

## Concretization of Abstraction: Metaphorical Expressions in Legislative Discourse

Clara Unoalegie Bola Agbara  
Nigerian Turkish Nile University, Abuja

### **Abstract**

Language occupies an important position in human co-existence such that it can either bind or disintegrate a community. Although language is an abstract entity, it plays a crucial role in the development of every facet of the society. In everyday interaction, whether official or unofficial, language users often employ linguistic tools such as metaphor to concretize their messages. This paper sets out to identify how legislators in their bid to bring about development in the society, use metaphor to concretize their intentions during official interactions. Using speech act theory, the study analyzed the speeches of senators during the consideration of bills and it was discovered that some Nigerian legislators sometimes employ metaphors to perform representative, affective and effective acts.

**Key words:** metaphor, indirect speech acts, locutionary act, illocutionary act, perlocutionary act, transactional and interactional functions, sentence form, sentence function, abstraction, conceptual mapping and concretize.

### **Introduction**

Language being an important linguistic device can either bind or split up a community. It is this importance of the role played by language in the development of human society which has necessitated its study in various academic fields such as linguistics, psychology, sociology, and philosophy. For the field of linguistics, language is studied both from the perspective of its linguistic forms and varied functions because linguists believe that effective description of language cannot be achieved through the study of its formal properties without also studying the various functions it serves within the human society.

Brown and Yule (1983) suggest 'transactional and interactional' as the two terms which can be used to summarize the major functions of language. However, they argue that it is almost impossible that in any communicative situation, 'utterances would be used to fulfill only one function, to the total exclusion of the other' (1). The term 'transactional' is used to refer to the "function which language serves in the expression of 'content'" (1) while interactional is used to refer to that function which involves the expression of social relations and personal attitude. Put differently, language is a tool used by speakers to signal not just information /message but also to denote bonding or distance simultaneously; and this act of messaging in the long run, leads to development. To achieve the aim of the intended message, it is very crucial that the receiver gets the content of the information appropriately; otherwise, a wrong reception could lead to unforeseen consequences in the real world. Most speakers are conscious of the possibility of wrong decoding of one's message and hence, speakers often embellish their speeches with metaphorical utterances.

The use of metaphorical expression in legislative debates is particularly interesting because debate as a subset of argumentative discourse ought to feature explicit linguistic forms which are devoid of ambiguity so that the addressee does not misinterpret the message being passed

across. However, like most utterances which are embellished with metaphorical expressions, legislative debates also feature a great deal of the use metaphor. One major societal expectation, as well as legislative duty of the senators who are representatives of their various senatorial constituencies is to bring about positive changes; first in their senatorial constituencies and then, in the country as a whole. The intention to bring about a change is an abstraction in the mind of the initiator. This abstraction, however, when encoded in linguistic codes helps to bring to limelight that which is in the subconscious of the initiator. Thus, for the legislators to actualize their intentions 'to bring about change' in the real world, the abstraction is symbolized in linguistic codes. Legislative interaction is thus, a process which aims at bringing about development in the society.

Using the Speech Act Theory, this paper analyses the various metaphoric expressions which characterize some utterances in Nigeria legislative debates, as well as identifies the illocutionary acts performed with such metaphoric expressions in the discourse. Speech Act Theory (Austin 1962) is anchored on the notion 'speaking is acting'. The data for the analysis is taken from the Senate Hansard of the 6<sup>th</sup> National Assembly inaugurated in 2007. For efficient management and thorough analysis; only six bills are sampled from 2009 to 2010.

### **SPEECH ACT THEORY**

Speech Act Theory which was first proposed by Austin (1962), and later, was expanded by Austin's student, Searle, considers speaking as acting provided the speech occurs within a context which fulfills certain felicity conditions. The theory's main tenet is a consideration of the social and linguistic contexts of language use. Hence, the context of performance determines the actual speech act which could be representative (assertive), directive, commissive, expressive, or declarative acts. Put differently, an individual's intention (abstract thought) comes to limelight through the performance of the production of appropriate linguistic codes.

Austin identifies three distinct acts performed when linguistic codes are uttered; these are:

- Locutionary act: a speaker's production of intelligent linguistic codes (utterance).
- Illocutionary act: the utterance made performs specific acts such as explaining, informing, advising, criticizing, persuading, entertaining, promising, etc
- Perlocutionary act: the actual effect of the utterance on the listeners, such as enlightened, infuriated, persuaded, impressed, upset, happy, etc.

These three acts are chains of events which occur during interaction in that 'Speakers perform their illocutionary acts within entire conversations where they are most often in verbal interactions with other speakers who reply [perlocutionary effect] to them and perform in turn their own speech acts [illocutionary act] with the same collective intention... (Vanderveken 53)

Expanding the work of Austin, Searle in his book, Speech Acts: An Essay on the Philosophy of Language, (1967), argues that speaking is an activity which is governed by regulations and that a speech act is an intentional behavior. For Searle, successful performance of illocutionary act, that is being understood, is more important than the effect produced, which is perlocutionary act. In other words, the ability to concretize one's thought abstraction in an effective form is very crucial in successful communication. In addition to suggesting the possibility of performing speech act indirectly, Searle reclassified illocutionary acts under five sub-headings:

- Representative act: is the act of describing, explaining, illustrating, reporting, emphasizing or affirming a state of affair in the world, and the speaker can establish the truth of the utterance made.

- Directive (Affective) act: an utterance whose propositional content expresses or initiates something to be carried out by the addressee; for example, to appeal, suggest, advice, command, instruct, etc.
- Commissive act: an utterance whose propositional content expresses something to be executed by the speaker; for example, to vow or promise.
- Expressive (Effective) act: an utterance that expresses the inner or psychological state of the speaker; for example, happy, sad, disappointed, enlightened, impressed, worried, etc.
- Declarative act: an utterance whose propositional contents effect changes in the state of affairs in the world; for example, declare a meeting open or closed, name a new born baby, etc.

**Indirect Speech Act**

Searle (1975) asserts that illocutionary act, whether representative, directive, commissive and expressive acts can be conveyed in an indirect manner; in which case the sentence forms does not matching the traditional function assigned to sentences. Thus, he introduces the principle of ‘indirect speech act’ into the Speech Act Theory. Supporting the notion of indirect speech acts, Grundy asserts that speakers often make request or give order indirectly. According to him, ‘... every sentence type can be used for every utterance function’; (Grundy 59). For examples:

SENTENCE FORM	UTTERANCE	
FUNCTION		
Interrogative:	Can you put the book on the table?	Request
Declarative:	You better come early tomorrow.	Order
Imperative:	Have a joyous celebration.	Assertion
Imperative:	Give me one good reason why I should leave you alone.	Question
Interrogative:	Who cares? – No one cares.	
	Only God cares.	Assertion
Declarative:	I wonder where we are heading to.	Question

Thus, indirect speech act puts aside the traditional roles assigned to sentence forms. By implications, indirect speech acts are often performed when language users distort the traditional character designated to sentence forms.

However, linguistic codes are largely abstracts that there is need to concretize one’s message for apt action to take place. One major manner of concretizing linguistic code abstractions, though in an indirect manner, is metaphoric expressions. Searle views metaphorical utterance as ‘simply a species indirect communication in the style of Gricean implicature...’ (Lycan 14)

**METAPHORS**

The term metaphor is used to describe an utterance which proffers a comparison (conceptual mapping) between two ideas or things that are unrelated in many aspects but are similar or alike in some other aspect (Johnson & Lakoff 2003). This ‘conception mapping’ between two divergent ideas or things functions as a “bridge” linking the two dissimilar things / ideas to develop similarity in another form and thus trigger the speaker’s intended effects and providing a forceful power and insightfulness to the listeners (Bai & Chen 2013). The possibility of creating optimal relevance and associative meaning makes metaphoric

expression, to a certain degree, 'more easily and quickly understood than some non-metaphorical literal expressions' (Lycan 2). Put differently, metaphor helps to draw the attention of the addressee to some likeness, often a novel or surprising likeness, between two or more things (Davidson 1978).

Most often metaphor is seen as a device for the embellishment of literary works, especially poems, and rhetorical enhancement. However, Lakoff and Johnson in their revised work "Metaphor We Live By" (2003), argue that metaphor is not just a tool for poetic works alone but a vital machinery in human interaction. Although, language users regard metaphor '... as a characteristic of language alone' (3), it is rather 'a matter of ... thought and action' (3). According to them, 'metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in term of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature' (3). They demonstrate the fact that our conceptual system is powered by wide varieties of metaphorical expressions by citing some metaphor concepts such as 'Argument is War' (4); 'Time is Money' (7); and 'The Mind is a Machine' (28). Lakoff (1995) states that conceptual metaphor are so natural and deep in our subconscious such that speakers use them extensively without, both the source (speaker) and the receiver, noticing the enormous social consequences of shaping or varying the understanding of our everyday world. Metaphors are constantly used and have become so natural to language users that some metaphors are classified as dead and others are fresh / novel metaphors. Dead metaphors are

phrases that evolved from what were originally novel metaphors but have turned into idioms or clichés and now mean literally what they used to mean metaphorically; they have their own dictionary entries, and in the most extreme cases, none but philologists even know of their metaphorical origins, (Lycan 2).

Lycan further states that the difference between dead and novel metaphors is that of smooth usage in that fresh or novel metaphors being easily picked up, become over-used and eventually become 'sicken, harden and die' (2).

## DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Metaphors constitute a form of indirect speech act that abounds in some of the speeches in Nigerian legislative discourse. Metaphor being a communicative tool helps 'to make ... the hearer "see" the topic under discussion "in a new light" and to feel about it in a new way', (Camp 1). In other words, metaphoric pragmatic force lies in understanding and experiencing an idea or a thing in a new but indirect manner as intended by the speaker. The use of metaphor in any discourse implies that the participants – the speakers and the listeners – have knowledge of the two concepts (conceptual mapping) being indirectly compared; otherwise the act will not be successful. The two dissimilar ideas or things place side by side as if they were similar, are used pragmatically, to structure the thinking and knowledge of the listeners; and to concretize and conceptualize abstract idea in order to achieve effective persuasion.

In the Nigerian legislative discourse, the structural patterns of metaphor vary; some are lexical, others are phrasal and some others are clausal. However, these metaphors will be discussed, not on the basis of their structural patterns but on the basis of their illocutionary acts. Below are some samples:

1. '... the same foreign lawyers who charge Nigerian victims so heavily will in turn sub-contract the same to Nigerian lawyers **for peanut payment.**' (1<sup>st</sup> Speaker: Arbitration Bill).

The speaker uses the expression 'for peanut payment' (a prepositional phrase) to concretize the little amount paid to Nigerian lawyers. 'Peanut' is a small seed, referring to

the payment as “peanut payment” helps to conceptualize the speaker’s meaning to the listeners. It is a representative act.

The 4<sup>th</sup> speaker in the same Bill also uses metaphor in:

2. ‘But what happens is that sometimes most of our people’s **hands are seized** because they would not be able to insist for arbitration to be in Nigeria.’

The term ‘our people’s hands are seized’ (a clause) is a metaphoric expression used to conceptualize the difficulties experienced by Nigerian business men and women in the choice of venue in settling business disputes. This difficulty arises as a result of the fact that Nigerian business men and women are at the receiving end; they are not the providers of the funds and as such cannot determine the venue for the settlement of disputes.

Other metaphorical expressions are:

3. ‘... we are at the **short end of the stick...**’ (6<sup>th</sup> Speaker: Arbitration Bill).

The 6<sup>th</sup> speaker uses this locution ‘at the short end of the stick’ (an idiomatic expression) to concretize the fact that Nigerians are at a disadvantage and as such cannot decide where disputes should be settled because the foreign partners; who are at the “long(er)” part of the stick; provided the funds and technology and hence they have the final decision on venue for dispute settlement as reflected in the Memorandum of Understanding.

4. ‘... people would rather **go through the back** to sign MoU...’ (6<sup>th</sup> Speaker)

This locution is used to conceptualize the fact that Nigerian business men and women will continue to sign contract agreements irrespective of the content of the Memorandum of Understanding because Nigerian business class lacks the funds to carry out their businesses. Hence if the present Bill is enacted and contains obstacles which will prevent the Nigerian business class from signing any Memorandum of Understanding the signing will still be done without taking cognizance of the relevant law.

Also in Evidence Bill, speakers use metaphorical expressions as illustrated in the following locutions:

5. ‘The Act has remained **stagnant...**’ (2<sup>nd</sup> speaker)

The 2<sup>nd</sup> speaker compares the Evidence Act Bill to water which normally flows in its movement but which now is making no progressive movement. This Bill, as it is now, seems dormant and cannot achieve its goal. To conceptualize this idea of lack of progression, the speaker used the term ‘stagnant’; (an adjective).

The same speaker further uses another metaphor to concretize the need for an amendment of the present Bill when he said:

6. ‘... what the Evidence Act requires is **comprehensive surgery...**’

Only animate beings go through surgery when critically sick. Therefore, this Bill according to the speaker is critically sick and requires not just a ‘surgery’ (reworking) but a ‘comprehensive’ one. The 3<sup>rd</sup> speaker on the same Bill also feels that the Bill requires amendment and emphasizes the importance of the Bill in order to achieve justice. He asserts that:

7. ‘...the Evidence Act is the **key** in making justice at whatever level.’

The item “key” (noun) is an instrument for opening what is locked. Similarly, Evidence Bill is what will open up justice for any person seeking for justice where or when it is locked up.

The 11<sup>th</sup> speaker of Evidence Bill used metaphor to appeal to the Senate President to ensure that the Bill is quickly passed without delay. He says:

8. ‘... in view of the reforms that are going on in that sector (financial sector), you need to put your **weight** behind this Bill, fast track it and...’

The speaker is appealing to the Senate President to use his power to hasten the passage of this Bill. ‘Weight’; (a noun) here refers to the authority and power of the Senate President.

In Petroleum Bill, the 2<sup>nd</sup> speaker emphasizes the role and importance of oil to Nigerian economy when he states:

9. ‘The **life wire** (sic) of this country is oil.....’

In other words, it is oil that makes the Nigerian economy to be energetic or active, without oil the country will probably become dead economically.

Also the 4<sup>th</sup> speaker emphasizes the importance of the Bill metaphorically when he refers to it as

10. ‘... a **one-stop** legislation for oil industry.’

The 9<sup>th</sup> speaker in his contributions used metaphorical expressions:

11. ‘... we tend **to battle** with the choices before us.

...we cannot afford **to throw away the baby with the bath water**.

...foreign investors seemed to have exploited and **plundered** this country to **bone marrow** [sic].’

This speaker uses the 1<sup>st</sup> locution ‘to battle’ (to infinitive verb) to state that human beings always have to struggle (battle) to choose appropriate options “choice” in the midst of many options. The speaker performs representative act. But in the 2<sup>nd</sup> locution ‘to throw away the baby with the bath water’, (a clause), he advises the House to be careful to note the good aspects of the Bill ‘the baby’ which should be accepted while the not –so-good aspect ‘the bath water’ is discarded. Thus, the speaker performs an affective act.

The 10<sup>th</sup> speaker also performs an affective act while making an appeal to the committees that will examine the Bill, he says:

12. ‘...let those committees do **justice** to the Bill.’

This speaker is simply appealing that the members of the committees should not be biased, so that the right decisions/ actions ‘Justice’ would be taken.

The Appropriation Bill contains series of metaphorical expressions. The 3<sup>rd</sup> speaker punctuated his contributions with metaphoric expressions; below are some samples:

13. ‘... every time we pass budgets we have **to bend over backwards** to go through the process of amendment...’

‘... the **flip flop** is a feature of an economy that is **not broad based, robust and resting on a good cradle**.’

‘... any economy that is **resting on one leg**...’

‘... would be a clarion call for us...’

In this 1<sup>st</sup> locution, the speaker describes the act of budget amendment metaphorically as ‘bend over backwards’ while in the 2<sup>nd</sup> locution, he describes the act as ‘flip flop’. He uses these metaphoric expressions to express his displeasure at constant change of senate’s decisions on budget due to the fact that the Nigerian economy is monolithic ‘not broad based’, and lacks a good support ‘good cradle’ because the economy of the nation is not firm due to the fact that it is ‘resting on one leg’. In the 4<sup>th</sup> locution, the speaker metaphorically suggests that there is need for the Senate to take a positive action to make the Nigerian economy ‘broad based’ and ‘robust’. Thus, the speaker performs two separate illocutionary acts: he uses the first three locutions to perform an expressive act of displeasure and the fourth, to perform an affective act of suggestion.

Similarly, the 5<sup>th</sup> speaker in the same Bill performs an expressive act metaphorically by conveying his dismay at the constant budget amendment and the ideas of reducing the earlier funds allocated to the various sectors of the economy in the budget:

14. ‘... we must do it with **a lot of human face**...’

‘...what we want to realize in having a good budget will remain **a mirage** unless...’

In the 1<sup>st</sup> locution, the speaker uses the term ‘human face’ (a noun phrase) to make an appeal; that in reducing the funds allocated to the various sectors, the needs of each sector as

well as the realities on ground must be considered. In other words, allocation of funds should not be done out of favouritism or sentiments. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> locution, he emphatically states that the intentions of having a good budget will not be realized but will remain a ‘mirage’ except the environmental sector is given priority.

In like manner, the 6<sup>th</sup> speaker metaphorically expresses his disapproval of equal reduction of funds allocated to every sector:

15. ‘...everybody [sic] knows that he would be getting **an envelop** [sic], that envelop (sic) puts you in a **straight jacket**, say that this is the amount irrespective of your needs.’

‘... we take a second look at the culture of simply using a **dropper to feed a starving person** while **giving too much to an already filled up person**.’

This speaker uses the 1<sup>st</sup> locution ‘... envelop puts you in a straight jacket’ to describe and conceptualize the implications of having an equal reduction of funds for all sectors without considering the individual needs of each sector. While he uses the 2<sup>nd</sup> locution ‘using a dropper to feed a starving person while giving too much to an already filled up person’ (complex sentence) to conceptualize his suggestion that equal reduction of funds should be avoided because it amounts to given too little to a sector in great needs of funds ‘starving person’ and too much to sectors that require little funds ‘filled up person’. Thus, the speaker performs representative and affective acts, respectively.

In Terrorism Bill, speakers also used metaphorical expressions in their contributions. The 6<sup>th</sup> speaker used the following metaphorical utterances to make suggestions:

16. ‘... we would begin **to nip** whatever that is encouraging terrorism **in the bud**...’

‘... we have to be on **the same page** of development...’

In the 1<sup>st</sup> locution above, the speaker is suggesting that the root cause of terrorism which is poverty should be destroyed at the point of germination ‘nip...in the bud’ by the provision of necessary infrastructure and development; and thus, nobody will feel cheated and angry. In other words, the best way to handle and solve terrorism in the world is for the developed powerful and rich nations of the world to assist the under developed ones to be at the same stage or level of development. He performs an affective act of suggestion metaphorically in the 2<sup>nd</sup> locution above. If all the nations are at the same level or ‘page of development’, everybody would be comfortable and there would be no need for anyone to carryout terrorist activities.

The 11<sup>th</sup> speaker uses the following metaphors:

17. ‘... we must **clean our house**.’

The speaker refers to Nigeria as a ‘house’ that has become unwholesome as a result of terrorists activities; therefore should be cleansed. That is, the acts of terrorism should be removed by enacting Terrorism Bill. The locution is an appeal to the senators that there is need to discourage acts of terrorism in the Nigeria.

Similarly, the 13<sup>th</sup> speaker employs metaphors in his contribution:

18. ‘... Nigeria cannot be **an Island** in itself;...  
... that we have **pockets of problems** here and there...  
... America, who is **the watch dog** of acts of terrorism...’

The speaker uses the 1<sup>st</sup> locution, to state emphatically that Nigeria must do what other nations are doing: discouraging terrorism because Nigeria cannot be different ‘... be an Island’. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> locution, the speaker describes the presence of series of crisis spread across the nation as ‘pockets of problems’ which would result in terrorist activities if not properly handled now. And in the last locution, he conceptualizes the role of America fighting

terrorism all over the world as ‘watch dog’; thereby performing affective and representative acts.

### Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the study, it is evident that metaphoric expressions come naturally to language users as means to shape the understanding of co-participants in any communicative event. Our study have shown that legislative deliberations, though highly formal in structure and nature, yet the participants still employ metaphoric utterances not only as tools to concretize abstract intentions but also as a means to persuade co-interlocutors in the debate to accept the speaker’s point of views and thus bring about development in the Nigerian society. The use of metaphors by the senators helps to conceptualize forceful representative acts, influential directive acts and poignant expressive acts. The structures of the metaphoric expressions which feature in our data varied, ranging from nominal elements to phrasal and clausal groups, and idiomatic expressions.

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