

The Role of Language in Political Campaigns: A Sociolinguistics Analysis of Nigerian Election Rhetoric

Emmanuel Pereowei Monday* 

Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Nigeria

mondayemmanuelpereowei@gmail.com

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*Corresponding author

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ABSTRACT: *This study examines the role of language as a strategic tool in Nigerian political campaigns, with a focus on how rhetoric reflects and shapes sociocultural identities, power relations, and voter perceptions. Drawing on sociolinguistic frameworks of discourse analysis, the research explores how politicians employ code-switching, metaphor, proverbs, and vernacular expressions to appeal to diverse audiences in a multilingual society. Data were gathered from campaign speeches, media interviews, and political advertisements across recent election cycles. The analysis reveals that Nigerian political rhetoric is deeply rooted in sociolinguistic diversity, where the strategic use of English, Pidgin, and indigenous languages functions as a marker of solidarity, authority, and authenticity. Politicians exploit linguistic hybridity to navigate ethnic sensitivities, construct populist identities, and negotiate credibility across heterogeneous constituencies. I argue that language in Nigerian electioneering is not merely a vehicle of persuasion but a performative act of identity politics, reinforcing and contesting existing power structures. Ultimately, the research highlights that understanding the sociolinguistics of political discourse is key to decoding the ideological underpinnings and communicative tactics that drive electoral behavior in Nigeria's democracy.*

KEYWORDS: Language, Political Campaign, Election, Sociolinguistics, Nigeria.

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1. Introduction

Within Nigeria's dynamic and intricate political framework, language serves as a pivotal element in the contest for authority, validation, and self-conception. As Africa's most linguistically diverse nation, featuring over 500 indigenous languages coexisting with English, the official medium of governance, communication in political campaigns extends beyond simple information exchange. It transforms into a calculated, purposeful, and profoundly emblematic endeavour. Political figures engage with voters not merely through words; they embody identities, navigate the complexities of belonging, and craft narratives that resonate with the diverse aspirations and concerns of varied audiences.

The rich tapestry of languages in Nigeria profoundly influences the substance and form of political discourse. Campaigns are executed in English, Nigerian Pidgin, and a range of indigenous languages including Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, each selected for its sociolinguistic significance in particular contexts. English conveys a sense of authority, modernity, and national scope, whereas Pidgin serves to connect diverse ethnic groups and elicits a feeling of genuine grassroots identity. Indigenous languages function as significant tools of emotional and cultural resonance, enabling politicians to assert their insider status and reinforce ethnic unity. This intricate interaction of languages illustrates how linguistic selections mirror wider social hierarchies and political manoeuvres.

Examining the sociolinguistic landscape, one finds that political language in Nigeria transcends mere neutrality; it serves as a battleground for the enactment and contestation of power dynamics. Rhetorical practices including code-switching, metaphorical framing, and the utilisation of proverbs serve to persuade, unify, or create divisions among electorates. Campaign speeches, media broadcasts, and public debates function as platforms where politicians shape their identities as approachable, capable, and ethically sound leaders. The effectiveness of these performances hinges not merely on the content of the discourse, but equally on the manner of its delivery and the language employed.

This research thus examines the function of language within Nigerian political campaigns from a sociolinguistic perspective. This inquiry aims to elucidate the operational dynamics of linguistic strategies as tools for persuasion and the formation of identity, while also examining their reflection of the wider socio-political landscape in Nigeria. The examination of the rhetoric employed in recent elections seeks to uncover the ways in which language serves as a conduit between ideology and identity, thereby transforming political discourse into a reflection of the nation's intricate cultural and political landscape.

2. Literature review

Language has long been acknowledged as a fundamental tool for political persuasion, identity formation, and power negotiation. In the African sociopolitical setting, especially in Nigeria, researchers have emphasised the significance of language performance in influencing electoral outcomes and perpetuating ideological narratives. This section examines pertinent research on political discourse, sociolinguistics, and Nigerian electoral rhetoric, emphasising significant theoretical and empirical contributions.

2.1 Language, Power, and Political Communication

The theoretical basis for comprehending political language is grounded on Critical Speech Analysis (CDA), a paradigm that interprets speech as both a product and a mechanism of social power, ideology, and control (Fairclough, 2015; van Dijk, 2018). CDA asserts that language is inherently biased; it functions as a strategic instrument through which dominant groups perpetuate their authority and validate prevailing power dynamics. Fairclough (2015) asserts that political discourse functions as a domain where social connections are formed, challenged, and normalised, thereby influencing public conceptions of legitimacy, authority, and governance. In addition to this perspective, van Dijk (2018) underscores the cognitive aspect of power, contending that elites employ language to shape public consciousness, direct interpretation, and ultimately affect collective belief systems.

In the Nigerian political situation, these theoretical findings hold particular relevance. Nigeria's diverse languages and ethnic groups make it hard to communicate politically because you have to find a balance between bringing people together and splitting them off. Taiwo (2020) states that Nigerian political speech acts are purposefully structured to have a dual function: to impose authority while simultaneously expressing solidarity with the people. This language balance allows politicians to seem both strong and approachable, which fits with African rhetorical traditions that value moral persuasion and communal identification.

Adegoju and Oyeboode (2021) assert that Nigerian political figures utilise a variety of rhetorical and pragmatic techniques, such as metaphors, proverbs, and code-switching, to convey moral integrity, inclusivity, and national unity. But these same language choices frequently hide larger ideological goals that quietly reinforce inequalities based on ethnicity, geography, and class. The interaction between overt calls to unity and covert discursive exclusion illustrates how political language in Nigeria functions as a mechanism for both nation-building and social difference. Thus, evaluating political communication through the lens of CDA shows the ideological conflicts implicit in political speech and exposes the deep link between language, power, and identity in the Nigerian politics.

2.2. Multilingualism and Code-Switching in Nigerian Politics

Nigeria has a lot of different languages, with over 500 native languages. This has made code-switching not just a way to communicate, but also a key rhetorical tool in political debate. Because the country has several languages, officials need to find strategies to cross language barriers that make everyone feel included, persuade people, and show their identity. Opeibi (2019) and Ordu and Odukwu (2024) show that Nigerian politicians intentionally switch between English, Nigerian Pidgin, and native languages to connect with different groups of people and show that they are culturally aware and close to them. This approach turns language into a symbolic tool that shows class, race, and political views.

English, the official language that came from colonial rule, is still linked to education, modernism, and bureaucratic power. Politicians often use it in official debates, policy announcements, and international forums to show that they are cosmopolitan and good at running things. But Igboanusi and Peter (2021), Ordu and Odukwu (2024) say that this formal registration might also show that someone is elitist and doesn't care about the ordinary lives of the people who vote. To address this issue, several politicians switch to Nigerian Pidgin, a language medium that crosses ethnic differences and appeals to urban, working-class, and younger demographics. Pidgin is a language that levels the playing field. It's casual, funny, and

easy to understand, which helps politicians build a feeling of shared identity and connection with the people.

In addition to English and Pidgin, indigenous languages like Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo are also important for creating emotional connections and cultural authenticity. Adebayo (2022) stresses that using local languages at demonstrations or campaigns frequently has a lot of meaning, bringing up common history and memories. In these situations, indigenous language forms help to strengthen ethnic unity and show that you can be trusted and have the same moral ideals as the people around you. Consequently, the interaction among different language codes permits politicians to simultaneously appeal to national unity and ethnic particularism, illustrating the intricate sociolinguistic structure of the Nigerian state.

Odebunmi's (2020) research further clarifies the performative aspect of code-switching, contending that it serves both as a persuasive instrument and a mechanism for identity formation. Politicians can show different sides of themselves by switching between different language types. For example, they can switch between the image of an educated elite and that of an accessible populist. This dynamic fluidity reflects the larger sociopolitical situation in Nigeria, where people are always negotiating their place, legitimacy, and power across language and ethnic lines. As a result, code-switching in Nigerian political communication becomes a strategic manifestation of hybridity an adaptive discourse technique employed by leaders to navigate the tensions inherent in a postcolonial, multilingual society.

2.3. Rhetoric, Metaphor, and the Performance of Identity

In addition to language choice, the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of Nigerian political speech have garnered significant academic interest, especially for their ability to integrate political communication within culturally significant contexts. In Nigeria, political rhetoric does more than just convey information; it is a performative act that uses common semiotic resources like metaphor, proverb, story, and performance to create legitimacy, emotion, and a sense of community identity. Obeng (2018) and Osisanwo (2021) assert that these stylistic methods anchor abstract political doctrines in culturally comprehensible frameworks, enabling political figures to connect with audiences through recognisable forms of expression and ethical reasoning.

Metaphor plays a key part in this process. Through metaphorical language, politicians establish symbolic mappings that make complicated sociopolitical concepts approachable and affectively charged. Adegoju (2018) points out that agricultural metaphors like "sowing seeds of progress," "weeding out corruption," and "harvesting change" are common. These metaphors turn political activity into a cycle of growth and reward. These metaphors are very relevant to Nigeria's history of farming and living in groups. They connect current political endeavours to traditional ideas of work, growth, and regeneration. In this regard, metaphor serves as both a cognitive instrument and a cultural conduit, connecting political ideology to experiential reality.

In the same way, proverbs have a big impact on the moral tone of political discussions. Igwedibia (2022) contends that proverbs function as stores of communal wisdom, functioning as moral anchors that link political statements to the ethical standards and epistemologies of traditional culture. When politicians use proverbs like "a tree cannot make a forest" or "you do

not throw away the baby with the bath water," they put their arguments in the context of common moral ideals, which gives them more power by appealing to shared cultural norms. This technique reflects what Ruth Finnegan has termed the "moral economy of orature," wherein speech derives its authority from the societal endorsement of tradition. In addition to verbal skill, performance is a crucial aspect of political communication. Ezenwa-Ohaeto and Nnodim (2023) assert that political statements in Nigeria are intrinsically multimodal, including linguistic, paralinguistic, and physical signals. Intonation, rhythm, gesture, humour, and call-and-response interaction are all important parts of how meaning is made and understood. The physicality of political performance, such as raising hands, dancing, or changing tone, turns campaign rallies into places where people may feel emotionally connected and confirm their group identification. Humour, in example, functions as both a persuasive tool and a means of managing tension, enabling speakers to address political critique while preserving connection with varied audiences.

These stylistic and performative elements demonstrate that Nigerian political speech functions not just as a platform for intellectual discussion but also as a cultural performance where language, physicality, and symbolism intersect. The interaction of metaphor, proverb, and physical performance strengthens the idea that political communication in Nigeria serves as a platform for emotional and moral negotiation, wherein leaders harness cultural memory and emotional energy to attain legitimacy and maintain authority.

2.4 Digital Discourse and the New Political Linguistics

Recent research has focused on how social media technologies are changing the language and rhetoric of Nigerian politics. The emergence of digital platforms like Twitter (now X), Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp has not only varied political communication methods but also democratised access to the public sphere, enabling previously marginalised voices to engage in political debate. Researchers like Akinlotan (2022) and Ezenwa-Ohaeto (2023) note that these digital spaces have become important places for linguistic experimentation, where politicians, citizens, and influencers work together to create new ways to talk about politics that go beyond the usual ways of talking about politics in campaigns.

In this changing media environment, Nigerian politicians use multilingual and multimodal discourse on purpose to reach a wide range of people. Akinlotan (2022) characterises this phenomenon as the formation of a "hybrid political vernacular," a linguistic amalgamation that integrates official English with Nigerian Pidgin, indigenous idioms, emojis, memes, and hashtags. This hybridisation not only indicates cultural authenticity and technical proficiency but also conforms to the expressive conventions of younger, digitally engaged individuals. The use of humour, irony, and references to popular culture in political messages shows a move away from top-down, one-way communication and towards participatory, two-way communication, where political authority is shown through interaction and relatability instead of distance and decorum.

Also, the speed, brevity, and intertextuality of social media have created new ways for politics to persuade people. Hashtags like #EndSARS, #VoteWisely, and #NaijaDecides are like rallying points that turn complicated political feelings into shareable, emotionally charged symbols. Memes, GIFs, and short films add to the emotional side of conversation, turning political discussion into visual and performative ways for people to become involved. Ezenwa-

Ohaeto (2023) observes that new digital modes of expression broaden the parameters of political discourse, facilitating multimodal storytelling that integrates text, imagery, and audio to elicit immediate emotional resonance.

This digital shift also makes old ideas about language hierarchy and control more complicated. In the past, political communication mostly happened through formal media outlets. Now, social media lets people communicate in a more horizontal and decentralised way, where they may directly dispute, mock, or remix political stories. The discourse that follows is characterised by fluidity, engagement, and resistance, illustrating both the creative capacity and the instability of Nigeria's online political culture. In this way, social media doesn't just move traditional campaign tactics into the digital world; it changes the very rules of political persuasion, where linguistic hybridity, performativity, and immediacy come together to change how power, credibility, and identity are shown in the digital public sphere.

Although current study offers significant insights into Nigerian political rhetoric, there is a scarcity of works that amalgamate sociolinguistic and ideological factors within a cohesive analytical framework. Most studies examine code-switching or metaphorical language in isolation, failing to contextualise them within the larger framework of identity politics and nationalism. This study aims to address that gap by analysing how language choices and rhetorical patterns together serve as tools for the development of political identity and social bargaining in Nigerian elections.

3. Methodology

The study employs a qualitative descriptive design, utilising Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Sociolinguistic Discourse Analysis (SDA) as its principal frameworks. These methodologies are suitable since they highlight the interaction among language, power, and social environment (Fairclough, 2015; van Dijk, 2018). The objective is not just to delineate the language characteristics of campaign rhetoric but to analyse how they embody Nigeria's multilingual and socio-political contexts. The study focuses on campaign discourse from the 2019 and 2023 Nigerian general elections, selected because they represent periods of intense linguistic diversity, political polarization, and digital engagement. Transcripts of major campaign speeches delivered by presidential candidates from the All Progressives Congress (APC), People's Democratic Party (PDP), and Labour Party (LP). A purposive sampling technique was used to select materials that contain instances of multilingualism, rhetorical framing, and culturally loaded expressions. Approximately 20 speeches, 15 media interviews, and a corpus of 100 digital posts were analyzed. This sample size ensured depth while allowing for comparative analysis across languages and media formats. Data were collected from publicly available sources: Official campaign archives, online political communication databases, and media houses (Channels TV, Arise News, AIT), Verified social media handles of key candidates (e.g., @officialABAT, @atiku, @PeterObi). YouTube and other public repositories for recorded campaign events. The data were analyzed through a multi-layered discourse analytical frameworks

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents and interprets the findings from the qualitative analysis of campaign speeches, interviews, advertisements, and social media posts from the 2019 and 2023 Nigerian general elections. The discussion integrates linguistic evidence with sociopolitical context to

show how language functions as a strategic, identity-driven, and ideological instrument in Nigerian political campaigns.

4.1 Multilingualism and Strategic Code-Switching

Across all sampled materials, code-switching emerged as a dominant communicative strategy. Politicians alternated fluidly between English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous languages not as random stylistic choices but as deliberate appeals to varied audiences.

For instance, during a 2023 campaign rally in Lagos, a major candidate alternated between English (“We will strengthen the economy”) and Yoruba (“E je ka fi agbarawa se e “let us do it with strength”), eliciting loud cheers. This dual-linguistic structure projected both authority and grassroots belonging. Similarly, speeches in Northern states incorporated Hausa greetings and religious expressions such as *Insha’Allah* and *Alhamdulillah*, reinforcing moral integrity and cultural alignment.

This aligns with Odebunmi’s (2020) argument that code-switching serves as identity performance enabling candidates to inhabit elite and populist personas simultaneously. It also reflects Salami’s (2020) observation that multilingualism in Nigerian politics mirrors the nation’s social heterogeneity. Thus, language choice becomes a form of symbolic negotiation, signaling inclusivity while maintaining ethnic authenticity.

4.2. Rhetorical Patterns: Metaphors, Proverbs, and Cultural Frames

Analysis revealed a rich tapestry of metaphorical and proverbial language used to structure campaign narratives. Politicians often employed agricultural metaphors “harvesting change,” “sowing seeds of hope,” “weeding corruption” to frame governance as cultivation, implying diligence and moral stewardship.

Proverbs, drawn from Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo traditions, appeared frequently as moral endorsements of leadership. For example, one candidate cited a Yoruba proverb: *Bi omodebasubu, a woiwaju; bi agbalagbabasubu, a woehin* (“When a child falls, he looks forward; when an elder fall, he looks back”), using it to underscore the wisdom of experienced leadership. Such expressions not only grounded the message in cultural familiarity but also reinforced the speaker’s ethos.

These findings corroborate Adegoju’s (2018) and Igwedibia’s (2022) analyses that metaphors and proverbs in Nigerian political rhetoric act as cognitive frames that bind political messages to shared moral and communal values. They make abstract policy discourse intelligible and emotionally resonant within local epistemologies.

4.3. Populist Discourse and Identity Construction

Another key theme identified was populist self-presentation through linguistic markers of solidarity and humility. Candidates frequently used inclusive pronouns (“we,” “our people”) and collective idioms (“we go do am together”) to construct a shared identity with the electorate. Pidgin English, in particular, was central to this strategy, functioning as a linguistic equalizer that blurred class distinctions.

For instance, social media posts from 2023 showed candidates tweeting in Pidgin: *Na our turn to fix this country* or *No shaking, we go win together*. These expressions projected informality, accessibility, and a sense of community. This pattern supports Igboanusi and Peter's (2021) claim that Pidgin serves as a "lingua franca of solidarity" in Nigerian politics, enabling politicians to appear relatable across ethnic lines.

Moreover, these linguistic forms carried emotional appeal, positioning candidates as members of the suffering populace rather than detached elites a recurring hallmark of African populist rhetoric (Adegoju&Oyebode, 2021).

4.4. Digital Rhetoric and Linguistic Innovation

On digital platforms, politicians adopted hybrid language practices, blending English with slang, emojis, and hashtags to engage younger audiences. Tweets such as *#NaijaYouthRise* or *We move! 2023 is ours* combined linguistic informality with visual and rhythmic dynamism.

This aligns with Akinlotan's (2022) notion of a "hybrid political vernacular" in online spaces, where the immediacy and interactivity of social media reshape campaign language. The study found that posts with Pidgin and slang generated more engagement (likes, retweets, comments) than formal English posts suggesting that digital linguistic creativity enhances perceived authenticity and emotional connection.

4.5. Ideological Themes and Power Relations

Through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), several ideological themes emerged: unity rhetoric, moral renewal, and anti-elitist sentiment. Language was used to construct a moral dichotomy between "us" (the people) and "them" (the corrupt elite).

For example, candidates repeatedly invoked collective suffering phrases like "our shared pain," "our children's future," and "enough is enough" to mobilize emotions of frustration and hope. Simultaneously, they positioned themselves as saviors or reformers capable of moral redemption. This discursive framing supports Fairclough's (2015) assertion that political discourse legitimizes authority by invoking shared moral imaginaries.

However, subtle power asymmetries persisted: even while appealing to the masses, candidates retained linguistic dominance through controlled turn-taking, elaborate metaphors, and English-dominant code structures reaffirming van Dijk's (2018) claim that elite discourse often masquerades as egalitarian communication.

4.6. Regional and Cultural Variation

The analysis also revealed regional linguistic variations in campaign rhetoric.

1. In the North, Hausa expressions and religious intertextuality (quoting Qur'anic verses) lent authority and piety to speeches.
2. In the South-West, Yoruba proverbs and humor were used to project wisdom and familiarity.
3. In the South-East, emotive Igbo idioms emphasized suffering, resilience, and justice.

These variations show how Nigerian politicians adapt language to regional expectations, reinforcing Adebayo’s (2022) argument that ethnicity and language are inseparable in Nigerian political mobilization.

4.7. Summary of Key Findings

Theme	Linguistic Strategy	Sociopolitical Function
Multilingualism	Code-switching between English, Pidgin, and local languages	Inclusivity, ethnic solidarity
Rhetorical Style	Metaphors, proverbs, repetition	Moral legitimization, cultural resonance
Populist Discourse	Pidgin use, collective pronouns	Construction of unity and humility
Digital Language	Slang, emojis, hybrid English-Pidgin	Youth engagement, authenticity
Ideological Framing	“Us vs. them” narratives	Power negotiation, moral positioning

4.8. Discussion

The results demonstrate that language in Nigerian political campaigns operates simultaneously as communication, performance, and ideology. Multilingualism serves as both a bridge and a boundary invoking unity while reinforcing ethnic pride. Rhetorical artistry transforms political promises into moral stories, while digital communication redefines the public sphere through linguistic innovation.

Overall, Nigerian election rhetoric exemplifies what Bourdieu might call *linguistic capital*: the strategic deployment of language varieties to accumulate symbolic power. Politicians who navigate these linguistic terrains skillfully achieve not just persuasion, but also legitimacy presenting themselves as embodiments of Nigeria’s plural identity.

Thus, the sociolinguistic dynamics of Nigerian campaign language reveal the profound role of communication in mediating democracy, identity, and power.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the function of language in political campaigns using a sociolinguistic analysis of Nigerian electoral rhetoric. Utilising critical discourse analysis and sociolinguistic theory, it investigated the ways in which multilingualism, rhetorical techniques, and linguistic performance create political significance and influence voter perception within Nigeria's multilingual society.

The results indicate that language in Nigerian political campaigns serves as a significant instrument for persuasion, identity formation, and ideological negotiation. Politicians purposefully exploit linguistic codes utilizing English for authority, Pidgin for inclusion, and indigenous languages for ethnic and cultural affiliation. These changes in language are not just

stylistic decisions; they are planned acts of identity performance meant to get support from Nigeria's varied populace.

Metaphors, proverbs, and other rhetorical tools are moral and cultural anchors that connect political statements to values and worldviews that people have in common. These kinds of tactics turn vague political promises into stories about development, unity, and morality that people can understand. Populist and digital discourse make these dynamics even stronger. Politicians are using Pidgin, slang, and multimodal expressions more and more online to reach younger and more tech-savvy audiences.

In the end, the study finds that Nigerian political language is not a neutral medium but a performative discourse one that both reflects and creates the country's sociopolitical reality. By making strategic decisions about language, politicians show that they belong, have power, and are credible. This strengthens both the opportunities and difficulties that come with Nigeria's multilingual democracy.

Recommendations

- 1 **Promote linguistic inclusivity:** Candidates should continue to employ multiple languages in their campaigns but do so ethically, ensuring that linguistic appeals do not reinforce ethnic divisions.
- 2 **Enhance authenticity through context-sensitive rhetoric:** Pidgin and local languages can be used to foster solidarity, but they should be integrated thoughtfully to maintain message coherence and avoid populist superficiality.
- 3 **Encourage multilingual public communication:** Election materials and political debates should be provided in multiple languages to promote accessibility and civic participation among linguistically diverse citizens.
- 4 **Monitor manipulative rhetoric:** Regulatory bodies should be vigilant against hate speech and linguistic polarization, which can inflame ethnic tensions during campaigns.
- 5 **Expand interdisciplinary inquiry:** Future research should integrate sociolinguistics, political science, and media studies to explore how linguistic strategies evolve with technological change.
- 6 **Conduct comparative studies:** Analyses across African nations or between local and national elections could reveal broader continental trends in multilingual political communication.
- 7 **Promote critical language awareness:** Voters should be educated to recognize rhetorical manipulation and ideological framing in campaign discourse, empowering them to engage more critically with political messages.

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