



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Linguistic Inference in Leadership

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Jul 11, 2024 Accepted: Sep 20, 2024	Language, a communication tool in every society, is vital in leadership, thus, the role language plays in leadership can never be over-emphasised because it is the medium through which leaders lead, and are understood by their followers. A leader's language choice to a large extent, accounts for his/her leadership style, and reveals effectiveness/ineffectiveness in leadership. It is on this premise that this study assesses linguistic inference in leadership. Working within the tenets of Halliday's (1994) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the study analyzes textual linguistic expressions employed by leaders, revealing thoughts, intents, values, etc. through language use, communication style, and discourse patterns, and how they reflect on leadership. Engaging the qualitative method of data analysis, the study examines the speeches of Nigerian leaders in the political and business sectors - President Bola Ahmed Tinubu and Aliko Dangote's speeches respectively. Findings revealed that the choice of words of leaders constitutes their leadership style, resulting in effective or ineffective leadership. It concludes that, leaders' effective communication gives birth to individual/organisational support in leadership which in turn, produces effective leadership. The study recommends that more attention should be given to language use/communication in leadership for effective leadership, and this would also curb enormous generalisation of leadership communication style.
Keywords Communication Inference Leadership Linguistics Systemic Functional Grammar	
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INTRODUCTION

Language is an essential communication tool for both spoken and written exchanges. With language, it is possible to capture new realities with new names, which grow and are integrated into people's everyday experiences. Language is not only fundamental to the human nature, but also the foundation of cultural identity, leadership, and the overall existence of every human being. It is the ability to make use of language effectively that differentiates and makes humans unique among animals. Man would not be superior to a beast if it was not for the sophisticated human intellect and ability to utilise language to both encode and decode the natural world. Ugorji (2020, p. 17-18; Uwajeh (2002), posited that language is an element of human behaviour consisting of structures and systems for communicating thoughts and experiences, essentially through representation. The interest in language around the world stems from the realisation that language is a virtual window that allows one observes the entire world. Understanding leadership, human behaviour, the human intellect, and the human environment revolves and is dependent on language (Ugorji, 2020). Human

civilisations also use language as a means of communication, conservation, and understanding of themselves and the people whose legacy they are.

Language consists of two primary parts: the mental component and the ways of representing it, which include writing, speaking, gestures, and signing. This study is focused on the latter. Language scaffolds concept knowledge in individuals, helps to acquire abstract concepts such as emotion categories across the lifespan, assisting individuals use concepts to make meaning of ongoing sensory perceptions (Lindquist et al., 2015). In the words of Anyanwu (2002), language as a communication tool, comprises symbols, signs and vocal acts, arbitrarily created and conventionally used to express ideas, thoughts and emotions. The use of signs and symbols allows for the interpretation, response, or translation of the signals by both the sender and the recipient.

According to Nuyts (1989), and Ogbemi & Akpoveta (2008), language is informative, directional, ideational, phatic, expressive, and performative. It is employed to convey ideas, opinions, and viewpoints. It is the primary means of communication and the single tool that unites people, worldwide. Many people ponder what society or the human race would be like in the absence of language; thus, communication would be ineffective. Language, the overall communication tool is essential in a nation and its residents' survival. The center of many other activities, including social, political, economic, educational, etc. is language. Societies are formed, transformed, and informed by language. Leadership, which is one of the points of focus in this study, undoubtedly revolves around language. Language, a complex but resourceful tool, is essential in leadership, leaders therefore, employ language to indulge followers in their different styles of leadership. This is evident in language strategies employed by leaders. Communication is key in leadership and language choice is paramount. Language choice reveals leadership style. This means that leadership is characterised by the use of language. Leadership style could be seen as the distinctive way a person or group of persons expresses themselves through language (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023). Style is a crucial component of speaking and writing that helps authors and presenters, leaders and followers, etc. express individual voices and desired effects.

Leadership is the ability to influence individuals or groups to think, feel and take positive action to achieve goals (Capezio and Morehouse 1997). It could be referred to the focal point of group processes, a personality issue, encompassing cooperation, the use of influence, certain behaviours, a type of persuasion, power dynamics, a tool to accomplish objectives, the impact of interaction, distinct roles, and the creation of structure (Robert Vecchio, 2012). Effective leadership can be said to be an individual's ability to guide, inspire, and influence others in achieving a common goal. It requires a range of skills and attributes. These skills and attributes are first of all, revealed through the use of language. This is because language enables leaders articulate their vision, establish trust, persuade and influence, settle disputes, demonstrate emotional intelligence, inspire, give clarity, modify communication style to suit different contexts, and so on. By these, the aim of this study is to identify and categorise the language strategies employed by leaders in the political and business sectors by analysing linguistic inference. The study assesses textual linguistic expressions such as leaders' thoughts, intentions, beliefs, values, etc. in leadership through language use, communication style, and discourse patterns.

Theoretical Framework

The theory employed in this study is Michael Halliday's (1994) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). SFL focuses on language functions in social contexts, emphasising the relationship between linguistic forms and meanings. It explains that, the context in which a word or a statement is employed determines its meaning. The meaning of a word or statement is derived from its "use", thus, the value in a contextual use determines its meaning, rather than its ideal referent in every other situation (Halliday, 1994). This proves that the meaning of a word is informed by conventional social discourse in which it is used, making it easier to unravel and comprehend the real meaning of words or statements in a an identified or known context of usage. The key aspect of SFL is the three Metafunctions - Ideational metafunction (language used to represent experiences and the world around us (expression of contents - actions, events and entities)); Interpersonal metafunction (language used to establish and maintain social relations (interaction between speakers and listeners, such as expressing attitudes, asking questions, and giving commands)); Textual metafunction (language used to create coherent and cohesive texts; this involves organising information in a way that makes sense within a particular context and ensuring that different parts of a text fit together). This insight results in linguistic inference.

Linguistic Inference

Over the years, linguistics inferences have traditionally been studied and characterised in various groups such as entailment, implicatures or presuppositions. These are most times, traditional linguistic means, such as thoughtful or complicative judgements about words/phrases employed in different structures in conversational contexts. Linguistic inference is a technique used in arriving at conclusions or arriving at meanings of language use and context. It is the interpretation of a speaker or writer's meaning from the use of words beyond its literal sense. Linguistic inference is one of the tools that enhances effective communication as it enables the comprehension of suggested or implied meanings, identify intents, and fill in information gaps. In the literature, there are different aspects of linguistic inference such as contextual understanding which deals with both situational and linguistic contexts; pragmatics, implicature, presupposition, inference in syntax and semantics, etc. Linguistic inference is key to understanding and producing language in everyday communication, as well as for comprehension reading, and the analysis of texts (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023; Braimah, et al, 2024).

Two sources inform meanings attached to utterances. First, specific combination of words pronounced, which feeds the application of grammatical and compositional rules, the implied knowledge of these rules permits one's understanding on the infinite combination of words that can form a proper sentence. In essence, grammatical operations result in precise and literal meaning of sentences. Second, the sentence meaning may be enriched, considering extra linguistic information, such as general rules of communication and social interaction, information about the context of the utterance or the assumed common knowledge between the speaker and the addressee. The application of these pragmatic process leads to the formation of implicatures. In pragmatics, implicature is the area of linguistics that examines how context affects meaning. It describes what is indicated or inferred in a speech, even when the words are neither strictly implied nor expressed. Implicatures are conclusions drawn by listeners from shared information, contexts, and communication principles.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed qualitative method of data analysis. Speeches of two Nigerian leaders – President Bola Ahmed Tinubu (political sector) and Aliko Dangote (business sector) were analysed linguistically. The criteria for the selection of leaders’ speeches were based on incumbency of leadership in the political sector, and the highest net worth from the business sector, as at when the study was carried out; an additional criterion was based on speeches that were national broadcasts. The speeches of the selected leaders were sourced from the online space. They were assessed to establish communication strategies by assessing linguistic inference in leadership.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This study explores communication strategies by examining linguistic inferences, and the roles they play within leadership context. It projects a focus on how language and communication strategies influence leadership practices, decisions, and dynamics both in the political and business domains. This study earlier established that linguistic inference is a process of drawing meanings from language use and context(s) in which they are engaged (Osimen, et al, 2024). It was said that it is the extrapolation of meaning from a speaker/writer’s usage of words form intended meaning (Braithair, et al, 2025). Linguistic inference is an essential concept for effective communication in leadership as it serves as an essential tool. This is because it allows for the understanding of suggested or implied meanings, intent, and fills in certain gaps in communication due to the fact that linguistic features are used to convey inferences of various types and degrees. In what follows, the study analysed some linguistic features in the speeches under study, buttressing inferences in communication style that informed leadership style. Both speeches are encumbered with quite a number of linguistics features that conveyed different tone, metaphorical underpins, intentions, perspectives, empathy, vision, accountability, inclusiveness, unity, determination, etc.

Analysis of President Ahmed Bola Tinubu’s Speech

The expressions “It is my unique honour...” and “...on this solemn yet hopeful day” depict a formal tone, and characterised by the context of usage. “President of our dear country” and “fellow Nigerian,” reveal the speaker’s authority and relatability, established through the the use of titles and roles. Phrases such as “...our nation's independence”, and “...dear people”, foster a feeling of pride in the group, as well as collective identity. “63rd anniversary of our nation's independence” highlights how lengthy and significant the country's history has been, encouraging retrospection and celebration.

The speech includes religious undertones such as “sacred rights” and “individual gifts that God has bestowed on us...”. These imply the nation's identity and ideals are predetermined by God. This may elicit audience’s sense of moral obligation and shared destiny as a result. The assertion that “No one is greater or lesser than the other” promotes the idea of equality and unity among citizens. It serves to strengthen national cohesion. “As Nigerians, we are all endowed” and “...this nation belongs to you”, reinforce the idea of collective ownership and shared responsibility. They depict commitment to addressing current challenges, implementing reforms, support for citizens, government strategic plans, and economic improvements.

Other linguistic elements employed by the President Bola Ahmed Tinubu express accountability, inclusiveness, empathy and encouragement for vulnerable citizens, and sense of unity. These qualities are revealed in: Accountability - "My administration shall always accord the highest priority to the safety of the people", "Our service chiefs have been tasked with the vital responsibility of rebuilding capacities...", "We have paid ultimate sacrifices..."; Inclusiveness - "We have embarked on several public sector reforms...", "We are introducing a provisional wage increment...", "...we set up an infrastructural support fund..."; Empathy and encouragement for vulnerable citizens - "I am attuned to the hardship that have come...", "I have a heart that feels and eyes that see", "I wish to explain to you why we must endure this trying moment", "I wish today's difficulties did not exist", "...but we must endure if we are to reach the good side of the future"; Unity - "Our bonds are intangible yet strong, invisible yet universal", "We are joined by a common thirst for peace and progress.", "...by the unifying ideals of tolerance and justice, our nations stands, and here we shall remain".

The show of confidence and optimism about the country's future are reflected in statements such as "...no other nation or power on this earth shall keep us from our rightful place of destiny". The side by side usage of triumphs and travails suggests that both successes and hardships contributes to the nation's identity and strength. "Love and cherish it as your own" depicts a direct call to action, encouraging citizens to assume personal responsibility for their beloved nation's well-being. This is an emotional call that aims to deepen the audience's emotional connection to their country, as well as his leadership. Phrases such as "broad and dynamic blend of ethnic groups, religions, traditions and cultures...", "yet our bonds are intangible yet strong, invisible yet universal", emphasise that, even though there is diversity in the country, there abides strong underlying unity. The statement is highly metaphorical and highlights the unseen but powerful connections in the country, tied by unity.

In terms of aspirations, the speaker made use of "common" repeatedly - "common thirst for peace and progress", and "common dream of prosperity and harmony". These underscores shared goals and values. They express that, despite differences, Nigerians stay united by their aspirations for a promising future. The expression "our nation stands and here we shall remain" communicates resilience and determination, echoing Nigeria's stability and perseverance. "commitment to democracy and the rule of law remains our guiding light" serves as a metaphorical expression that depicts foundational and enduring values they hold.

The use of linguistic features such as "promise" and "pledge" in "at my inauguration, I made important promises about how I would govern this great nation" conveys dutifulness and responsibility; it also reflects personal accountability and commitment. "Reshape and modernise our economy" and "secure lives, liberty and property of the people" indicate the speaker's priorities in governance.

An empathic tone and sensitivity were displayed in "I am attuned to the hardships that have come" and "I have a heart that feels and eyes that see". Engaging sensory features (heart, eyes) is metaphorical, projecting personal and emotional connection to the citizens' ordeal. The speaker establishes a vision of a fair and prosperous future in "a future Nigeria where the abundance and fruits of the nation are fairly shared among all, not hoarded by a select and greedy few". This draws attention to the speaker's dedication to social justice and equity in contrast to earlier injustices. The vivid imagery of "hunger, poverty, and hardship... pushed into the shadows of an ever-fading past", evokes a hopeful picture of progress and improvement. "I will now outline the path we are taking" is

an expression that indicates structure. It signifies a structured approach which suggests that the government is equipped with organised plan to handle issues. This statement fosters comprehension and clarity, and prepares the citizens for in-depth knowledge.

The use of first-person plural pronoun “we” in the extracted line that follow, highlights inclusion, it creates a sense of belonging and expresses some level of solidarity, instinctive involvement, and overall, engages the audience. It is a tool that signals persuasion and acceptance, and seeks to avoid assumptions, taking on a crucial role to suggest the relationship and perspective between a leader and the led - “We have embarked on several reforms...”; “Based on our talks with labour...”; “We are introducing...”; “To ensure... we set up an infrastructure support fund...”; “We have opened a new chapter...”; “We are also setting up training...”; “...we embrace more change, we also make history”; “We are increasing investment in micro, small and medium-sized enterprises”.

The use of the first-person singular pronoun “I” in “I pledge a thorough housecleaning...” indicates self-identity in leadership; establishing direct personal connection with the audience, conveying speaker’s personal thought, experience and emotion, as well as creating a sense of intimacy and relatability. It enabled the speaker communicate personal perspectives, beliefs, values and feelings. This literary tool does not particularly seek the indulgence of the audience, but conveys authenticity and sincerity in speech, indicating and enhancing authority, credibility and responsibility for the content (Osimen, Newo & Fulani, 2024). It further emphasises speaker’s role or perspective in speech, expressing a sense of empowerment, self-analysis and self-affirmation, highlighting the speaker's personal commitment.

“...a thorough housecleaning” suggests a comprehensive method for dealing with corruption and inefficiencies. Furthermore, “...that housecleaning is well underway”, implies that reform has already made great progress. This expresses progress and new leadership. The use of “I” in “I salute and commend our gallant security force” suggests acknowledgement and admiration, appreciation, gratitude on citizens’ efforts and sacrifices, and this goes a long way to establishing good leadership trait. “brothers and sisters” send a message of support, unity, and familial relation. Transparency in leadership is expressed in “My special investigator will soon present his findings on past lapses and how to prevent similar reoccurrences”. It also indicates a proactive strategy focused on engaging lessons from the past to present problems in future. Commitment to leadership is revealed in “providing investing funding for enterprises with great potential” suggests commitment top leadership, demonstrating a deliberate approach to economic development.

“We can only achieve our better Nigeria through courage, compassion and commitment as one indivisible man”, sets a visionary and hopeful tone for the future. Personal commitment reflects in “I promise that I shall remain committed and serve faithfully”. This conveys personal promise of commitment and morality. By adding a serious tone, the word “promise” strengthens the speaker’s commitment. A call for collective action is highlighted in “I also invite all to join this enterprise to remake our beloved nation into its better self”. This is an inclusive call to action, promoting group involvement in the process of nation-building. Motivation is a strong tool for effective leadership. The speaker establishes this in “we can do it”, “We must do it”, “We shall do it”. The repetition and emphasis are used to showcase confidence and determination. The progression “can do”, “must do”, “shall do”, are modal auxiliaries used to emphasise increasing levels of certainty and resolve. Lastly, a patriotic blessing in “May God bless the Federal Republic of Nigeria”, conveys a religious and

patriotic sentiment. The invocation of God's blessing adds a solemn and hopeful tone. The use of the country's full title at the end of the speech "Federal Republic of Nigeria" adds formality and respect in closing.

Analysis of Aliko Dangote's Speech

Aliko Dangote employed language with lots of linguistic inferences to convey his message full of gratitude/appreciation, acknowledgement of challenges, support, and personal resilience. He begins by acknowledging the challenges. He describes this with the word "arduous". This was used to lay emphasis on the conspicuous effort and difficulty involved in achieving the set goal. Acknowledgement of the support and collaboration of individuals and organisations were highlighted in "It could not have been possible without the support and collaboration of many parties and individuals". This showcases the importance of team work, internally and externally. The use of "your excellency" and "distinguished guests" conveys politeness and respect for the attendees. These are evident in "Let me start with your excellency, Mr President...", and "...permit me your excellency, distinguished guests...". These express formal and ceremonial tone, characterised by the context of usage.

The power of unity and team work leadership was expressed in achieving set goals in "At times when I felt really giving up, your confidence and quiet words of assurance had been the difference". A show of in-depth gratitude was displayed in "Mr President, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart...". This sends sincere appreciation from the speaker right from the introduction of the speech, laying emphasis on its depth, alongside revealing emotional connection. The speaker expresses the level of support in leadership in the statement "The government of Lagos has been exceptionally remarkable in his commitment and support for the private sector". The use of "exceptionally remarkable" buttresses the high level of commitment and support received, and also describes the support as being outstanding/remarkable/extraordinary. "I will like to express my deep appreciation and gratitude to the Lagos State Government and his successive governors", the use of "his" accords the government the attribute of a person. This shows some level of streamlines, for the purpose of intense recognition.

The speech is made of language rich in inferences that convey personal connection, appreciation and recognition of exceptional support and visionary leadership. The use of "especially" in "The Federal Ministry of Petroleum Resources and his various agencies, especially the NNPC, our partner", highlights the importance of vital role of the NNPC as a partner. The expression of togetherness in "He (NNPC) pled to satire this project to this successful event". This explains that, in effective leadership, support from entities is crucial in achieving a successful project. "The NNPC has extended their full support and backing" indicates a high level of commitment and support. The adjective "full" that qualifies "support and backing" suggests an all-inclusive and solid assistance. This also reveals the importance of involvement in effective leadership. The phrase "...under the leadership of Mele Kadiu" unambiguously acknowledges the role of successful leadership and stresses the relevance of effective guidance and direction in achieving positive outcomes.

Overall, the speaker engaged an appreciative and respectful tone, which identifies the key role of institutional support and leadership that produces successful outcomes. The mention of specific institutional names and individuals expresses emphasis and deeper sense of personalising appreciation and humility in leadership; it further adds specificity in giving gratitude - "I want to

acknowledge Access Bank PLC., and Zenith Bank, so, thank you very very much, Herbert Wigwe, thank you very much, my big brother Jim Ovia”, and other names mentioned such as Chief of Naval Staff, CDC, Communities and their traditional rulers, Chief of Defence Staff. Addressing them by their names and employing words such as “my big brother” create some sense of familial relation. This reveals some level of intimacy and trust in leadership. The repetition of “major” in “it is the major major challenge of our live...” underscores the import and struggle of the challenge. Even with the struggles in challenges, gratitude was accorded to Almighty Allah. This submits a sense of divine assistance and gratitude. The repetition of “really” in “... I’m really really sorry...” lays emphasis on depth of the apology and regret rendered in the speech. Apology rendered in leadership where necessary, indicates humility. Humility is one of the qualities that enhances effective leadership. The speech expresses gratitude, respect, and a sense of achievement while engaging the formal and somewhat conventional/informal tone. The acknowledgement of the chairman’s support, despite the hesitant expression “ehh” also revealed appreciation for significant support. The “ehh” expression, a slot-filler, indicates a means to recall something, though informal. The use of an informal reference “this thing” (the event) suggests a casual approach in a formal setting. Overall, the tone is a blend of formality and informality

Contrasts and Similarities in both Speeches

The study reveals that the language choice was basically characterised by context, as well as the different platform of leadership. As a result, contrasts and similarities exist in both speeches. President Bola Ahmed Tinubu’s speech revealed linguistic features that portrayed formality, the god-factor, equality, unity, collective ownership, shared responsibility, national cohesion, commitment, resilience, determination, inclusiveness, motivation, the singular and plural personal pronouns such as “I” and “we”. While Aliko Dangote’s speech was encumbered with acknowledgement/recognition, commitment, resilience, determination, a blend of formal and informal language, support, inclusiveness, politeness and respect, formal and ceremonial tone, gratitude, achievements, the use of repetition and adjectives.

Similarities in both speeches lie in linguistic inferences that portrayed formality, commitment, resilience, determination, and inclusiveness. Formality provides structure and order in leadership; commitment reveals dedication to set goals, consistency and reliability; resilience showcases adaptability to change and ability to lead effectively with leadership obstacles, and achieve long term success; determination helps a leader achieve goals uncompromisingly; and inclusiveness fosters value and respect for everyone, yielding to productivity in leadership.

CONCLUSION

Language use is unique and most times, influenced by context. The analysis of language use in the speeches of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu and Aliko Dangote highlights how the context and platform of each leader influence their language choice. This situates Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics which holds that, a word or statement is derived from its “use”, and that the value in a contextual use determines meaning. On the one hand, President Tinubu’s speech is marked by a formal tone, emphasising themes like national unity, divine guidance, and collective responsibility. He also uses personal pronoun to imply a sense of shared devotion and resilience. His language conveys a significant emphasis on leadership and national cohesion. Aliko Dangote’s speech, on the other hand, is distinguished by a blend of professional and conversational tones, many

acknowledgements and recognition of achievements. His speech also emphasises politeness, respect and gratitude, while highlighting achievements and support from various parties. The ceremonial and grateful tone is further enhanced by the use of repetition and adjective to qualify certain contributions.

Despite the distinction in language use, both leaders shared some similarities to conveyed formality, commitment, resilience, and inclusiveness. The similarities express shared commitment to their different roles and responsibilities in governance and business. The similarities are key concepts in leadership. These are leadership qualities that carry out important roles in effective leadership. Leaders with these qualities are likely to inspire trust, encourage collaboration and achieve lasting success; these are also qualities that make leaders stronger and more capable to lead toward success and insightfully navigate challenges that accompany leadership. Overall, these linguistic elements amplify leaders' ideas and establish connection with their followers/audience, demonstrating the powerful role of language in leadership communication.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends that leaders should be abreast with context, as this would guide choice of language, ensuring appropriateness and impact. This would result in effective connectivity with the led, and also establish effective communication in leadership. The study also recommends that, while formality is necessary in some contexts, leaders could also make efforts to use language that promotes inclusiveness and shared responsibility; making personal connection with audience/followers by engaging pronouns such as "we" (first person plural pronoun). This ensures involvement and value on the led. There is need for further research to investigate the effectiveness of different linguistic strategies in various leadership contexts, as it could provide more insight into how leaders can improve communication for different scenarios and target groups.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest of any kind between the authors.

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