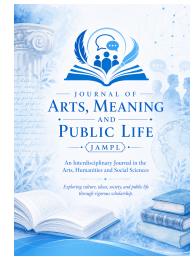


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A critical study of war frames against corruption in the first-term inaugural speeches of Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammadu Buhari

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how former Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammadu Buhari deployed war narratives in their first-term inaugural speeches to frame the fight against corruption in Nigeria. Both Obasanjo and Buhari, at different times, served as military heads of state and as democratically elected presidents. Thus, the manner in which the two leaders deployed conflict lexicon in framing corruption attracts linguistic investigation. Excerpts from the speeches that express the speakers' stances on corruption were purposively selected for analysis using van Dijk's critical discourse analysis (CDA) model. The findings reveal that the speakers utilised various linguistic and ideological strategies to create mental shortcuts for the audience, legitimise the fight against corruption and the deployment of relevant state apparatuses, and implement the fight with negotiated public consent. Through adversarial representations, the speakers frame corrupt public officials as enemies of the state, while inclusive language and mental schema give the masses voluntary ownership of the war. The underlying proposition is that, if the enemy is not defeated immediately, corruption will spread its cancerous tentacles and overwhelm the nation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria gained independence in 1960. Since then, the country's democratic experience has witnessed several interregnums by military regimes, especially between 1966 and 1999. Seven presidential elections have been conducted in the country since 1999, producing five presidents: Olusegun Obasanjo (1999–2007), Umaru Musa Yar'Adua (2007–2010), Dr Goodluck Ebele Jonathan (who completed Yar'Adua's tenure from 2010 to 2011 and governed from 2011 to 2015 after winning the 2011 presidential elec-

tion), Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023), and Bola Ahmed Tinubu (2023–present).

Nigeria has, for a long period, been plagued by hunger, insecurity, unemployment, religious intolerance, heightened corruption, ethnic animosity, bad governance, nepotism, and other problems. Nigerian leaders, both military and civilian, often use these development gaps to initiate discursive narratives that deliver messages of hope to the masses in their public speeches. Available data reveal that these socioeconomic problems resonate, although in varying proportions, in the first-term inaugural addresses of Obasanjo (1999) and Buhari (2015).

Expectedly, the two leaders dedicated sections of their speeches

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to the issue of corruption. Both present corruption as an enigmatic national malady that destroys socioeconomic structures and tarnishes Nigeria's image and territorial integrity, while affecting foreign investment and trans-border economic transactions. Because both former presidents had military backgrounds, they framed their narratives against corruption in a warlike manner, making their speeches an interesting subject for linguistic investigation.

1.1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON OLUSEGUN OBASANJO AND MUHAMMADU BUHARI

Former President Olusegun Obasanjo was born in Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria, on 5 March 1937. He enlisted in the Nigerian Army in 1958, where he rose through the ranks to Major General. He received military training in Nigeria, England, India, and the United States. Obasanjo served as a military ruler from 1976 to 1979, when he handed power to a civilian government, thereby becoming the first military leader in Africa to have done so. He was later imprisoned for opposing the military regime of Sani Abacha. Obasanjo was subsequently elected as a democratic president to spearhead Nigeria's transition from military rule to democracy and served from 1999 to 2007. His presidency focused mainly on anti-corruption efforts and economic reforms.

Muhammadu Buhari was born in Daura, Katsina State, Nigeria, on 17 December 1942. Buhari enlisted in the Nigerian Army in 1961 and rose through the ranks to become a Major General. He served as Nigeria's military head of state from December 1983 to August 1985. During his tenure, Buhari implemented several measures aimed at combating corruption and general indiscipline. After he was ousted from power through a counter-coup, Buhari returned to civilian life and later entered politics. He ran unsuccessfully for the presidency in three consecutive elections in 2003, 2007, and 2011 under different political parties. He was elected president in 2015. His tenure as president was characterised by efforts to combat corruption, terrorism, and insurgency, while also implementing economic reforms and infrastructure projects.

Both Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammadu Buhari, at different times, served as military heads of state and as democratically elected presidents. Thus, the manner in which the two former military leaders deployed language to enact war frames against corruption attracts critical linguistic investigation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. INAUGURAL SPEECH

It is a global practice for a president-elect, upon being sworn into office, to present an inaugural speech. It is the president's first official engagement with the citizens, and the speech outlines policies of the new administration and presents a roadmap for governance. The inaugural speech is a significant strand of public speaking because it marks the beginning of a new era in leadership recruitment (Chilton, 2004). Such a speech is crucial in setting the tone for a president's or leader's term by inspiring and redirecting the citizenry of a nation. Typically, an inaugural address outlines the vision and administrative policies of a new leader and persuades citizens to support the new regime.

An inaugural speech is a genre of political discourse. The two inaugural speeches under investigation qualify as discursive texts in political discourse because they were produced by Nigerian

presidents (politicians), at political institutions (inaugural ceremonies), to inform Nigerian citizens about the administrative policies of the respective regimes (purpose). This description is consistent with accounts of what constitutes political discourse (Baylon, 1991; van Dijk, 2001; Meridji, 2004; Abdullahi and E. J. Amodu, 2018).

2.2. CORRUPTION

Corruption is undoubtedly one of the major factors militating against the growth and development of Nigeria. It exists in many forms, and it can mean different things to different people. Dobel (Dobel, 1978, p. 958) offers a technical definition: "corruption is the betrayal of public trust for individual or group gain". This presupposes that any person or group who acts against the "spirit and letter" of his, her, or their office is guilty of corruption (Onifade, 2015; Rose-Ackerman, 1999). Corruption is also defined as behaviour that deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private, pecuniary, or status gains (Johnston, 1982; Obayelu, 2007). This definition aptly captures the Nigerian scenario, in which public office is often seen as one of the fastest and easiest avenues for acquiring wealth.

This situation often leads to the mismanagement of government resources and, ultimately, bad governance. Corruption undermines economic development because corrupt practices undermine investment, impede growth, and exacerbate income inequality (Mauro, 1995). This position is shared by the two former presidents under investigation, as their inaugural addresses strongly indicate that corruption retards development.

2.3. LANGUAGE, POLITICAL DISCOURSE, AND WAR FRAMES

Language is the central medium through which political activities are carried out. Politicians have to master the art of rhetorical persuasion in order to communicate effectively and convincingly. The language of politics is known as political discourse. Political discourse has been described as a prominent means of doing politics (van Dijk, 1985, 2001; Meridji, 2004). These scholars further argue that political discourse is identified by its actors or authors, who are politicians, and that such discourse is performed within an institution to achieve a result. Simply put, political discourse is the language politicians use for political communication to address social problems in society.

Politicians often deploy war metaphors to frame adversarial relationships when they discuss corruption. They use frames such as "corruption is cancer", "corruption is a disease", "corruption is an existential threat", "corruption is a poison", and "corruption is corrosion that causes destruction". Concepts such as "cancer" and "disease" are not, strictly speaking, war source domains. Nonetheless, they represent dangerous conditions that can kill a victim if left unchecked. Such adversarial constructions are potent because war frames evoke fear, anxiety, and a sense of urgency in the masses. Declaring war on social problems and identifying political opponents as enemies who perpetuate those problems can mobilise members of an in-group to fight the perceived enemy with all their might (Flusberg et al., 2018). Such a state of emergency may also justify government action to reallocate resources and tackle the identified problems forcefully. The general belief is that, if the enemy is not defeated, the problems will continue and the masses will be at the receiving end. The

masses are therefore persuaded to embrace the war voluntarily as a just cause and render the necessary support.

2.4. CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a form of critical social science geared towards illuminating the problems with which people are confronted by particular forms of social life and contributing resources that people may draw upon in tackling and overcoming those problems (Fairclough, 2001). The term *critical*, as used in CDA, relates to Critical Theory, according to which social theory should be oriented towards critiquing and changing society as a whole, as opposed to traditional theory oriented solely towards understanding or explaining a social phenomenon. Thus, *critical* is not to be understood in the everyday sense of criticising or being negative.

Wodak and Meyer (Wodak and Meyer, 2001, 2009) explained that being “critical” entails not taking things for granted, opening up complexity, making visible the interconnectedness of things, challenging reductionism, dogmatism, and deep dichotomies, and, through these processes, making opaque structures of power relations and ideologies manifest. Rogers (Rogers, 2004) and Kendall (Kendall, 2007) similarly emphasise the analyst’s intention to uncover power relationships and demonstrate inequalities embedded in society by being attentive and sceptical, while also proposing alternatives. This implies that exposing or revealing hidden features in a text is important because such features may not be obvious to less powerful social actors and, therefore, may not be resisted.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: TEUN VAN DIJK’S APPROACH TO CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

There are various strands or orientations in CDA associated with Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk, Ruth Wodak, Gunther Kress, and other scholars. The present study finds van Dijk’s tripartite model—society/culture/situation, cognition, and discourse/language—most useful for analysing the inaugural speeches. First, the sociocognitive foundation of van Dijk’s approach presents the persuasive use of language by power brokers to influence the masses and get things done as a “mind game”. Second, van Dijk’s CDA model highlights the ideological dichotomy of Us (positive label) versus Them (negative label) as discursive framing through which power and dominance may be enacted. Van Dijk argues that CDA is especially interested in how ideological dichotomies polarise representations of in-groups (Us) and out-groups (Them) (van Dijk, 2001). This strategy is extensively utilised by the two speakers whose speeches are under investigation, as they accuse and blame members of opposing groups.

Third, van Dijk (van Dijk, 2003) identifies a range of ideological discourse strategies that may be employed in subjective discourse. Only the strategies found in the two inaugural addresses are briefly outlined below:

Authority: citing authorities or references to validate one’s claims;

Storytelling: telling about negative events as personally experienced and giving plausible details about negative features of the events;

Argumentation: presenting a negative evaluation as following from the facts;

Accusation: accusing opponents of wrongdoing;

Lexicalisation: making deliberate word choices that sharpen the discourse;

Labelling: describing people or entities using particular labels or tags;

Evidentiality: using evidence to support what is being said; and

Argumentum ad hominem: over-emphasising negative traits of opponents so as to tarnish their public image.

4. METHODOLOGY

The primary data for this study consist of excerpts drawn from the first-term inaugural speeches of the two former presidents under investigation. The inaugural speeches were downloaded from the Internet in PDF format using mobile phones. The texts, designated Extract 1 and Extract 2, were later transferred to a laptop and subjected to linguistic scrutiny to identify excerpts that manifested corruption framing. The selected excerpts were then categorised into: (i) frames through which the speakers conceptualise corruption; (ii) blame frames; (iii) frames that declare war on corruption; and (iv) frames that offer solutions to corruption. This approach presents a four-layer critical incursion into the inaugural addresses. Secondary sources used to clarify concepts were obtained from books, journal articles, and other materials from libraries and the Internet. The analysis is divided into background information on the speeches, conceptualisation of corruption, blame frames, declarations of war against corruption, and solutions.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

5.1. EXTRACT 1: OBASANJO (1999)

The text analysed in this section is Obasanjo’s inaugural address, “The New Dawn” (Obasanjo, 1999). Obasanjo was elected president at a time when Nigeria was passing through a turbulent political experience. Incessant military interregnums had already marred several democratic experiments in the country. Moreover, the country had not fully recovered from the wounds of the Civil War. The national economy was severely battered. Systemic corruption among ranking military elites and their civilian cohorts stifled national development. Generally, disunity, disillusionment, and heightened interethnic suspicion made the political terrain cacophonous. In these circumstances, Obasanjo, as a newly elected president, was expected to address these problems and place the country on a more productive trajectory.

5.1.1. Obasanjo’s Conceptualisation of Corruption

“This is the challenge before us ...” (par. 5, line 50).

“Corruption, the greatest single bane of our society today ...” (par. 9, line 70).

“Corruption is incipient in all human societies.” (par. 9, line 71).

“The rampant corruption in the public ...” (par. 11, line 87).

"No society can achieve anything near its full potential if it allows corruption to become the full blown cancer it has become in Nigeria." (par. 9, lines 73–75).

"Our country has thus been through one of its darkest periods." (par. 5, line 49).

"All these have brought the nation to a situation of chaos and near despair." (par. 5, lines 49–50).

The title of the inaugural address, "The New Dawn", is metaphorically symbolic: it marked the end of a military interregnum and ushered in another civilian government, further marking the beginning of a new chapter in Nigeria's democratic experience—the Fourth Republic. Obasanjo frames corruption as a monumental national challenge. He does so through a story-telling strategy, using metaphorical and rhetorical narratives.

The speaker describes corruption in terms of a malady or epidemic: a bane or cancerous disease that spreads rapidly and destroys the cells of the body, rendering the sufferer helpless. Thus, just as cancer is at war with the sufferer's body and can terminate the victim's life if left unchecked, corruption can overwhelm a nation if it is allowed to thrive uncontrollably. Furthermore, he deploys an argumentative tone to remind the audience that "the country has been through one of its darkest periods", "a situation of chaos", and "near despair". The allegorical description can create disturbing pictures in the minds of the masses so that the message has lasting effects in their memories.

"The impact of official corruption is so rampant and has earned Nigeria a very bad image at home and abroad. Nigeria ... became a pariah nation. Besides, it has distorted and retrogressed development. Our infrastructures—NEPA, NITEL, Roads, Railways, Education, Housing and other Social Services—were allowed to decay and collapse." (par. 5, lines 45–48).

In the excerpt, the speaker tells the masses that pervasive corruption has tarnished Nigeria's image at home and abroad. He develops the argument by referring to key infrastructure that provides social benefits to citizens and drives national development but was allowed to decay and collapse as a result of corruption. Electricity, communication, transportation, education, and shelter are basic infrastructure, and a leader who neglects them fails to advance the welfare of citizens and the nation.

5.1.2. Blame Frames

"One of the greatest tragedies of military rule in recent times, is that corruption was allowed to grow unchallenged, and unchecked, even when it was glaring for everybody to see. The rules and regulations for doing official business were deliberately ignored, set aside or by-passed to facilitate corrupt practices." (par. 9, lines 75–78).

"Government and all its agencies became thoroughly corrupt and reckless. Members of the public had to bribe their way through in ministries and parastatals to get attention and one government agency had to bribe another government agency to obtain the release of their statutory allocation of funds ..." (par. 4, lines 41–44).

In these excerpts, the speaker deploys ideologies of accusation and labelling to launch a direct attack on past military governments and government parastatals, presenting those regimes

and institutions as agents responsible for pervasive corruption in Nigeria. As far as the speaker is concerned, successive military administrations created fertile ground for nurturing corruption. He describes their inability to tame corruption as "one of the greatest tragedies" to have occurred under military rule. Furthermore, through vagueness, the speaker states that rules and regulations governing public conduct were grossly subverted and labels public officials "thoroughly corrupt" and "reckless". He does not state explicitly who subverted the extant laws for conducting government business, but there is a strong implication that military elites and other senior government functionaries were responsible. Under these circumstances, public officials acted without adequate accountability while leaders looked the other way.

5.1.3. Obasanjo Declares War on Corruption

"... it must not be condoned." (par. 9, line 72).

"... will be tackled head-on at all levels." (par. 9, lines 70–71).

"Fellow Nigerians, let us rise as one, to face the tasks ahead ... Let us make this the beginning of a genuine Renaissance." (par. 5, lines 50–52).

"The beneficiaries of corruption in all forms will fight back ..." (par. 9, lines 78–79).

"We shall be firm with them. There will be no sacred cows. Nobody, no matter who and where, will be allowed to get away with the breach of the law or the perpetration of corruption and evil." (par. 9, lines 79–81).

"The rampant corruption in the public service and the cynical contempt for integrity that pervades every level of the bureaucracy will be stamped out." (par. 11, lines 87–88).

"All the impacts of bad governance on our people that are immediately removable will be removed." (par. 8, lines 67–68).

The speaker has already identified corruption as a cancerous disease that must not be condoned because it can infest and ravage the national economy. The work is enormous, and he cannot do it alone. Therefore, he makes a national call for compatriots to unite and fight corruption. He warns that the beneficiaries of corruption will fight back, but the speaker and the masses will be firm with them. Expressions such as "let us rise", "to face the tasks ahead", "will be tackled head-on", "it must not be condoned", "shall be firm with them", "there will be no sacred cows", "nobody, no matter who and where, will be allowed to get away with", "are immediately removable will be removed", and "will be stamped out" clearly indicate the warlike tone with which the speaker frames corruption. The use of inclusive expressions such as "fellow Nigerians", "challenge before us", "let us rise", "we will", "we shall", and "our people" is intended to draw the masses into the narrative and enlist their support for the fight.

5.1.4. Solutions

Obasanjo's framing of solutions to corruption can be discussed under two broad headings: (a) administrative/legal reforms and (b) support from the masses/religious intervention.

Administrative/Legal Reforms.

"This is why laws are made and enforced to check corruption ... " (par. 9, line 72).

"A code of conduct for ministers and other public offices will be introduced." (par. 18, lines 155–156).

"I shall immediately reintroduce 'Civil Service Rules', and 'Financial Instructions' and enforce compliance." (par. 10, lines 84–85).

The expressions "laws are made", "enforced to check corruption", "Code of Conduct", "Civil Service Rules", "Financial Instructions", and "enforce compliance" are examples of the administrative and legal frameworks the speaker intends to deploy in the fight against corruption. The speaker also gives broad timelines for the proposed response:

"All the impacts of bad governance on our people that are immediately removable will be removed, while working for medium and long-term solutions ..." (par. 8, lines 67–68).

This suggests that some policies would be enforced immediately, some would follow in the near future, and others would be long-term measures. As in war discourse, the address also conveys urgency. The phrases "I shall immediately reintroduce" and "are immediately removable will be removed" are intended to prepare the masses for immediate action.

Support from the Masses/Religious Intervention.

"Fellow Nigerians, let us rise as one, to face the tasks ahead ... Let us make this the beginning of a genuine Renaissance." (par. 5, lines 50–52).

"They [politicians] must join in the campaign against corruption ..." (par. 26, lines 112–114).

"To be appointed a minister or to any other public office is not a licence to loot public funds." (par. 17, lines 143–144).

"I call on all Nigerians but particularly on our religious leaders to pray for moral and spiritual revival and regeneration in our nation." (par. 26, lines 217–218).

Here, Obasanjo seeks the cooperation of Nigerians, including the masses, politicians, cabinet members, and religious leaders, in the fight against corruption. The speaker recognises the influence of religion in Nigeria and the social standing of religious leaders. Thus, his call on religious leaders to pray for the nation's moral rejuvenation gives the fight a religious dimension.

5.2. EXTRACT 2: BUHARI (2015)

The text analysed in this section is Buhari's inaugural address of 29 May 2015 (Buhari, 2015). Buhari assumed the presidency at a time when Boko Haram and other terrorist groups controlled some local government areas in northern Nigeria (All Progressives Congress, 2018). His administration was therefore faced with terrorism, corruption, and several other socioeconomic and administrative challenges. His inaugural speech, which would set the tone for his administration, was correspondingly authoritative and decisive in its treatment of insecurity, corruption, and economic problems.

5.2.1. Buhari's Conceptualisation of Corruption

"At home we face enormous challenges." (par. 8, lines 34–35).

"Daunting as the task may be ..." (par. 12, line 48).

"... pervasive corruption ..." (par. 8, line 33).

"Nigerian economy is in deep trouble." (par. 16, lines 77–78).

"... financial crime ..." (par. 7, line 30).

Like Obasanjo, Buhari conceptualises corruption as an enormous national challenge and, therefore, a daunting task. He uses emphatic metaphors to communicate the extent of corruption and the damage he attributes to it. He deploys the ideological strategy of lexicalisation, which involves deliberate word choices that sharpen discourse. Lexical items such as "deep trouble", "pervasive", "enormous challenges", "daunting task", and "financial crime" are deliberately chosen to influence the audience's perception of the danger posed by pervasive corruption.

5.2.2. Blame Frames

"It is a national shame that an economy of 180 million generates only 4,000MW, and distributes even less." (par. 22, lines 112–113).

"Continuous tinkering with the structures of power supply and distribution and close on \$20b expended since 1999 have only brought darkness, frustration, misery, and resignation among Nigerians." (par. 22, lines 114–116).

Here, the speaker deploys the strategies of accusation and evidentiality. He provides numerical evidence in support of a long-standing claim about expenditure on power supply since 1999. According to the speaker, the project "only brought darkness, frustration, misery, and resignation among Nigerians". This functions as a direct criticism of the previous PDP-led governments, which the speaker associates with generating only 4,000 MW and distributing even less to a population he describes as 180 million. He calls the situation "a national shame".

The speech also contains another accusation:

"In recent times Nigerian leaders appear to have misread our mission." (par. 9, line 37).

The phrase "in recent times" directs criticism at recent political leadership. The manuscript interprets this criticism as focused principally on the PDP's sixteen years in government. This accusation sets up the pattern van Dijk describes as positive representation of Us and negative representation of Them. Buhari takes the blame frame further by listing Nigerian founding figures whom he presents as patriotic and then criticising some later leaders:

"Some of their successors behaved like spoilt children breaking everything and bringing disorder to the house." (par. 10, lines 42–43).

This ideological representation is an instance of "labelling", whereby people or entities are described using particular labels or tags that foreground certain negative traits. Here, the speaker labels some successive government leaders as "spoilt children" who break what they encounter and thereby bring disorder to the

house. In the manuscript's reading, this antagonistic narrative helps the masses identify those framed as corrupt enemies of the state and invites them to join the speaker in rescuing the nation from such actors.

5.2.3. Buhari Declares War on Corruption

"We are going to tackle them head on." (par. 8, lines 34–35).

"We must not succumb to hopelessness and defeatism." (par. 8, line 36).

"We can fix our problems." (par. 8, line 36).

"We as Nigerians must remind ourselves that we are heirs to great civilizations ..." (par. 11).

"The blood of those great ancestors flow in our veins." (par. 11, line 44).

"Daunting as the task may be it is by no means insurmountable." (par. 12, line 48).

"We will not allow this to go on." (par. 22, line 116).

After identifying the perceived enemies and challenges, Buhari speaks authoritatively and in a warlike manner to mobilise the masses for the task ahead. The repeated use of the inclusive pronoun "we" gives the masses ownership of the struggle, while expressions such as "tackle them head on", "must not succumb", "will not allow this to go on", "can fix our problems", "by no means insurmountable", "must remind ourselves that we are heirs to great civilizations", and "the blood of those great ancestors flow in our veins" indicate militarised constructions intended to boost morale among the masses.

5.2.4. Solutions

Buhari's proposed solutions to corruption are framed along three points: executive oversight, administrative/legal reforms, and support from the masses.

Executive Oversight.

"Constitutionally there are limits to powers of each of the three tiers of government but that should not mean the Federal Government should fold its arms and close its eyes to what is going on in the states and local governments ... [it] will ensure that the gross corruption at the local level is checked." (par. 14, lines 63–64).

"I will try to ensure that there is responsible and accountable governance at all levels of government in the country." (par. 14, lines 67–68).

Here, the expressions "fold its arms", "close its eyes", "is checked", and "I will try to ensure that there is responsible and accountable governance" indicate how Buhari's government would use executive power to check corruption at different levels of government.

Administrative/Legal Reforms.

"The legislative arm must keep to their brief of making laws, carrying out over-sight functions. The judicial system needs reform to cleanse itself from its immediate past ... on corruption, serious financial crimes or abuse of office." (par. 13, lines 55–58).

"The law enforcing authorities will be charged to operate within the Constitution." (par. 12, lines 51–52).

"We shall rebuild and reform the public service." (par. 12, lines 52–53).

"We shall charge them to apply themselves with integrity to stabilise the system." (par. 12, lines 53–54).

Phrases such as "must keep to their brief of making laws", "carrying out over-sight functions", "needs reform", "to cleanse", "will be charged", "to operate within the Constitution", "shall rebuild", "shall reform", "shall charge", "with integrity", and "to stabilise" indicate how Buhari's government proposes to enact administrative reforms to address corruption and other social vices among public officials.

Support from the Masses.

"... no matter how well organised the governments of the federation are they cannot succeed without the support, understanding and cooperation of labour unions, organised private sector, the press and civil society organisations." (par. 15, lines 70–72).

"I appeal to employers and workers alike to unite ..." (par. 15, line 72).

"My appeal to the media today—and this includes the social media ..." (par. 15, line 74).

"My appeal for unity ..." (par. 16, line 76).

The speaker states that corruption is an enormous challenge that cannot be fought and overcome by a single individual. He therefore calls for a united strategy. Expressions such as "support", "understanding", "cooperation", "labour unions", "organised private sector", "the press", "civil society organisations", "appeal", "employers", "workers", and "media", including social media, signal the speaker's public enlistment of different social groups in the fight against corruption.

6. FINDINGS

The study reveals similar ideological narratives in the two speeches. Both former presidents acknowledge corruption as an enormous national challenge and an existential threat to Nigeria. They therefore deploy conflict imagery to frame their fight against corruption. This is done with the intention of arousing fear and a sense of urgency in the minds of the masses: if corruption is not fought and defeated, its cancerous effects may overwhelm the nation.

The two speakers also enlist the support of citizens in fighting corruption. As retired army generals, they recognise unity as a valuable resource in times of war and call on the masses to unite in the fight. Both speakers also undertake to deploy legal and administrative frameworks against corruption. Buhari, in addition, emphasises executive oversight as a means of addressing corruption at different levels of government.

Both speakers blame previous governments for pervasive corruption in the country, although their blame frames target different actors. Obasanjo criticises past administrations, especially military administrations, while commending the eleven-month transitional government led by Abdulsalami Abubakar that handed over power to civilian rule:

“I commend General Abdulsalami Abubakar and members of the Provisional Ruling Council (PRC) for the leadership they gave the country ... As officers and gentlemen, they have kept their word.” (par. 3, lines 22–25).

The manuscript interprets Obasanjo’s attack on past military leaders as self-justifying and possibly connected to his imprisonment under an earlier military regime.

Buhari, for his part, criticises successive governments, especially those of the Fourth Republic, when he states:

“Some of their successors behaved like spoilt children breaking everything and bringing disorder to the house.” (par. 10, lines 42–43).

The manuscript interprets this as a metaphorical reference to the PDP’s sixteen-year rule. The tone is harsh and the message is blunt. It further argues that Buhari’s blame frames do not focus on earlier military leaders and reads this selectivity in relation to Buhari’s own history as a military ruler. On this basis, the study submits that the two presidents utilise what van Dijk describes as positive representation of Us and negative representation of Them to sustain antagonistic narratives.

7. CONCLUSION

This study investigates how former Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammadu Buhari deployed war narratives to frame their fight against corruption. The analysis applies van Dijk’s model of Critical Discourse Analysis to uncover underlying ideologies and power dynamics in the ways corruption was discursively constructed, contested, and addressed within the Nigerian political landscape. The research reveals that the speakers used various linguistic and ideological strategies to advance their purposes in the speeches. These include war imagery, blame frames, a lexicon of urgency, vague narratives, inclusivity, metaphors, rhetoric, referential evidence, and argumentation. The speakers deliberately deployed militarised language to sway the minds of the masses and garner public support for the fight against corruption.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data analysed in this study consist of publicly available inaugural speeches cited in the manuscript.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this manuscript.

FUNDING

There is funding available for the study.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study did not involve human participants, animals, confidential personal information, or sensitive data. Therefore, ethical approval and informed consent were not required.

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