

# Lexicalisation in Media Representation of the 2003 and 2007 General Elections in Nigeria

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## Abstract

Some of the previous studies on media representation of elections in Nigeria only provided impressive theoretical and critical analyses of ideology. Not much has been done to show how such ideology(ies) could be lexically accounted for. Given the fact that ideologies are very crucial in elections, this study investigates the ways the cover stories in two Nigerian news magazines, *Tell* and *The News*, lexically, express the ideological pursuits of social actors in the 2003 and 2007 general elections in Nigeria. This paper adopts Fairclough theoretical model on 'wording' which is equivalent to Halliday's theoretical model on 'lexicalisation'. In the analysis, we observe that both magazines used linguistic tools to represent their ideological affiliations, that is, election in Nigeria is a dirty game and politicians are insincere. Lexicalisation and intertextuality intermingled to depict contextual lexical choices.

**Keywords:** *Nigerian general elections; media discourse; ideology; lexicalisation; wording*

## 1. Introduction

The study of media allows text consumers to become aware of the workings of language, especially in the media field. Fairclough (1989, 1992), Osisanwo (1991), van Dijk (1998), Scollon (1998), Pan (2002), Massi (2008), Taiwo (2004, 2008), Nunn (2008), Odebunmi (2008), Alo (2008), Chiluwa (2005, 2008), Osisanwo (2010a, 2010b, 2011) among others, have carried out different studies on media discourse and related fields. However, the changes in the society have given rise to the need for new processes of interpretation. Although one of these studies looked into language and power relations (Taiwo 2008), studies on media representation of elections in Nigeria have not paid adequate attention to a critical linguistic perspective on language used in reporting electoral matters. Studies on ideology have provided impressive theoretical and critical analyses of ideology but have failed to show how such ideology could be linguistically or lexically accounted for, especially in relation to the control or dominating influence of one person or a political group over the society. We need to examine how the ideological beliefs of the magazines are used in taking dominance and control over their consumers. Based on the fact that ideologies are very crucial in elections, this study investigates the ways the cover stories in two Nigerian news magazines, *TELL* and *The News*, lexically express the ideological pursuits of the social actors in the 2003 and 2007 general elections in Nigeria. The news magazines, *TELL* and *The News* were selected based on the fact that they are both Nigerian magazines, with wide readership within the country. This study is also restricted to the elections conducted during the political dispensation of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2007). We are, therefore, only concerned with the 2003 and 2007 general elections in Nigeria.

## 2. The Print Media and News Discourse

The ability of a language user to select the appropriate lexical and structural items for effective communication comes to the fore when a critical examination is carried out on media discourse, especially the print media. In order to efficiently and effectively achieve the sole objective of media discourse, that is, the dissemination of information, all the elements within the processing unit should be effectively put to use. Since the editor also wants to disseminate, report, educate, and inform the public about education, politics, sports, culture, technology, law and other salient issues in the society, there is the need to have a purposeful planning of pages and allocation of sections to news

stories. When this is done, the lingering issue in the society, which is the most important news item that the editor selects as the lead news, or major news item, for a particular publication, must not only be on the front page, but also have a captivating caption.

Since we cannot separate a print medium's ideological stance from the angle from which a particular story is reported and how it is reported, it means that no print medium is ideologically neutral. Olowe (1993:8) posits that news pages are not ideologically neutral. In essence, all newsworthy events are subjected to rigorous linguistic manipulation (mediation) to suit the print medium's ideological stance. In the words of Fowler, Hodge, Kress and Trew (1979), Fiske (1994) and Taiwo (2008), we can, therefore, say that the print media word-choice(s) are never neutral; rather, they carry the power that reflects the interests of those who speak or write. This is not unconnected with the new status that language is given, in which it is no longer seen as merely reflecting our reality. Rather, it is seen as being central to creating reality, especially as one discovers favouritism and special embellishments to the news and reports, depending on the interest/bias of both the editor and the print medium. The issue of 'whose opinion?' is very vital in news discourse. It is often necessary to identify people and speakers, especially those who make specific comments concerning particular issues. When such names are mentioned, and their function, relevance and influence in the society stated, the reader either gets interested or otherwise. However, this is not devoid of incessant introduction of the news reporter's point of view which is capable of influencing public opinion and social change. Hence, the reporter's or the print medium's worldview goes a long way in influencing the way people are presented or represented. It therefore becomes important to examine the way language is used to achieve this purpose.

Linguists, especially systemic functional linguists such as Halliday, Eggins, Bloor and Bloor among others, claim that the knowledge of the phonology, grammar, lexis and semantics of a text does not necessarily constitute a total knowledge of the text. Hence, there is the need for an inquiry into the psycho-social perspective of the author, that is, to have in mind the rhetoric intent, coherence and the worldview that the author brings to the text (Kaplan, 1990). The shift in interest takes linguists into the study of the social process as against the initial focus on the linguistic structure of the text. One of the major proponents of this view, Fairclough (1989, 1992 and 1995) argues on "contemporary processes of social and cultural change". Fairclough (1995:2) says media discourse is 'a tool for social change'. This is obvious since the media adopt language in constructing a relationship that ensures a constant social interaction and takes the advantage of the knowledge of the social, cultural, political, educational and historical relationship that exists between the people and the society as its major motivating factor. To see language as a socio-cultural phenomenon is to believe that "language transforms itself to become a meaningful part of our human social behaviour" (Oyeleye, 1997:90).

### **3. The Media and Social Actors**

The influential people in the society are the people in power, that is, opinion leaders, court judges, celebrities, newspaper editors, prominent national figures, among others (Osisanwo 2011:1). With their use of language, these people play a vital role in shaping issues in the society and setting the boundaries of what is talked about and how it is talked about (Taiwo, 2008). The media with their style of reporting issues also shape ideas in the society. The media monitor the activities of the government to ensure that it is accountable to the people, in conjunction with other institutions that operate within the society (Osisanwo 2011:1). Such individuals who attract the attention of the media are referred to as social actors.

The contenders for the number one seat in Nigeria are aware of the wide latitude of power, largesse and comfort built into the position or the office. This, therefore, engenders the observable world of struggle between the politicians, on the one hand, and the masses/electorate, on the other hand. The media are not also left out of these representations. The concerns expressed by the media houses show that the reported issues relate to ideological struggle, diplomacy, among others. Hence, the politicians become conscious of what to say, when to say it, how to say it, and where to say it. They are also conscious of the way to react to issues in any public gathering, especially where press men are in attendance. The peoples' perception of different politicians is expected to go a long way in influencing their decision to vote for them or not. Hence, the system of knowledge, beliefs, social relations and identities represented about their persons by the media play a role in influencing the decision of the electorate. In the light of unveiling the accruable meanings to media texts, this study examines lexicalization as an ideological pointer in the print media with a focus on the headlines and cover stories in relation to how it tries to reflect the minds, feelings, opinions and attitudes of the influential people. It emphasises how the ideologies of the news magazines are promoted in the various reports on the Nigerian General Elections of 2003 and 2007.

#### 4. The Data

The data for this study were got from two magazines – *Tell* and *The News*. The two Nigerian magazines (produced weekly) were selected out of a range of other magazines because of their wide readership within and outside the country. From the 520 editions of both magazines published within a period of five years, 81 cover stories relating to Nigeria General Elections in *Tell* (50) and *The News* (31), covering 2003 and 2007 elections, were purposively selected. Since our interest is to use the lexical density to determine the text producer's ideological affiliation, sample texts were drawn from the collected samples and were subjected to content analysis, and the use of simple percentages helps to determine the focus of the magazines. Therefore, the analysis of the few samples here is representative of the larger data.

The cover stories were subjected to content analysis.

#### 5. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Based on our intention to examine how words and structures are lexically chosen and constructed, editions that specifically report issues that border on general elections were specifically selected. Necessary stories and relevant discourse representations were copied out with their details, such as the name of the paper, date of publication and page number. The data were closely examined. They were then subjected to analysis, using Fairclough's (1992) theory on wording, which is equivalent to Halliday's (1978) theory on lexicalisation. In the analysis, we consider lexicalisation, lexical focus, overlexicalisation and relexicalisation in order to determine the lexical focus of the selected stories.

##### 5.1 Lexicalisation and Lexical Focus

Lexicalisation, otherwise termed 'wording' by Fairclough (1992:190) has to do with the use of lexical items from different register fields. Such lexical items overtly or covertly give clues to the ideology of the text producer. The deployment of different morphological structures, such as affixation, blending, compounding, collocation, and so on, to form lexical chains or to lexicalise a text gives clues to the bias of the text producer. In our text, lexical items that relate to the ideologies of *TELL* and *The News* are significantly introduced in marshalling the print medium's points. Some of such ideologies include the view that in Nigeria, election is fraudulent, election is rigged, election is a dirty game, and the power of incumbency dictates the tune of elections, among others. A critical analysis of the lexical structure of a passage is capable of yielding information relating to the three dimensions of discourse.

##### 5.2 Overlexicalisation/Overwording and Re-lexicalisation/Re-wording

Overlexicalisation is a term used by Halliday (1978) for the dense wording of a domain. The term is otherwise termed overwording by Fairclough (1992). It has to do with the intense preoccupation that points to peculiarities in the ideology in a given text. The overwording of a domain with collocational properties aids the discovery of the ideological stance of the text producer. Halliday (1978) used the term *re-lexicalisation* to mean wordings that generate new lexical items. Fairclough (1992) refers to this as *re-wording*. It has to do with words that are set up as alternatives to the existing ones.

Borrowing from studies already carried out in determining the thematic preoccupation of a text producer and his bias in a given passage by Sinclair (1966) and Osisanwo (1986), we adopt the following formula:

$$C\% = \frac{\sum L}{T} \times 100$$

(Osisanwo 1986:93)

The formula helps in working out the field of discourse and the thematic preoccupation of the writer in a given story through the analysis of the lexical items. Osisanwo (1986:94) explains that the terms, *node*, *span*, *collocates* and *correlation* are very important in determining the lexical density of a passage.

**Node** is the central lexical item whose collocations are being determined, that is the thematic preoccupation of a passage.

**Span** is the entire piece of writing being investigated.

**Collocates** are the words that have the tendency to function together in particular situations.

**Correlation** is the closeness of the relationship between the node and the collocates.

In the formula, **C%** stands for the percentage of correlation.

**L** stands for the total number of the lexical items being investigated.

$\Sigma$  stands for the total number of content words in the passage.

The workability of this formula is in the view that the higher the percentage of correlation, the stronger the evidence that the passage belongs to the same field of human activity as the node selected. This helps in determining the text producer's ideology.

### Sample 1

But the **tone** for the **rejection** of the **results** of **general elections** was set not by **opposition parties** but by **international** and **local groups** who **observed** the **elections** across the country. These **groups** were **emphatic** in their **condemnation** of the **outcome** of the **polls** in certain **states**. Leading the **pack** was the European Union Election Observer Mission, **EU EOM**. In a **thoroughly damning report**, the **mission insisted** that, "the **presidential** and a **number** of **gubernatorial elections** were **marred** by **serious irregularities** and **fraud**". The **EU Group** said that in certain states, **minimum standards** for **democratic elections** were not met. "Many **instances** of **ballot box stuffing**, **changing** of **results** and other **serious irregularities** were **observed** in Cross River, Delta, Enugu, Kaduna, Imo and Rivers State. The **election** in these states **lack credibility** and **appropriate measures** must be **taken** by the **relevant authorities**", the **EU Mission** said in its **report**.

(*The News*, May 5, 2003).

In sample 1, there are 84 content words. 55 of them determine the lexical focus of the story. They are pointers to the node. The node is the view that the 2003 election in Nigeria is fraudulent.

$$C\% = \frac{55}{84} \times \frac{100}{1} = \frac{5500}{84} = 65.5\%$$

For easy analysis, the lexical items which relate to the node have been highlighted, while other content words which are used in channelling the message are not highlighted. Since 65.5% of the lexical items relate to the node, it is evident that the text producer's choices and belief portray the view that the 2003 elections were fraudulent.

### Sample 2

Bribe Scandal

**Geff Ojinika** is one of the **legislators** who believe that the **tenure** of the **President** should be **extended** beyond the **constitutional limits** of **two terms** of **four years**. He purses that conviction without any apology. He went to lend his voice to the **tenure extension debate** ...**blackmail** him. The **embattled legislator** is being **fingered** as the **person** who **allegedly undertook** the **sharing** of the **N40billion bribe**. The **money supposedly meant** to **influence** the **lawmakers** to **vote** for the **controversial clause** on the **tenure extension**. **Ojinika** said he was never involved in the **distribution** of **money** to **fellow legislators**. Nobody **shared** any **money**. I did not participate in any exercise of that nature. An **alibi**? Apart from Ojinika's **denial**, there are variations to the story of how the **alleged booty** was **shared**. The **development raises questions** about the **credibility** of some of the **claims** concerning **inducement** of **legislators**... (*TELL*, May 22, 2006.)

In sample 2, there are sixty-seven (67) content words. Fifty-two (52) of them determine the lexical focus of the story. They are pointers to the node. The node is the view that there was third-term agenda and bribery attempt at achieving the agendum.

$$C\% = \frac{52}{67} \times \frac{100}{1} = \frac{5200}{67} = 77.6\%$$

The highlighted lexical items relate to the self-succession bid, bribery scandal and the beneficiaries. Other content words which are used in channelling the message are not highlighted. Since 77.6% of the lexical items relate to the node, it is evident that the text producer's choices and belief portray the view that the bribe scandal in changing the controversial clause on the tenure extension is not only strong, it is real.

From the initial analysis on lexical focus, we observe the recurrence of some collocations as used by both magazines in order to sustain the chain of discussion. The use of words such as *fear, battle, war, killing, assassination, violence, killer, shooting, gunpoint* and so forth, suggests the writer's beliefs. The writer suggests an unpleasant scenario or environment. The innocent citizens in such an environment get taken aback by the scenario. If the democracy which belongs to the people becomes what gives them threat of danger, pain, fear and unpleasant emotional trauma, then the democracy must have been hijacked by hoodlums, hooligans and selfish political figures who think of getting to power just for selfish reasons.

The use of the words *elongate, self-succession, perpetuation, continuity, undying* and *extension* suggests that the writer is convinced that 'somebody' wants to remain somewhere beyond the expected time or remain indefinitely. The sustenance of words such as *bribe, blackmail, fraud, scandal, bribery* around the third-term agenda also suggest the writer's belief that there were attempts by the third-term plotter(s) to bribe their way through. It also suggests that the rumour on the bribery allegations on the third-term agenda is not far from the truth. Other words like *campaign, vote, electorate, election, voter, opponents, parties, victory, polls, 2007* and so on suggest that elections were being held sometime in 2007. They also suggest the production of the text around electioneering issues.

Occasionally, while some social actors try to communicate in the public, they tend to use words without considering the consequences of such words within a larger purview. When such actors use words, the media help to project and enlarge the meaning within the confines of the observable happenings within a given environment. Such words eventually find their ways into the lexicon of, for instance, Nigerian politics. The lexical items become words that are alternatives to existing ones. Consider the following:

*do-or-die politics,*  
*do-or-die election,*  
*sit-tight agenda,*  
*third-term plot,*  
*tenure extension,*  
*self-succession,*  
*evil genius.*

The use of the expression *do-or-die* became popular in Nigerian politics through the media. President Obasanjo used it on a TV media chat. According to the user, it means that PDP and the government of the day would put their all to retain governance in the circles of PDP aspirants since they have been judged to be the only set of credible politicians. However, the expression has been re-lexicalised to cover a political/electoral landscape that is fraudulent, rigged and totally judged to lack credibility.

The phrase *sit-tight agenda* is also a term used alongside *sit-tight scheme, third-term plot, tenure extension,* and *self-succession plot*. All these terms were generated by the media to explain Chief Obasanjo's desire to remain in power beyond the constitutional maximum two-term tenure. The President's desire then became a cause for concern, and this dominated the discussion in the media for about a year. As the desire kept extending, new words were being created, or existing ones were being expanded to explain the scheme. By *sit-tight* is meant the desire not to leave a given seat, in this case, the seat of power at the Aso Rock Villa. The term *sit tight* also shows the General as a military man who is avaricious and intends to use a dictatorial force to remain in power. Other expressions are also created or re-lexicalised based on the attribute of social actors. General Babangida has been labelled an 'evil genius' based on his perceived dirty deals which were often carefully executed or schemed and often went almost unnoticed.

Prenominal Adjectives afford writers the opportunity of self-expression. They are used to modify nouns. The words used by a speech maker to modify words go a long way in exposing his ideology. The prenominal adjectives used by *TELL* and *The News* are pointers to their views and beliefs concerning the nominal words being modified. The following prenominal adjectives have been culled out of our data:

*titanic battle, battle of the Generals, the looming war, killing field, political assassination, three murders,*  
*strong-arm tactics, wide-spread fears, the looming violence, bloody revolution, the Aso Rock battle, a*

*festering nest of murders, the bloody road to 2007, the hacking-down of opponents, the vicious killer, a harvest of guns, political cold war, shooting mission, N25 billion bribe, the bribe storm, the bribe saga, anti-corruption campaign, bribe blackmail, a litany of corruption, stolen millions, the scandal in Aso Rock, the fraud scandal, sit-tight schemes, sit-tight agenda, third-term plot, the plot, perpetuation in office, tenure extension, self-succession plot, another game plan, tenure elongation, six more years, six years re-election, the undying third-term plot, self perpetuation plot, continuity in office, April general elections, confusion over elections, the April polls, PDP's dubious victory, one-party monster, politician's dirty deals, gunpoint politics, do-or-die election, Professor of fraud, opposition party, operation rig the polls.*

The pronominal adjectives listed above belong to one of the four classes below:

- 1) pronominal adjectives which suggest threat to human life at the polls and that election in Nigeria is a dirty game
- 2) pronominal adjectives which suggest that bribery, corruption and avarice are enmeshed in the Nigerian society through the political figures.
- 3) pronominal adjectives which suggest that there is self-succession plot
- 4) pronominal adjectives which suggest that there were elections and that the elections were fraudulent and rigged.

The pronominal adjectives are differentiated according to their different thematic preoccupations in the tables below:

**Table 1:** Pronominal Adjectives Indicating Threat to Human Life at the Polls

S/N	Pronominal Adjectives	Indication
1.	Titanic battle	Pronominal
2.	Battle of the Generals	adjectives which
3.	The looming war	suggest/indicate
4.	Killing field	threat to human life at
6.	Political assassination	the polls and that
7.	Three murders	election in Nigeria is
8.	Strong-arm tactics	a dirty game.
9.	Wide-spread fears	
10.	The looming violence	
11.	Bloody revolution	
12.	The Aso Rock battle	
13.	A festering nest of murders	
14.	The bloody road to 2007	
16.	The hacking-down of opponents	
17.	The vicious killer	
18.	A harvest of guns	
19.	Political cold war	
20.	Shooting mission	

**Table 2:** Pronominal Adjectives Indicating that Bribery and Corruption are Enmeshed in the Nigerian Society

S/N	Pronominal Adjectives	Indication
1.	₦25 billion bribe	Pronominal
2.	The bribe storm	adjectives which
3.	The bribe saga	suggest/indicate that
4.	Anti-corruption campaign	bribery, corruption

6.	Bribe blackmail	and avarice are
7.	A litany of corruption	enmeshed in the
8.	Stolen Millions	Nigerian society
9.	The scandal in Aso Rock	through its leaders.
10.	The fraud scandal	

**Table 3:** Prenominal Adjectives Indicating Threat to Human Life at the Polls

S/N	Prenominal Adjectives	Indication
1.	Sit-tight schemes	Prenominal
2.	Sit-tight agenda	adjectives which
3.	Third-term plot	suggest/indicate that
4.	The plot	there is
6.	Perpetuation in office	self-succession plot
7.	Tenure extension	
8.	Self-succession plot	
9.	Another game plan	
10.	Tenure elongation	
11.	Six more years	
12.	Six years re-election	
13.	The undying third-term plot	
14.	Self perpetuation plot	
16.	Continuity in office	

**Table 4:** Prenominal Adjectives Indicating Threat to Human Life at the Polls

S/N	Prenominal Adjectives	Indication
1.	April general elections	Prenominal
2.	Confusion over elections	adjectives which
3.	The April polls	suggest or indicate
4.	PDP's dubious victory	that there were
5.	One-party monster	elections and that the
6.	Politician's dirty deals	elections were
7.	Gunpoint politics	fraudulent and
8.	Do-or-die election	rigged.
9.	Professor of fraud	
10.	Opposition party	

The prenominal adjectives in the tables above are representative of both *Tell* and *The News* reports on NGEs. The adjectives suggest the thematic preoccupation of the reports. They show that both magazines believe that there were riggings during the elections, hence they were not free and fair. They confirm the existence of bribery, corruption, fraud, among others. They also believe that there was self-succession plot.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

We have shown how cover writers construct reality, advance the ideologies of the social actors and are influenced by their own ideological leanings and those of the magazine owner. As a result, cover stories, instead of representing the

writer's objective viewpoint, can be taken as representative of the ideological stance of the magazine as an institution. The lexical choices that expressed ideological pursuits in the reports were generally non-neutral. An inquiry into the lexical focus of the stories reveals the focus of the news magazines. Their chosen lexical items relate to the self-succession bid, bribery scandal, and election fraud, among others. An inquiry into overlexicalisation reveals the use of words such as *fear, battle, war, killing, assassination, violence, killer, shooting, gunpoint* to suggest an unpleasant scenario or environment; and the use of the words *elongate, self-succession, perpetuation, continuity, undying* and *extension* to suggest that an individual writer is convinced that 'somebody' wants to remain somewhere beyond the expected time or remain indefinitely. The sustenance of words such as *bribe, blackmail, fraud, scandal, bribery* around the third-term agenda also suggest the news magazines' belief that there were attempts by the third-term plotter(s) to bribe their way through.

An investigation of the use of re-lexicalisation shows that words like *do-or-die politics, do-or-die election, sit-tight agenda, third-term plot, tenure extension, self-succession, evil genius* are terms generated and re-lexicalised by the magazines to explain Chief Obasanjo's desire to remain in power beyond the constitutional two-term tenure. Some words are also created or re-lexicalised based on the attribute of social actors. The use of pronominal adjectives also reveals that phrases like *titanic battle, killing field, political assassination, three murders, strong-arm tactics, wide-spread fears, a festering nest of murders, the bloody road to 2007, the hacking-down of opponents, a harvest of guns, political cold war, shooting mission, N25 billion bribe, the bribe storm, the bribe saga, anti-corruption campaign, bribe blackmail, the fraud scandal, sit-tight schemes, sit-tight agenda, third term plot, perpetuation in office, tenure extension, self-succession plot, another game plan, tenure elongation, six more years, six years re-election, the undying third term plot, self perpetuation plot, PDP's dubious victory, one-party monster, politician's dirty deals, gunpoint politics, do-or-die election, Professor of fraud, operation rig the polls* suggest: (i) threat to human life at the polls and that election in Nigeria is a dirty game, (ii) that bribery, corruption and avarice are enmeshed in the Nigerian society through the political figures, (iii) that there is self-succession plot, (iv) that there were elections and that the elections were fraudulent and rigged.

In summary, we observe that both magazines used linguistic tools to represent their ideological affiliations, that is, election in Nigeria is a dirty game and politicians are insincere. Lexicalisation and intertextuality intermingled to depict contextual lexical choices.

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