Chapter 6

Politics and Promises: A Multimodal Social Semiotic Interpretation of Political Party Emblems and Slogans as Discourse of Hope in a Democratic Nigeria

Ikenna Kamalu
University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Working within the framework of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) and critical metaphor analysis (CMA), this study examines the emblems and slogans of the four main political parties in Nigeria: the People’s Democratic Party (PDP); the All Progressives Congress (APC); the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA); and the Labour Party (LP), which have become instruments of campaign and propaganda. While the emblems/logos are visual (iconic) representations of party ideology, the slogans are verbal rhetorical affirmations of what the emblems represent. Based on insights from the theory of multimodality, this study is an attempt to use a social semiotic approach in the interpretation of visual communication. Multimodality understands visual as representation and communication. The approach that this study adopts tries to interpret how the multiple modes in multimodal communication yield themselves to different levels of meaning realization.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria returned to democracy in 1999 after several years of military rule. Democracy opened up the political space for citizens to participate in debates and actions that are intended to bring about social change in the society. This participation was best realized through the formation of political parties of diverse ideological persuasions. Currently the country has twenty-four registered political parties that participated in the 2015 general elections. The parties made appeals to the sentiments of the electorates by making promises to improve on the living standards of people. The party manifesto is one medium through which political parties make their policies and programmes known to the public. However,
beyond the instrumentality of the manifesto, which the average electorate may not have access to or may find difficult to comprehend, the party emblem (logo) and its slogan are also veritable rhetorical strategies by which political parties inform, persuade, manipulate, and/or exploit the electorate. Parties adopt the type of logo and slogan that create the impression of its alignment with the suffering majority of the country or frame them as nationalistic and democratic in orientation.

Politicians use verbal, written and pictorial modes as rhetorical strategies of persuasion but the verbal mode has been the dominant form and traces its origins to classical Greece and Rome. Politicians use language to communicate their ideologies and express social power. Sonderling (2009:88) argues that “language is not a simple medium for communication but is a powerful and complex social communication system that requires better understanding”. Politicians and their parties acknowledge the crucial importance of language in political discourse and the art of persuasion by exploiting its magical powers and resources. De Wet (2010) observes that “politicians rise to power mainly because they can talk persuasively to voters and political elites... politicians are endlessly geared to persuading voters to their own or party’s point of view” (p. 103). The language of politics is essentially aimed at persuading the audience/addressee to accept the perspective of the speaker. Beard (2000) therefore contends that it is important to study the language of politics because it enables us to “understand how language is used by those who wish to gain power, those who wish to exercise power and those who wish to keep power” (p. 2).

The modern politician has also realized that the rhetorical force of the verbal medium can be aided and enhanced by other semiotic regimes such as icons, colours, shapes and text compositionality. Politicians and parties therefore adopt the type of emblem (or logo) and slogan that can arrest the attention of the audience easily as discourses of hope in the political system. The emblems and slogans are usually persuasive in orientation and encapsulate the central ideology of the parties. In the Nigerian context, the emblems communicate the understanding and ideology that party democracy is evolving in the country. This study therefore explores the rhetorical use of these items (emblems and slogans) by political parties in Nigeria and their attempt to make party sympathizers cling to or buy into the ideology that underlies them as articles of hope in democratic participation.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF NIGERIA’S POLITICAL DEMOCRACY

Nigeria has had four attempts at democracy since independence in 1960. Political democracy in the first republic – 1960-1966 was organized along sectional or ethno-religious lines. Political parties made no pretences regarding their supreme allegiance to regional and religious interests. The three dominant political parties in the first republic represented the interests of the three major ethnic groups that held sway in the three (later four) regions in the country The Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) in the Northern region represented the interests of the mainly Hausa/Fulani group; The National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) in the Eastern region represented that of the dominant Igbo ethnic group; while the Action Group (AG) in the Western region catered for the interests of the Yoruba. The creation of the Mid-Western region in 1964 was politically motivated. It was undertaken to cater for the interests of the minority ethnic groups said to be under the hegemonic dominance of the Yoruba. Surprisingly, such gesture was not extended to the minority groups in the Northern and Eastern regions. In the true sense of the word, none of the political parties was national in orientation. They made it clear that regional
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