



A STYLO–RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF OBAFEMI AWOLOWO’S “IT IS NOT LIFE THAT MATTERS”

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ABSTRACT

This paper focusses on stylistic analysis of one selected speech of Obafemi Awolowo; a Nigerian, lawyer, philosopher and statesman. Awolowo occupied a significant position in Nigeria politics. Rhetorical communication has a special relationship with leadership and society and Nigerian leaders have adopted the medium as an effective way of making direct contact with the people. Political speeches are made by leaders to persuade, inform, correct and manipulate the audience. The text for this study is drawn from a collection of Awolowo’s speeches as contained in Voice of Courage 1981a titled “It is not life that matters but the courage you bring into it”. The speech is purposively sampled to demonstrate Awolowo’s language use as a weapon of influencing his audience. The analysis is done within the framework of Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar and New Rhetoric Approaches which concentrate on the examination of language forms and evaluate the ideas put forward in speech. Findings from the study show that Awolowo employed the use of the English language as a strategy of persuasion to gain the support of his audience. The analysis reveals the effectiveness of Awolowo’s language use.

Keywords: Speech, Rhetoric, Persuasion, Stylistics, Obafemi awolowo.

INTRODUCTION

Stylistics is concerned with the analysis and description of linguistic features of texts in relation to their meaning. Language variation and the distinctiveness of features within and across texts as occasioned by situational factors are the major purview of stylistics as an emergent field in the study of language (Lawal, 2003). As noted by (Olajide, 2003) stylistics is concerned with identifying, describing and explaining whatever is striking and recurrent, in the written or spoken text. According to Osundare (2008):

Style is hardly ever an accident. It is both a configuration and a consequence of interrelated factors - historical, cultural, social, and ideological. This is why

even when the what is constant, the how varies in different ways to modify or change it.

The above coheres with the conception of “style as the man”, in that no two persons write exactly the same way. As rightly observed by [Oyekola \(2005\)](#), the richness of language resources avails a speaker or a writer a set of system from which he could make a choice to express his ideas or views. The theory of rhetoric dates back to the Greek philosophers – Aristotle and Plato. Aristotle defines rhetoric as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion (*Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*). According to [Duckworth \(2009\)](#), rhetoric in its broadest sense is the theory and practice of eloquence, whether spoken or written. It defines the rules that should govern all prose composition or speech designed to influence the judgement or the feelings of people. Maggers as cited by [Adebisi \(2006\)](#) gives a graphic description of rhetoric thus:

- ...use double meanings
-word a snappy retort
-say things forcefully
-make people laugh
-surprise your listeners
-embellish your point
-gain rapport with the audience
-arouse emotion
-appeal to reason
-win an argument

Speech is the primary form of language; it is human communication through the spoken language. Austin as cited by [Eastman \(2009\)](#) asserts that by speaking, a person performs three kinds of act:

- a locutionary act (or locution): which is the act of uttering some expressions with a particular sense and reference.
- an illocutionary act (or illocution) which is the act performed in or by virtue of the performance of the locution.
- a perlocutionary act (or perlocution) which is the act performed by what is said.

The power of political rhetoric lies in persuasive language. [Oha \(1994\)](#), quoting Ricoeur understands such power as “the power to manipulate words apart from things and to manipulate men by manipulating words”.

Political speeches have been made in Nigeria at different times. These speeches are made by leaders to persuade, inform, correct, put forward an idea and to influence people in doing certain things. Studies that have been done on Nigerian political rhetoric include [Johnson \(1988\)](#), [Maiyanga \(1990\)](#), [Oha \(1994\)](#) and [Adegoju \(2005\)](#). Scholars have also carried out research studies on Awolowo’s work. These include [Ogunmodede \(1986\)](#), [Awonuga \(1988\)](#), [Akindele \(1989\)](#), [Oladeji \(1989\)](#) and [Ajewole-Orimogunje \(1998\)](#).

METHODOLOGY

The current study seeks to carry out a stylistic analysis of one selected speech of Awolowo to highlight the linguistic features in the speech and to bring to focus the effectiveness of Awolowo's use of English language. The text for this study is drawn from a collection of Awolowo's speeches as contained in – *Voice of Courage* (1981a) titled "It is not life that matters but the courage you bring into it". The speech was an allocution delivered by Awolowo on the 11th of September 1963 when he was declared guilty on the charges of treasonable felony. The speech is purposely sampled for analysis as it contains courageous, philosophical and critical issues. It also gives an insight into Awolowo's use of the English Language. The objective of engaging in this type of intellectual exercise is to demonstrate Awolowo's language use as a weapon of influencing his audience.

Awolowo's speeches are too many to be explored in this type of study because of space and time hence the selection of this one. The speech contains strong arguments and facts hence the need for its analysis. The study focusses mainly on the written mode of the text. Although the speech was written to be spoken, the analysis would be based only on the written mode due to non-availability of recorded tape of the speech.

Theoretical Approaches

The theoretical approaches considered relevant to this study are:

- The New Rhetorical Approaches
- Systemic Functional Model

The New Rhetoric Approaches

The New Rhetorical Approaches as presented by [Johnson \(1988\)](#) fall into the following groups of methods viz:

1. The linguistic methods which concentrate on the examination of language forms used in speech,
2. The idea-centered methods which trace and evaluate the ideas put forward in speech,
3. The experiential methods which are eclectic in perspective and derive focus from application of psychological, sociological, political or other theories pertinent to the material being studied and,
4. The computer assisted methods which rely on the use of computers for textual and other forms of data analysis.

The new rhetoric approaches will be found useful in this study

Systemic Functional Model

The systemic functional model makes the claim that the style of a text is determined by variable elements of the context of situations. The concept of functional grammar stems from the

consideration that abstract grammar alone cannot handle language in situation. Linguists like Halliday and some others decided to approach the use of language in situations from a purely functional angle. Part of their considerations is that language is not only behavioural but also situational. Halliday summarizes what we need to know about a context of situation in order to predict the linguistic features that are likely to be associated with it under three headings: the field of discourse”, the ‘tenor of discourse’ and the ‘mode of discourse’. The “field is the social action in which the text is embedded; it includes the subject matter. The ‘tenor’ is the set of role relationship among the relevant participants; it includes the level of formality as one particular instance. The mode is the ‘channel’ which includes the medium (spoken or written) which is explained as a functional variable (Halliday, 1978). As argued by (Halliday, 1978), the systemic functional model does not distance style form meaning since meaning is produced from linguistic and non- linguistic factors. The analysis in this study will find the Systemic Functional model useful as the selected speech is an instance of language in use.

Language, Politics and Persuasion

Political speeches in Nigeria are made to persuade, inform, correct or put forth an idea. It is a rhetoric that is infused with persuasive techniques concentrating on immediate pertinent issues. Johnson (1988) observes that it is a rhetoric of unmistakable power dwelling on the authority of the speaker and the government he leads, chastising, directing, informing, boasting, promising etc. The work of a politician entails addressing the people which requires the practice of rhetoric and linguistic style. A speaker aims at using persuasion to win the audience to his side. In the words of Akindele (1989), ideas are presented in such a way that they appeal to the audience’s sense of humour, justice and integrity especially when those ideas are uttered in a manner which is appropriate to the importance of the subject matter, the dignity of the occasion, and the respect that the speaker owes, to the opinion of mankind.

According to Ayeomoni (2005) language and politics are interconnected and language is considered the vehicular expression of politics: it is the means by which ideas are widely disseminated. Akindele (1989) observes that political discourse involves persuasion of group or groups of people, largely through the manipulation of language that forms the communication environment of a society.

Awolowo and his Attitude to the Use of the English Language

An individual uses language generally to represent his or her personal experience of life. Awolowo’s political rhetoric can be seen as the expression of his experiences of life which vary from one situation to another. Obafemi Awolowo occupied a significant position in Nigerian politics. He was born into the Christian family of David Sopolu and Mary Efunyela Awolowo on 6th March 1909 in Ikenne. Ikenne-Remo is the headquarters of Ikenne Local Government Area - one of the 20 local government areas that make up the present Ogun State of Nigeria (Adeleye and Okezie, 2012). Obafemi Awolowo was a Nigerian, Christian, educated elite, philosopher, lawyer,

politician, author, journalist and rhetorician. He read extensively, wrote seventeen books and was writing the second chapter of another work when he died. His acquisition of formal Western education and his training as a lawyer enhanced immensely his speeches. Awolowo built the first television station in Africa, the first Olympic-size Stadium in Nigeria - the Liberty Stadium, Ibadan. He started the first free health service for children under eighteen years and introduced the first minimum wage of fifty kobo a day in the Western region. As rightly noted by [Chiamogu et al. \(2012\)](#), a man whose labour contributes to the wealth of a system should have a wage that sufficiently takes into account his contribution. Awolowo established the African Newspapers Limited, publisher of *Tribune* newspapers in 1948. He loved education and introduced free education in Nigeria in 1955. These various achievements had influenced greatly his speeches. He was a statesman endowed with the power of oratory.

[Akindele \(1989\)](#) observes that Awolowo's power of rhetoric and argument transcended that of any other politician that Nigeria has produced. Commenting on Awolowo's use of language, [Oladeji \(1989\)](#) posits:

Awolowo was averse to inept use of English. He complained bitterly about the low competence in the use of English by officials of the colonial administration.... Awolowo was sensitive to the subtle nuances of language as can be seen from the many innuendoes, understatement and sarcasm found in his writings. He condemned the use, by Europeans, of derogatory labels and epithets like 'local' and 'natives' to refer to Africans or non-European peoples and described the use of the word 'tribe' to describe African ethnic groups and nationalities as "outrageous and undiluted insults".

Awolowo paid careful attention to the use of language and believed that it was an important factor in the lives of human beings. In his speeches, Awolowo combined his personality with impressive argument and rhetoric. His use and assessment of the English language can be related to that of a stylistician or linguist. English language has resources which enable people to express thoughts in a number of ways according to the occasion. According to Halliday (as cited by [Osisanwo \(2003\)](#)), it is the situational factor which determines the kind of selection in the linguistic system and the notion of register is thus a form of prediction: given that we know the situation, the social context of language use, we can predict a great deal about the language that will occur, with reasonable probability of being right.

[Oyeleje \(2005\)](#) has observed that one notable side effect of globalization today is the rapid spread of the English language. He asserts:

Increased contact between international communities has required that more people communicate across more boundaries. English has turned out to be the medium of this cross-border communication. English has now become a world language in both senses of international and global: international, as a medium

of literary and other forms of cultural life in (mainly) countries of the former British Empire: global, as the universal medium of the new technological age, the age of information.

English is a status maker in Nigeria as one's social rank is determined by one's command of English.

TEXT ANALYSIS

Choice of Words /Diction

The speech features a lot of expressions which are appropriate and significant in their use. We have nouns preceded by adjectives functioning as qualifiers as shown in the following:

public life	brave heart
British imperialism	confident hope
unyielding advocate	special and relentless vigour
feudal oligarchy	individual liberty
permanent subservience	aristocratic ruling
valuable services	

Adjectives are useful to provide further descriptions of nouns to give a clearer picture. In this extract the adjectives are used attributively – to pre-modify the nouns, all of which are abstract.

The use of the words “setback and triumphs”, “twilight and darkness” in the following extract is strategic.

- a. I have in my time known both setbacks and triumphs and have met both with equal mind
- b. that I go from the twilight into darkness....

The words are chosen to create a special effect on the audience.

Awolowo deliberately made use of the adjectives- ‘brave’, and ‘confident’ and the nouns – ‘faith’/‘hope’ destiny’ in this extract:

It is therefore with a brave heart, with confident hope and with faith in my alterable destiny that I go from the twilight into darkness....
(underlining mine)

His choice of these lexical items gives an expression of hope and expectations of better things. This shows his determination. Also his choice of the noun phrase “incalculable injuries” is significant. He said “there might be a heightening of the present tension which has lasted for fifteen months and has done incalculable injury to the economy”. This is an exaggeration used to paint a picture of a bad and pathetic situation in the country.

The Use of Adverbs

Awolowo made use of the adverbs – first, second, third - to itemise the negative impact his incarceration might have in the country politically and economically. This is strategic; the adverbs

are used probably to arouse a feeling of pity from the audience and also to assert his (Awolowo's) feeling of self-justification. This he did primarily for pragmatic reasons, that is, as a function of his own strategy of defence and vindication.

Also there is the use of the adverbs – ‘naturally’ and ‘similarly’ in the following sentences:

- a. Naturally, in the course of my long political activities, I have attracted to myself a sizeable crop of detractors and adversaries
- b. Similarly, I have in my time known both setbacks and triumphs, and have met both with equal mind.

These adverbs are used as disjuncts as they are not integrated within the clauses where they occur. According to [Quirk and Greebaum \(2004\)](#), disjuncts express an evaluation of what is being said either with respect to the form of the communication or to its contents. The adverbs serve the function of reinforcing the statements which follow in each of the sentences.

Modal Auxiliary Verbs

The use of modal auxiliary verbs in the speech should also be noted. The modal auxiliary verbs are used together with main verbs to express complete actions. Examples can be found in the following:

- a. I must say... that I disagree with you verdict
- b. I must stress that
- c. I must end by thanking.....

Awolowo used the modal auxiliary verb ‘must’ to express strong obligation or compulsion.

Sentence Types

The speech text features Awolowo's use of variety of sentence types as exemplified in the following.

Simple sentences

- a. I have been in politics for upward of 30 years
- b. I am the most unyielding advocate of a federal constitution in Nigeria.

Sentence (b) has the structure SPCA e.g.

I	am	the most unyielding advocate of a federal constitution in Nigeria	
S	P	C	
A			

Compound Sentences

- a. It isn't life that matters/but the courage you bring into it.
- b. I have in my time known both setbacks and triumphs/and have met both with equal mind.

In sentence (a) there are two independent clauses. There is the use of the conjunction ‘but’ to show a contrast. We also have two independent clauses in sentence (b) with the additive conjunction “and”.

Complex Sentence

I have rendered to Nigeria and to Africa services, /which historians will regard as imperishable.

Here we have one independent clause and one dependent clause. The examples given above prove that Awolowo's language is accessible and comprehensible as he was able to express his ideas and thought clearly without obscuring meaning.

Use of Lexical Items from Different Fields

Awolowo's speech features lexical items from different fields. For example we have a set of words belonging to the legal register such as-tribunal, lordship, verdict, advocate, dock, judgement, justice, sentence, case and defendant. This is justified by the fact that he trained as a lawyer. Also in the field of government and politics we have the use of lexical items such as – imperialism, independence, feudal oligarchy, federalism, aristocratic ruling, nationalist, democracy, rule of law etc. The use of words from different fields of study suggests learnedness on the part of the speaker.

Foregrounding

In order to highlight his travails and suffering as one of the founders of Nigerian independent nation and to prove that he suffered more than any of his colleagues because of inter-tribal politics in the country, Awolowo said:

It is an irony of history that as one of the architects of Nigeria's independence, I have spent almost HALF of Nigeria's THREE years of independence, under one form of confinement or another.

It can be inferred from the above extract that Awolowo made this statement to garner the support of the people and to earn for himself pity from the audience. It should also be noted that the words 'HALF' and 'THREE' are foregrounded in the extract. This is done for the purpose of emphasis; to mark out these as key words which conspicuously point out significant references.

Parallelism and Biblical Allusion

Awolowo made use of parallelism which according to Oha (1994) has important and cognitive attitudinal function as it invites the audience to perceive two situations as sharing the same features. He made use of this technique by drawing a parallel between himself and Peter, the hero of Walpole's novel titled *Fortitude*. This is used to affirm that he also had the qualities found in Peter. He said:

In the words of Peter therefore, I declare: Blessed be your verdict....And in advance I also say: Blessed be such sentence as it may please your Lordship to impose upon me.

In this extract, Awolowo made an allusion to the Bible in Matthew Chapter 5, verse 5-17 where Jesus Christ used the word 'blessed' severally when he was addressing his disciples. Also we have another biblical allusion in "Peter NOT Peter the Apostle". This reveals a Christian influence which is supported by the fact that he was a Christian during his life time. It can also be seen from this statement that Awolowo demonstrated calmness, boldness and bravery as he declared –

“Blessed be your verdict which you have just pronounced on me Blessed be such sentences as it may please your Lordship to impose upon me”.

Metaphor

The expression – “I am the most unyielding advocate of a federal constitution for Nigeria” is metaphoric. According to *Routledge Encyclopaedia of language teaching and learning*, metaphor involves the mapping of one domain of meaning unto a different one. As rightly pointed out by [Ayeomoni \(2005\)](#) the language of the political class is usually figurative and metaphoric when they want to force their ideas through and make them convincing and impressive.

Use of Variety of Emotional Strategies and Motivational Appeals

Awolowo used a variety of motivational appeals and value proofs, facts and statistics, cause and effect and appeals to authorities as arguments to justify his actions as can be seen in the following:

- I have been in politics for upward of 30 years.
- ... I have operated in various theatres of the public life of this country.
- I have with others fought British imperialism .. and we have succeeded.
- ... I have been ... in the vanguard in agitating for independence.
- Since 1957, I have fought with special and relentless vigour for the eradication of feudal oligarchy in the North.

We note from the above the predominant use of the first person singular pronoun ‘I’. In this extract we have a dignified voice, a voice that speaks with authority which is exemplified by the use of ‘I’. Awolowo’s use of the first person singular pronoun gives an impression of his official status and creates the image of a powerful achiever. Awolowo used the pronoun ‘we’ in the concluding part of the sentence- “I have with others and we have succeeded.” Here, he was tactful by not arrogating to himself alone the struggle for the eradication of British rule in Nigeria.

In the last paragraph of the speech, Awolowo remarked:

In spite of the delay of the past few weeks in delivering judgement, and in spite of my disagreement with your verdict, ... I must end by thanking your Lordship for your patience during the hearing of this case, and for the due consideration with which you have treated me and the other defendants.

In this statement, he brought to focus the delay in giving judgement which is usually encountered in Nigerian law courts. This is an indictment and an attack on the legal system, a profession to which he belonged. This he did in an indirect way, probably to minimize offence. Awolowo employed the use of a package of emotional strategies to build up emotion in the audience as he declared.

But after darkness comes the glorious dawn.

It is therefore, with a brave heart, with confident hope, and with faith in my unalterable destiny that I go from twilight into darkness, unshaken in my trust in the providence of God that the glorious dawn will come in the morrow.

Awolowo launched an attack on people he regarded as his enemies – “My enemies will say who am I to think that if I am imprisoned, the country might suffer. What if I die?” This is a verbal attack on the people whom he had earlier referred to in the speech as “a sizeable crop of detractors and adversaries”. According to [Infante and Wigley III \(1986\)](#), verbal aggression denotes attacking the self concept of another person instead of, or in addition to, the person’s position on a topic of communication; the most fundamental effect of verbally aggressive messages is self concept damage. The rhetorical question “what if I died?” connotes that his enemies wanted him dead.

CONCLUSION

English language has resources which enables us to express thoughts and ideas in a number of ways according to the occasion. Utterances of political leaders have the force to persuade or manipulate the public. According to [Oladeji \(1989\)](#), Awoist language is invariably tailored to the demands of the topic under debate, the social context of the occasion of language use, and, the degree of the competence of the receiver-audience. Awolowo used the occasion of the speech to justify his actions and highlight his achievements.

As a lawyer he was familiar with the rhetoric of adjudication and its argumentative nature. These he utilised in a colourful way in this speech. It is worthy of note that Yoruba culture influenced Awolowo’s rhetoric as the Yoruba people believe and attach much importance to the power of words. In the Yoruba culture, words are used to achieve several purposes- to praise, abuse, attack etc. This has contributed immensely to Awolowo’s rhetorical magic. The analysis has revealed to us the combination of Awolowo’s rhetorical power, argument and persuasion in handling the subject matter.

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APPENDIX

IT IS NOT LIFE THAT MATTERS BUT THE COURAGE YOU BRING TO IT.

Allocutus delivered by Chief Obafemi Awolowo on 11th September 1963, when Justice Sowemimo declared him guilty on charges of treasonable felony.

May it please Your Lordship.

Though this is a point which will be taken up at a Higher Tribunal, yet I must say, with respect, that I disagree with your verdict as well as with the premises on which the verdict is based.

I have been in politics for upward of 30 years. During this long period, I have operated in various theatres of the public life of this country.

I have with others, fought British imperialism with all my might and with the talents that it pleased God to give me; and we have succeeded. We have succeeded to the extent that Nigerians are today occupying positions which they never dreamt of some fifteen years ago.

Again I have been, with others, in the vanguard in agitating for independence.

I am the most unyielding advocate of a federal constitution for Nigeria.

It is an irony of history that as one of the architects of Nigeria's independence, I have spent almost HALF of Nigeria's THREE years of independence, under one form of confinement or another.

Since 1957, I have fought with special and relentless vigour for the eradication of feudal oligarchy in the North, and in any case to prevent the spread of this evil political system to the Southern part of this country.

During the same period I strongly advocated the breaking up of the North into more States in order to have true federalism in Nigeria, and to preclude the permanent subservience of the people of Nigeria to the aristocratic ruling caste in the North.

In short, I have always fought for what I believe, without relent and regardless of consequences to myself. In the result, I have rendered to Nigeria and to Africa services, which historians will regard as imperishable.

Naturally, in the course of my long political activities, I have attracted to myself a sizeable crop of detractors and adversaries.

Similarly, I have in my time known both setbacks and triumphs, and have met both with equal mind. This is as it should be.

Peter, NOT Peter the Apostle, the hero of Hugh Walpole's novel, FORTITUDE said: "It isn't that matters but the courage you bring to it". After life had done terrible things to Peter, he heard a voice that said among other things:

"Blessed be all sorrow, hardships and endurances that demand courage. Blessed be other things for of these things cometh the making of a man".

In the words of Peter therefore, I declare: Blessed be your verdict which you have just pronounced on me. And in advance I also say: Blesses be such sentence as it may please your Lordship to impose on me.

I personally welcome any sentence you may impose upon me. As a Nigerian nationalist, my only concern is that my incarceration might do harm to Nigeria for three reasons.

First, the valuable services such as I have rendered before, and which I can still render would be lost to the country, at least for a season.

Second, there might be a heightening of the present tension which has lasted for fifteen months and has done incalculable injury to the country's economy.

Third, for a while, the present twilight of democracy individual freedom and the rule of law, might change into one of utter darkness.

But after darkness comes the glorious dawn.

It is therefore, with a brave heart, with confident hope, and with faith in my unalterable destiny that I go from the twilight unto the darkness, unshaken in my trust in the Providence of God that the glorious dawn will come on the morrow.

My enemies will say who am I to think that if I am imprisoned, the country might suffer. What, if I died? The point is that I am still alive. Furthermore, the spirit of man knows no barrier, never dies, and can be projected to any part of the world.

This being so, I am confident that the ideals of social justice and individual liberty which I hold dear, will continue to be projected beyond the prison walls until they are realized in our lifetime.

In this connection, I must stress that in this courtroom, particularly in this dock, and all over the Federation of Nigeria, the spirit of a new Nigeria is already active and at work. This spirit, working through all constitutional means, is sure to prevail before very long to the delight, freedom and prosperity of all and sundry.

In spite of the delay of the past few weeks in delivering judgment, and in spite of my disagreement with your verdict, I must end by thanking your Lordship for your patience during the hearing of this case, and for the due consideration with which you have treated me and the other defendants.