

Language, Politics, Globalisation and the Emergence of Barrack Obama as the United States' President

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Abstract

The frenzy that caught up the entire world with the emergence of Barrack Hussein Obama as the First African American President of the United States of America hardly died down almost one year after the inauguration of the administration. The book makers, the stargazers, the pessimists and the conservatives all tended to be carried away by the wind of change that blew and initiated what can be described as a new world order. However, it is not many that have come to terms with the factors that facilitated this sudden change. The focus of this paper is to highlight some of these factors that played remotely and immediately to bring about the ground-breaking, political watershed in the history of the United States of America and the entire world. The work reveals that a combination of the impact of globalization and an articulate political language significantly influenced the emergence of Barrack Obama as the 44th president of the United States of America, thus breaking the racial barrier with a swiftness and certainty that even the people had not foreseen. It argues that the branch of linguistics that looks at the role of language in the society; sociolinguistics, cannot be better appreciated without considerations of such practically oriented issues that demonstrate the ability of language as the quintessence of man to contributing towards the reshaping of the socio-political, economic and even scientific and technological history of the world. Yet language receives the least attention in comparison with other relevant factors.

Introduction

Sociolinguistics examines the role of language in relation to the society. The approach to its study is both empirical and theoretical. Politics is one aspect of societal life where language plays a significant role. Politics encompasses the science and art of government, the science dealing with the form, organization and administration of a state or part of one and with the regulation of its relation with other state. Thus we have imperial, national, domestic, municipal, communal foreign politics etc. The United States of America's election 2008, that produced Barrack Obama as president transcends national to international politics. Language roles and influence in politics is strategic and evident in such roles are structures and rhetorical and speech devices of oratory, propaganda, spin, electioneering campaign, advertising, bluster, mendacity etc. This paper is situated in the domain of language and politics which is an aspects of sociolinguistics. It seeks to highlight how language can contribute and in fact, influence a change of the sociopolitical, economic, scientific and technological history of the world; the emergence of an African as the president of the United States of America in an election. According to Essien (2003:25)

... in development, because the role of language is indirect or latent: the completion of a bridge-building or a successful election is more easily evident, for example, than all the language activities that led to it, we tend to ignore the potency in our development programmes and strategies.

While so much frenzy, noise and celebration was made and heard about the US elections, 2008 and the emergence of Barrack Obama all over the world, not much is heard or known about the language activities that contributed to his emergence. This paper is therefore focusing on

highlighting Obama's language activities prior to, during and after the United States election, 2008 and the significant impact this made on his emergence as president. It will also show how globalization worked with language to reshape the outcome of US-election result for more than 200 years of her political history. It will further show that the knowledge, mastery and use of an articulated political language holds the ace for a vibrant and progressive political career for any local and international politician, having the capability of breaking through tribal, ethnic, racial and religious divides.

1.1 Definition of Terms

1.1.1 Language

According to crystal (1992), language is the systematic conventional use of sounds, signs or written symbols in a human society for communication and self expression.

Linguists often distinguish between language viewed as an art of speaking, writing or signing in a given situation referred to by the French terms "parole" or linguistic performance. The system underlying an individual's use of speech, writing or sign and behaviour of a whole community is referred to in French as 'langue' or linguistic competence.

1.1.2 Politics

Politics is defined as the science and art of government. Orwell (1946) explains the major goal of politics to be control, which includes the desire to control resources or the economy, values and norms of the society, people's behaviour as part of social collectivities, the process of making decisions etc. It is a competition between different actors who

struggle to control the human and material resources through the acquisition of power. Politicians argue that there is hardly any social domain that is devoid of politics as all human beings are regarded as political animals. Ideology divides politicians into different groups along a continuum of right or left where the leftist are socialists and the rightist are conservatives with centrists as liberals holding between the two.

1.1.3 Globalization:

According to Gideons in Ndimele (2003:143) Globalization is the intensification of world wide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa. He sees globalization as a dialectical phenomenon, in which events at one pole of a distanced relation often produced divergent or even contrary

occurrences at another. Nyamnjoh (2007:1) sees globalization as a process marked by accelerated flows, and quite paradoxically, accelerated closures as well. He believes that while globalization has brought about free flows of capital, goods, electronic information, migration and boundaries dissolving; on the other hand, it has exacerbated insecurities, uncertainties and anxieties in locals and foreigners alike.

1.1.4 Language of Politics.

Szanto (1978:7) describes the language of politics as a lexicon of conflict and drama of ridicules and reproach, pleading and persuasion, colour and bite permeated. It is the language that is designed to valor men, destroy some and change the mind of others. It involves propaganda, advertising, structures, rhetorical and phonic devices of oratory, bluster, political

campaign etc. This is contrasted with politics of language which deals with language wars, language rights, freedom of speech, language and conflict resolution, relation between physical space and linguistic modulation etc. Language plays very significant role in political activities. According to Awonusi (2003:95) studies have shown that different political ideologist and tendencies may be marked by language. For example, he cites the work of Group de Saint Cloud (1982) and Bonnatous and Tournier (1995) as demonstrating that the reflective frequency of lexical items like *travailleur* and *salarie* in French trade unions reflects various political ideologies and how such ideologies change overtime. The language of politics as a domain of language use is peculiarly characterized by certain linguistic features. One of such features is the use of politically or emotionally neutral lexical items aimed at changing people's perceptions through the change of old semantic labels. Politicians like Obama rely on language to change people's perceptions and carrying them along. While it is said that very little difference exists between persuasion and coercion, it also differs from propaganda. The language of politics makes use of rhetoric repetition, figurative expressions etc. Obama's recognition, mastery and use of this language in the US 2008 elections in a globalised world put him at a very big advantage that culminated in his emergence as the first African American president.

2.0 A Brief on United States 2008 Elections

The United States of America (USA) operates the presidential system of Government with elected officials at the federal, states and local levels

electing their president indirectly through an electoral college. There are two major political parties; the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. There are also several minor parties who have not participated in the presidential election since 1864. Most media and public focus is on the two major parties. The US constitution defines to an extent how the federal elections are held especially in articles one and two, and various amendments. State law

regulates most aspect of the electoral law including primaries, the eligibility of voters, beyond the basic constitutional definition, the running of each states electoral college and the running of the state and local elections. The president and vice president are being voted in each state through selection. Electors from the list of 50 states designated by different parties or candidates and the electors typically promise in advance to vote for the candidate of their party whose names usually appears on the ballot box. The winner of the election is the candidate with 270 electoral colleges vote. However it is possible for a candidate to win the electoral colleges vote and loose the popular vote (nationwide). The financing of elections has always been controversial because private source of finance made up substantial amount of campaign contributions, especially in federal election. The federal elections commission which came into being in 1975 is saddled with the responsibilities of disclosing campaign finance information, to enforce the provisions of the law such as the limits and prohibitions on contributions to overseas public funding US presidential elections. The political history of the US was heated up and would never remain the same again with the declaration of Barrack

Obama on February 10, 2007 of his presidential candidacy at Springfield, Illinois and subsequent emergence as the flag bearer of the Democratic Party on June 3, 2008. Senator John McCain was equally selected as the flag bearer of the Republican Party. It was historic that for the first time in the history of US elections that the candidate of both parties were born outside the continental United States. While Barrack Obama was born in Hawaii, John McCain was born in Panama Canal. It was also, the first election since 1952 that neither the incumbent president nor the incumbent vice president was the candidate in the general election. Also, it was the first time in the election history that both major party nominees were sitting United States Senators.

3.0 Obama's Speeches, Prior, During and After United States 2008 Elections.

Awonusi (2003:95) had postulated certain linguistic features that characterize a political language such as ones used for electioneering campaigns. Apart from, such language triggering up a different ideological divide and possessing neutral lexical items, he maintains that such language is said to be politically correct or least offensive to the populace. For example, instead of using terms or words such as, garbage collectors, poor, blind, spokesman, black negro, disabled etc. one chooses to use, sanitation engineers, culturally deprived, visually impaired, spokesperson, African-American and physically challenged respectively. In using language for persuasion, he identified several linguistic features such rhetorics, repetition euphemisms, metaphors, alliterations etc. Obama's speeches will be x-rayed in the light of the

above postulations to determine its peculiarity that made such a great impact

3.1 Obama's Speech prior to the Election.

**...There is not a liberal America
and a conservation America,
there is the United States of America.**

This is taken from a speech made by Obama while campaigning for the senate of the United State long before the presidential election. He was criticizing the partisan views of the electorate over his candidacy and asked Americans to find unity in diversity. It can be discovered that this aspect of the speech is embellished with the linguistic features of alliteration and repetitions. At a time of partisanship and bickering of public debate, he selected lexical items with the capability of uniting the people around a politics of purpose that puts challenge of everyday Americans first before political gain. His repetitive and alliterative use of the word "America" was to emphasize to them America rather than personal or parochial interest. The carefully selected choice of neutral lexical items no doubt triggered up a different ideological divide – "an all inclusive America" rather than the already existing "conservation" or "liberal" divides.

The above speech and choice of words unarguably paved the way for his election into the United States Senate. It further endeared him to the heart of the United States citizens across racial divides, which opened him up for a presidential ambition. Commenting on the language and

oratory competence of Obama even before the presidential Campaign, the American writer, William Finnegan, writing on the New Yorker profiler of Obama, observed that Obama has the ability of “slipping subtly into the idiom of his interlocutor” as well as speaking “a full range of American vernaculars” (Adomi 2009:20)

3.2 Obama’s Speech during the Presidential Election Campaign.

The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works – whether it helps families find jobs at a decent wage, care they can afford, a retirement that is dignified. Where the answer is yes, we intend to move forward.

Where the answer is no, programs will end. And those of us who manage the public dollars will be held to account - to spend wisely,

reform bad habits, and do our business in the light of day – because

only then can we restore the vital trust between a people and their government. America is a friend of each nation and everyman, woman

and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity, and we are ready

to lead one. America is a nation of Christians and muslims, Jews and

Hindus- and non believers. They are different languages and cultures,

drawn from every end of this earth; because of the bitter experience of

civil war, we will become stronger and united.

The above speech is contained in his manifesto in the United states 2008 presidential election campaign. It was his blueprint for the American people covering such strategic areas as economy, security and defense as well as Religion.

Again, using Awonusi's criteria on linguistic features, it can be discovered that this speech is loaded with neutral lexical items that are least offensive to the populace. With the choice of words, he maintained his projection of a new ideological divide that identifies with no particular existing statuesquo, but one that includes and accommodates all the existing and yet to existing ones. Several words were repeated in the speech such as;

Whether (X 3)

Where (X 2)

Answer (X 2)

America (X 2)

He made use of implicatures which according to Awonusi in Essien (2003:100) are used to prod the listening public, make assumptions about things not said in a statement or assertion. In another sense, it gives the listener or reader a sense of collective involvement in an action or public policy. For example, in the above speech, Obama made use of implicatures as illustrated in these lines below.

___ **The question we ask today...**
 ___ **Whether our government is...**
 ___ **Only then can we restore...**
 ___ **And we are ready to lead once more...**
 ___ **Those of us who manage...**

In order to achieve this, he made use of first person plural pronoun instead of the first person singular pronoun. His manipulation of the

pronoun reference was a deliberate linguistic device to show a sense of collective responsibility.

Metonymy which is the substitution or replacement of a name by something similar to it as strategy of influencing a listener's perception was also used by Obama in that speech.

America is a friend of each nation and every woman. Here, the word America is not used to refer to the name of a city or country but to the people of the land.

The speech was heavily satirical. He used this to point out the absurdity and weakness of the prevailing (Bush's) administration in a subtle manner. For example,

___ **whether it (government) works**
 ___ **Whether it helps families find with decent wages.**
 ___ **Care they can afford**
 ___ **A retirement that is dignified.**

Obama's speech is also noted to have a number of contrastive pairs which he utilizes to create new meanings and drove home his point.

The question we ask today is not whether
Our government is *too small* or *too big*...
If the answer is yes...
If the answer is no...

3.3 Obama's Speech after the Presidential Election;
If there is anyone out there who still doubts that
America is a place where all things
are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our
founders is alive in our times; who
still questions the power of our democracy, to night
is your answer. It's the answer
told by lines that stretched around schools and
churches in numbers this nation has

never seen; by people who waited three hours and four hours, many for the very first time in their lives, because they believed that this time must be different; that

their voice could be that different. It's the answer spoken by young and old, rich and poor, Democratic and Republican, black, white, latino, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled Americans who sent a message to the world that we have never been a collection of Red states and Blue states; we are and always will be the United States of America. It's the answer that led those who have been told for so long by so many to be cynical, and fearful and doubtful of what we can achieve to put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day. It's been a long time coming, but to night because of what we did on this day, in this election, at defining moment; change has come to America...

The above is an extract from Obama's inspiring acceptance speech at Grand Park in Chicago after being elected on November 4, 2008 as the 44th president of the United States, and the first black president, having participated in the longest election campaign in the US history.

In the first paragraph of this speech, Obama made use of the adjective clause introduced by the relative pronoun 'who' to create an emphatic effect. He repeated this three times in the first sentence, separating them with semicolons, in order to draw attention and create emphasis as seen below,

... Who still doubts that America...
... Who still wonders if the...

...Who still question the power of...

As most politicians do, he enjoyed the use of contrastive pairs in this speech as in his other speeches to create new meanings and drive home his point. For example

- ... Young and old....**
- ... Rich and poor...**
- ... Democrats and Republicans...**
- ... Black and white**
- ... Disabled and non-disabled...**

It could be noted that some of these contrasts harbour certain ambiguities as strange ideological bedfellows are brought together e.g. Democrats and Republicans. There is also the use of metaphors to bring to the public images that are readily understood.

- E.g. **...The power of our democracy...**
...The dream of our founders is alive...

Here, democracy is said to possess some 'power' and dream is said to be 'alive'.

The attribute of 'strength' to democracy and 'life' to dream is to create a rosy and dynamic impression.

4.0 The Impact of Globalization

A combination of an articulate political language and the impact of globalization significantly influenced the emergence of Barack Obama as the 44th president of the United States of America, breaking the racial barrier with the swiftness and certainty that even the people had not foreseen. Using Ndimele (2003)'s definition of globalization, it can safely be said that the United States 2008 election was significantly shaped by events occurring many miles away.

Globalization re-enforced by the revolution in information and communication technology made the emergence of Barack Obama as a presidential candidate in the election accessible to the rest of the world with great speed and ease. It also made the reactions of the rest of the world accessible to Americans with equivalent speed and ease. The result of the opinion polls on a preferred candidate between Hillary Clinton and Obama in the Democratic party and eventually between Obama and John McCain in the general election from American allies, especially, European nations significantly impacted on the electorate decisions both at the party level and at the general election. A substantial sum of Obama's campaign fund was raised from the internet. Though funds were not accepted from outside America, but there is no doubt that most of the allies had businesses and accounts in America from where they contributed to the campaign fund. As America practices the principle of permanent interest and no permanent friend; she could not have easily jettisoned the overwhelming endorsement of Obama by a consortium of her allies representing her interest to stick to a globally unpopular and unacceptable racial prejudice. The European press as well as other world players from Asia and other parts of the world inundated the internet with opinions, expressions of support and solidarity with Obama whose upbringing in Indonesia, one of the Asian Tigers, tended to endear him to them. This is equivalent to the way his root in Africa endeared him to Africans who see him as their brother. Funds were raised in countries like Nigeria to support Obama's campaign even when such was not allowed by the American constitution. One of the most significant external influences that in no small measure

shaped the opinion of the American voters preferring Obama to McCain was his acceptance by Arabs in the Middle East. His support for the pull-out of US military forces in Iraq which the Arabs championed for a long time, made him their toast. His stint with the Islamic faith, his Islamic name, 'Hussein', his father's Islamic background as well as his articulate use of language in his address to the countries of the Middle East all contributed in making him their preferred candidate. For instance, it is recorded that during his campaigns, all his interactions and speeches with Middle East political, and opinion leaders, he never made use of the word terror or terrorism. Their tacit endorsement of Barack Obama transmitted to the American electorate via the information super highway, through language significantly impacted, on their voting behaviour. The emergence of Barack Obama has no doubt introduces a new world order with many political adjustments. The doctrine of racial superiority is becoming unpopular, socio-economics reforms are sweeping across the nations. Equality of gender is gaining ground as more female presidents are emerging. Minorities are having access to their nation's leadership and the younger generations are taking over the mantle of leadership. The United Nations is set for reforms with the possible inclusion of India and an African country as permanent members of the Security Council. Language use as one of the most significant factors contributing to Obama's emergence and reshaping of the world socio-political events is given the least attention. Language as the quintessence of man not only contributes towards the socio-political, economic and even scientific and technological re-engineering of the

history of the world but is also a prime tool that makes globalization a reality.

Conclusion:

This paper set out to highlight the language activities of Barrack Obama prior to, during and after the United State's election, 2008 as well as the significant impact this made on his emergence as president. It also looked at the impact, globalization through language made to reshape the outcome of the United State's election for several years. We discovered his careful choice of lexical items, use of repetitions and alliterations when needed, slipping through the idiom of his interlocutors, his ability to speak a full range of American vernaculars, the use of implicatures, metonymy, contrastive pairs, metaphors etc made him push through the racial divide. Furthermore, through the effect of language, the impact of globalization was well received on the American electorates. All these culminated in the emergence of Barrack Obama as the 44th president of the United States of America and the first African American president. It is however regrettable that while the result of the language activity and globalization is celebrated, language is not.

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