

The lexical item, ‘free’ and ‘independent’ are context-free as they are interchangeable in all contexts. These synonyms relate to the state of Nigerian judicial system. The speaker’s choice of ‘free’ and ‘independent’ reflect the non-interference of his government in the affair of the judiciary. By implication, the synonyms suggest that Nigerian courts were subjected to government interference before Obasanjo’s tenure. Consequently, these synonyms are meant to be an endorsement for his reelection as this is a common trend among incumbents (Seyranian and Bligh, 2008, Oni, 2012; 2018)

Synonyms Representing Expectation from Individual/Society/Institution

Expectation is seen as a strong belief about the way something should happen or how somebody should behave (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, New 9th Edition*). Synonyms representing expectation from individual, society and institution are related to the issue of societal development, forbearance, disorder, healthy information management and dissemination and negative practices and values. Societal development is characterised by ‘developing and building’ which are contextual synonyms. They indicate growth and improvement. For example, in his 1978 New Year Message, Obasanjo says:

Ex. 6

...it is essential that the role of educational institutions in *developing* good citizenship and *building* a wholesome society must be understood and exploited. (New Year Message, 1978)

In the extract above, ‘developing’ and ‘building’ refer to the role of the educational institution in developing good citizenship and building a wholesome society. The speaker views a wholesome society as one where positive ideals are imparted in the citizens through the educational institutions. This represents the speaker’s encyclopaedic knowledge about educational institutions’ pivotal role in developing good citizenship. This, therefore, serves as the basis for the idea represented in ‘developing’ and ‘building’ as illustrated in Ex. 6.

Besides, synonyms projecting expectation from individuals are captured by the issue of forbearance which is propagated through synonyms related to tolerance. Forbearance refers to the appreciation of Nigeria’s heterogeneous culture, belief, tradition and social background. Its description is projected by ‘diversity and differences’ as illustrated below where the speaker notes:

Ex. 7

One glaring long-standing shortcoming which all aspiring leaders must correct is one of ignorance of their own country. Those who wish to lead this country must know it. They must in all they say and do, demonstrate that they appreciate our *diversity*- our *differences* in fundamental beliefs, culture, tradition and social background. (Speech at the Special Convocation Ceremony, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 1977)

The lexical items, ‘diversity’ and ‘differences’ are examples of isosemantic synonyms because they can perfectly replace each other. These synonyms represent open-mindedness, approval, appreciation, etc. and they, as well, point to what is expected of aspiring leaders. Thus, the semantic implication of these synonyms serves as guideline for aspiring leaders. The enactment of ‘diversity’ and ‘differences’ is hinged on the speaker’s mental model about the problems that could erupt if the diversity that characterised Nigeria is not properly managed. Some implicit propositions are present in the extract above namely, there has been a perennial problem which past leaders have not been able to correct; the problem has always been that of ignorance of the knowledge of their own country; and the ignorance is due to failure by past leaders to recognise the differences in fundamental beliefs, culture, tradition and social background of the people. These propositions represent the speaker’s knowledge of one of the major problems that have plagued the nation.

Furthermore, the issue of disorder is picked out by synonyms related to chaos. Disorder is contextually defined as the state of anarchy in Nigeria during her early years of independence. The description of the confusion of the past is reflected in the contextual synonyms, ‘turbulence’ and ‘destruction’. For instance, in his 1978 address to traditional rulers, Obasanjo says:

Ex. 8

It must now be accepted that if all our traditional rulers had lived up to their responsibilities as leaders, the country would probably have avoided most of the *turbulence* and *destruction* of the past. (Address to Traditional rulers, 1978)

As indicated in the co-text, ‘turbulence’ and ‘destruction’ refer to internecine wranglings which resulted in widespread civil disorder that finally culminated in the Nigerian Civil War. The political context of the speech controls the choice of the synonyms in Ex. 8. The speaker’s choice of ‘turbulence and destruction’ results from his background knowledge of the ugly experience of the civil war. His use of the conditional clause introduced by the conditional marker ‘if’ suggests that traditional rulers did not live up to their responsibilities in the past. Also, the conditional statement is an attempt aimed at preventing a direct or blunt attack on traditional rulers. The speaker relies on the socio-cultural belief of the Yoruba people in the expression of the conditional clause. Even though his military background and status as the head of state afford him a form of ‘absolute’ power, his Yoruba experience impinges on the way he addresses the traditional rulers (who are seen as royal fathers) and this has a way of eroding the asymmetrical power relation that exists between the speaker and the traditional rulers. In Yoruba culture, a younger person is not expected to criticise an elder directly. The conditional clause gives the speaker the opportunity of indirectly apportioning the blame of past inefficiency on traditional rulers. This inefficiency culminated in the ‘turbulence’ and ‘destruction’ of the past as mentioned in the co-text. Besides, the speaker’s recourse to history as background information is an attempt to point out the errors and mistakes of traditional rulers and how they have failed in their duty as royal fathers in the past. Consequently, the reference to ‘turbulence’ and ‘destruction’ is meant to serve as

caution to tradition rulers in order to prevent a recurrence of such in the return to civil rule.

Moreover, synonyms representing government's expectation from the mass media is characterised by issue of healthy information management/dissemination. Healthy information management is associated with the disposition of the media towards the dissemination of information during that period of transition from military to civilian administration. Healthy dissemination of information is illustrated by 'peace' and 'tranquility' and 'dimmed' and 'blunted'. 'Peace' and 'tranquility' are isosemantic items – they are mutually interchangeable in all context. However, 'dimmed' and 'blunted' are contextual synonyms. For example, in his 1978 address to the representatives of the mass media, Obasanjo says:

Ex. 9

We all must ensure that *peace* and *tranquility* are maintained during this delicate period of transition so that in our march to civil rule, the nation could be spared the sad experience of the first Republic. (Address to Representative of the Mass Media, 1978)

The deployment of 'peace' and 'tranquillity' is controlled by the political milieu of that time. 'Peace' and 'tranquility' refer to the speaker's expectations from members of the public, especially the media, in ensuring that peace reigns during the transition to civil rule. Indirectly, the role of the press is called to question based on his experience of the effect of ruinous journalism on the society. This suggests that the media is to ensure that information is disseminated appropriately during the transition to civil rule to prevent a recurrence of the unpleasant experience of the First Republic.

Likewise, the responsibility of the mass media towards healthy information management is

reflected through synonymous relation as shown in the comment below where the speaker says:

Ex. 10

No matter how irresponsible or careless a political aspirant or political group may be, in their utterances and actions during this exercise, their effect will be *dimmed* and *blunted* if they are not sensationalised and put on high pedestal by the mass media. (Address to Representative of the Mass Media, 1978)

'Dimmed' and 'blunted' are context-bound synonyms as illustrated above. They refer to the outcome of the reportage of the actions and utterances of political aspirant or political group by the media during political campaigns. The use of 'dimmed' and 'blunted' shows how the media is expected to act during the democratic process. In other words, the speaker is of the opinion that no matter how careless a political aspirant or political group may be in their utterances and actions, they are not to be put on high pedestal as indicated in the surrounding text. This implies that careless utterances and actions of political aspirant or group are to be backgrounded. Thus, the use of 'dimmed' and 'blunted' is targeted at minimising the spread of unhealthy utterances and actions of political aspirant or group.

Additionally, synonyms signifying unhealthy conduct are conveyed by the issue of negative practices/values. The synonyms suggest disapproval and condemnation. For example, in his speech in 2003 at the inauguration address to the joint session of the New National Assembly, Obasanjo says:

Ex. 11

...we will not succumb to *harassment* and *threat* to national security, by those who are finding it difficult to demonstrate sportsmanship in the face of defeat.

(Inauguration Address to the Joint Session of the New National Assembly, 2003)

In Ex.11, ‘harassment’ and ‘threat’ are perfect synonyms. The deployment of ‘harassment’ and ‘threat’ is targeted as describing the actions of those who are aggrieved by election result. The speaker points out in the same speech that “parties and candidates who lost at the polls during the recent general elections, tended on the whole to have behaved well, in spite of allegations of irregularities. But, a few others have been threatening the peace and stability of the country....” He observes that the threat from this few people result from their inability to demonstrate sportsmanship in the face of defeat as contained in the speech. Thus, the speaker calls on all those aggrieved by the result of the election to channel their grievance to the appropriate quarters. Rather than taking law into their own hands, they are advised to pursue their grievances legally or else, the full force of the law would be brought to bear on them.

Also, the issue of negative values and conducts is expressed by synonyms associated with oppression. These synonyms suggest condemnation. Instances of synonyms within this category comprise: ‘dictate and teleguide’ and ‘restrictions and limitations’. For instance, in his 1977 speech at the world conference for action against apartheid, Obasanjo says:

Ex. 12

I am on record as suggesting that most of the nations that attained independence since 1945 are sponsored states. The implication of this is that their sponsors continue to *dictate* directly and indirectly, *teleguide* openly and subliminally the pace, tone, direction and quality of the lives of the citizens of the sponsored states. (No Compromise with Apartheid, 1977)

In Ex.12, ‘dictate’ and ‘teleguide’ are synonymous in orientation. To dictate is to direct the affairs of a people or an organisation or a

nation. To teleguide is to monitor closely the affairs of a people, an organisation or a nation. The tone of the world conference for action against apartheid underlies the deployment of ‘dictate’ and ‘teleguide’. These words are used to capture the act of those that continue to monitor the pace of development of Africa. Also, ‘dictate’ and ‘teleguide’ are used to create a relationship between the sponsored state and their sponsors. The speaker equates the happenings in some places to the groundwork of some stronger nations. Thus, the use of ‘dictate’ and ‘teleguide’ suggests that most nations that claim to have got independence have not been mentally liberated from those they got their independence from.

Also, the negative practice exhibited by the oppressive nature of apartheid is described by the synonyms ‘restrictions and limitations’ in the extract below:

Ex. 13

...apartheid is about *restrictions* and *limitations* to the fulfilment of every Black and African person as a full human being. (No Compromise with Apartheid, 1977)

The lexical items ‘restrictions’ and ‘limitations’ are examples of lexical synonyms and they are context-free synonyms. ‘Restrictions’ and ‘limitation’ refer to the apartheid policy. They are used by the speaker to portray a policy that is inimical to “the fulfilment of every Black and African person as a full human being”. Thus, the deployment of ‘restrictions’ and ‘limitations’ unfolds the oppressive nature of apartheid policy.

Similarly, in the Inaugural Speech of 1999, Obasanjo deploys ‘destroyed’ and ‘lost’ to lament and criticise the incursion of the military into government by stating that

Ex. 14

The incursion of the military into government has been a disaster for our country and for the military over the last thirty years. The esprit-de-corps amongst

military personnel has been *destroyed*; professionalism has been *lost*.
(Inaugural Speech, 1999)

‘Destroyed’ and ‘lost’ are contextual synonyms. These synonyms are used to describe the aftermath of military incursion into government. The tone of the synonyms is that of lamentation and condemnation. The involvement of military in politics is seen by the speaker as unethical and an aberration as it has caused grave disaster to the country and eroded the esprit-de-corps amongst military personnel. The political context is responsible for Obasanjo’s deployment of these synonyms. The democratically elected government that he handed over to in the second republic was short-lived as it was truncated by the military.

Also, in the Inaugural Speech of 2003, Obasanjo uses the synonyms ‘destruction’ and ‘devastation’ to condemn unethical electoral practices as indicated below.

Ex. 15

It is imperative that we nip this in the bud because religion mixed with politics in a multi-faith country like ours portends *destruction* and *devastation* of our social fabric and our entire structure. (Inaugural Speech, 2003)

The synonyms ‘destruction’ and ‘devastation’ are instances of context-free synonyms since they can perfectly replace each other. The relationship between these synonyms show the danger the admixture of religion with politics portends in a multi-faith country like Nigeria. The speaker’s deployment of ‘destruction’ and ‘devastation’ is better understood when placed alongside the co-text where he states that ‘there is the tragic appearance of religion in our national politics’. So, these synonyms give weight to the speaker’s condemnation and criticism of such unethical practice.

Conclusion

The analysis reveals that synonyms are building blocks in constructing Obasanjo’s political views and thoughts. These synonyms portray him as a reformer as shown in how he tactically deploys them to showcase his government’s commitment and achievement and how he frowns at those negative and unethical practices that are capable of undermining his goal of achieving political and social change. The finding also shows that those synonyms from the speeches made by Obasanjo as a civilian president reflect more of his government’s achievement and commitment. Conversely, there is a preponderance of synonyms from his military speeches that underscore his expectation from individual, institution and society. This is linked to the fact that the speeches of the speaker as a military head of state align more with the authoritarian nature of military regime since those synonyms reflect direction and expected mode of conduct from the citizens, society and institution as well. The pragmatic import and implicit assumption cocooned in these synonyms are unearthed when placed side by side the co(n)-text.

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