

**A Non-Verbal Study of Some Presidential Debates: An Interactional
Sociolinguistic Reflections**

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to uncover the discourse characteristics of election debates in Nigeria using the interpretive text of interactional sociolinguistics. The objectives are to identify and analyse the non-verbal interactional sociolinguistic features in the responses of the presidential aspirants. The data is drawn from presidential debate organised by the Nigerian Election Debate Group (NEDG) on 22nd March, 2015. This presidential debate was purposively selected because of the fact, it was the last debate that Nigeria has experienced till date. The analysis is guided by the concept of non-verbal contextualisational cues of Gumperz (1982) model of interactional sociolinguistic framework. The findings reveal various verbal features which manifested through different non-verbal features. The findings show that the aspirants made use of non-verbal features such as gestures, facial expressions and gaze as emotional qualifiers in their responses to convey meanings in the debate. They were illustrated to reveal the aspirants' emotional feelings towards the electorate and the country. The study is significant as it has contributed to the existing literature in non-verbal communication and the analysis has helped in understanding of the debates.

Keywords: Communication, non-verbal, presidential debates, interactional sociolinguistics.

Introduction

Linguistic capacity is innate to every human being and this makes communication essential for everyone and has been regarded as the center of human life. Lack of communication among human beings will definitely bring no life and possibly there will be no interaction. Reflecting this fact, Astina and Maulidiasa (2018) say communication is the process of delivering information from sender to receiver, with various manners, ways and patterns. One significant thing in communication is how a sender gives information and a receiver processes it.

Thibodeau (2010) points out that effective communication is the faithful reproduction of thought and idea. This means that the speaker must have processed the idea and present it in the manner that the receiver will understand the information. In other words, communication can be effective when the sender and receiver get a similar meaning in the communication. Churiyah (2011) explains that the purpose of communication is to express feeling, attitude and behaviour. He further explains that communication is used to create and enhance the relationship between human and group of people.

Communication can be used to influence people's attitude, behaviour and opinion, such as asking questions, giving solutions and suggestions to people as well as serving social interaction such as greetings.

There are two types of communication: verbal and non-verbal. Verbal communication is the most commonly used to deliver messages, thoughts and ideas while non-verbal communication plays an important role to convey the feelings, emotions and expressions which are often used in daily communication (Patterson, 2002). Rustan and Subhan (2018) claim that verbal communication can be a tool used to deliver some ideas and opinions as well as express feelings.

Non-verbal communication is generally defined as the aspect of communication that is not expressed in words. According to Allard-Kroppp (2020), it is an incredibly effective way of sending and receiving messages from person to person, especially in a foreign country, for instance, you can communicate hunger by making a gesture of pointing to your stomach or your mouth, a universal sign. Non-verbal communication involves the interchange of information and influence through contextual arrangements, static physical features and ongoing non-verbal behaviour. It operates automatically and outside of awareness and consequently, is highly efficient. Zhao (2018) affirms that non-verbal communication involves all those non-verbal stimuli in a communication setting that are generated by both the source and his or her use of the environment, and that have potential message value for the source or receiver. Non-verbal communication has been classified into two categories: those that are primarily produced by the body (appearance, movement, facial expressions, eye contact, touch, smell, and paralanguage); and those that the individual combines with the setting (space, time, and silence).

Mikoluk (2013) argues that non-verbal communication sets the tone of a conversation, and can seriously undermine the message contained in the speaker's words if it is not carefully controlled. Cherry (2018) identifies some forms of non-verbal communication among which facial expression is considered responsible for a huge proportion of it, considering how much information can be conveyed with a smile or a frown. The look on a person's face is often the first thing one sees, even before one hears what the person has to say. For example, we can combine a frown with crossed arms and unblinking eye gaze to convey disapproval. Non-verbal communication and behaviour can vary dramatically between cultures; however, facial expressions for happiness, sadness, anger, and fear are similar throughout the world. Moreover, body language, posture and movement can also convey a great deal of information. Common gestures include waving, pointing, and using fingers to indicate numeric amount.

Presidential debate is a situation where major-party nominees meet face-to-face, often for the very first time, to persuade voters that each is more qualified than the opposition. In the presidential debate, non-verbal resources are used by politicians to respond to vital issues that have national implications to the electorate. This type of discourse is imbued with convincing visual strategies like gestures, facial expressions and gaze to communicate their stances to the voters in order to win their votes.

Aim, Objectives and Methodology

The study aimed to uncover the discourse characteristics of election debates in Nigeria using the interpretive text of interactional sociolinguistics. The objectives are to identify and analyse the non-verbal interactional sociolinguistic features in the responses of the presidential aspirants. The data is drawn from presidential debate organised by the Nigerian Election Debate Group (NEDG) on 22nd March, 2015. The debate comprises two (2) sessions and each session lasted for two hours. The responses of some candidates

who participated in the two (2) sessions of the debate were used in order to get representable data. This presidential debate was purposively selected because of the fact, it was the last debate that Nigerian experienced till date. The data (in electronic form) covered by the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) was downloaded from the YouTube. The relevant visual elements such as gestures, facial expressions and eye gaze in the debate were captured and analysed. The analysis was guided by the concept of nonverbal contextualisational cues of Gumperz (1982) model of interactional sociolinguistic framework.

Theoretical Framework

Interactional sociolinguistics was propounded by Gumperz (2009) in his bid to develop a theory that will account for linguistic, cultural and social aspects of face-to-face interactions. Thus, Irimiea (2018 p. 62) describes interactional sociolinguistics as “a broad interdisciplinary approach that lies as the intersection of several disciplines and borrows some of their methods.” He further explains that it provides insights into the way social aspects combine with linguistic and cultural aspects to create meaning in talk. According to Gumperz (2001 p. 215), “Interactional sociolinguistics is an approach to discourse analysis that has its origin in the search for replicable methods of qualitative analysis that account for our ability to interpret what participants intend to convey in everyday communicative practice.” This means that interactional sociolinguistics is applicable to analysing a discourse and not only that, it also accounts for the interpretation of meaning that goes beyond what is said in everyday interaction which can be realized through the knowledge of presupposition and inference as well as shared background knowledge. Commenting on the constituent theories in the framework, Schiffrin (1994 p. 7), posits, “the approach to discourse that I am calling interactional sociolinguistics has diverse origins, for it stems from anthropology, sociology and linguistics, and shares the concerns of all three fields with culture, society, and language”. Thus, the convergent point of these approaches (pragmatics, sociolinguistics, conversational analysis and linguistics) mentioned above in interactional sociolinguistics framework is that they account for the grammatical, social, and cultural integral components of the framework. According to Gumperz (2001 p. 216), “interactional sociolinguistics fits in any interactional communication that involves two or more interlocutors in which they engage in inferring what others intend to convey and monitoring how one’s own contributions are received. In order to infer what is intended, the interlocutors rely on what Garfinkel (1967) calls ‘practical reasoning’ and unstated, taken-for-granted background knowledge to fill in for what is left unsaid.” This refers to presupposition and inference which rely on socio-cultural background knowledge that helps the interlocutors to infer the intended meaning. In other words, it recognises the fact that background knowledge which goes beyond the overt lexical information plays a major role in interpretive process. This shows how vital context is in interactional sociolinguistic analysis as reflected in Cuttings (2004 p. 133) that it (interactional sociolinguistics) attaches importance to the situational context, and the context of shared knowledge about speakers, their histories, and their purpose in speaking.

Gumperz (1982) introduced the concepts of contextualisation cue and conversational inference under interactional sociolinguistics. He points out that “language relates to context through contextualisation cues.” Gumperz (1982a) pointed out that the use of

contextualisation cues depends on many factors such as participants' shared understanding of the social context (of what they are doing and the purpose of the event) and what has already happened and what is being anticipated to happen as well as explicitly and tacitly held linguistic conventions for interpretation in that situation as he stated below:

Roughly speaking, a contextualisation cue is any feature of linguistic form that contributes to the signalling of contextual presuppositions. Such cues may have a number of such linguistic realisations depending on the historically given linguistic repertoire of the participants.... Although such cues carry information, meanings are conveyed as part of the interactive process. Unlike words which can be discussed out of context, the meanings of contextualisation cues are implicit. They are not usually talked about out of context. (p. 131)

In other words, they are part of the strategies that complement the overtly lexicalised signs in meaning interpretation in interaction. This explains how a speaker can possibly mean so much by uttering so little. According to Bloome *et al* (2005 p. 9), "they include verbal, non-verbal and prosodic signals, as well as manipulation of artifacts." Green and Walle (1981) and Bloome (1989) cited in Bloome *et al* expanded the examples of contextualisation cues as follow:

Paralinguistic/prosodic: Volume shifts, Tone shifts, Rhythmic shifts, Stress, Stress patterns and stress pattern shifts, Velocity shifts, Pausing, Intonation patterns and intonation pattern shifts, Stylizing patterns of intonation and stress (for instance, using an intonation and, stress pattern from a different type of situation and overdoing an intonation and stress pattern.

Kinesics: Gesture, Facial expression, Eye movement, Eye gaze, Eye contact, lack of eye contact or shifts in contact, Posture, Body movement, Facial direction, Parakinesic shifts (style of body movement)

Proxemics: Postural configurations, Distancing

Verbal: Register shifts, Syntactic shifts

Gumperz (2001 p. 219) defines conversational inference as "the interpretative procedure by means of which interlocutors assess what is communicatively intended at any one point in an exchange, and on which they rely to plan and produce their responses".

Gumperz (1982a p. 153) further explains "conversational inference, as I use the term, is the situated or context-bound process of interpretation, by means of which participants in an exchange assess others' intentions, and on which they base their responses." This means that a speaker does not say everything he/she intends to say in a conversational exchange, but expected the listener to deploy the shared background knowledge (context) they have in common to infer the underlying message. Thus, the listener's response would be based on the inference he/she makes.

In view of the review above, it is noteworthy that interactional sociolinguistic approach is a broad framework which subsumes other theories such as linguistics, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, conversational analysis and non-verbal communication analysis theories. It allows a researcher to apply its constituent theories to his or her study in order to produce a detailed result. However, all the theories subsumed in interactional sociolinguistic approach will not be applied in this study. Only Gumperz's concept of contextualisation cues will be deployed. This is because it is relevant to analysis of selected non-verbal features in the data, particularly, kinesics which include facial expression, gesture and eye gaze.

Literature Review

Non-verbal studies of speeches have been carried out by several scholars and these studies reveal that it is deliberately deployed by speakers during speech to bridge the gap between the speaker and the audience. Okoro and Day (2013) study non-verbal behaviour in intercultural communication between Nigerians and non-Nigerians during business transactions. Their objective is to investigate the extent to which Nigerian business people adapt to their non-verbal communication style when conducting business with nonNigerians as well as with other Nigerians. They employed the use of survey and face-toface interview method where specific non-verbal communication variables which include silence, non-verbal feedbacks, facial expressions, voice volume, gestures, and eye contact were used. This work identifies unique non-verbal signs essential for effective business communication in Nigeria. The study suggests the importance of identifying adjustment strategy associated with non-verbal behaviour in intercultural business transactions in Nigeria.

Shams *et al.*, (2016) study non-verbal communication and its effect on students at secondary level. The study attempts to focus on the aspect and effects of non-verbal communication behaviour as a universal component of effective teaching process. The finding shows that most of the teachers use non-verbal communication always for motivating the learner during teaching learning process. The study concludes that teachers should be trained to make effective use of non-verbal skills in the class.

Zhao (2018) examines sign in non-verbal communication. The study aimed at discovering the unique function of signs in communication so as to enrich the research of non-verbal communication. The study finds out that pictures and emoticon play the various functions in non-verbal communication. First, these signs in our life reinforce the verbal communication and make us get a good understanding. Second, the signs are the channel to indicate the meaning of one's saying, such as in public places to give us a direction, and in private space to convey more implied meaning.

Odeh, *et al* (2021) observe the use of non-verbal communication by parents to their children in the presence of visitors in Ovoko speech community, Enugu state, Nigeria. The study identifies various body signs used by parents to their children. The study finds out that a sign can connote more than one idea; therefore, the interpretation of body expression depends on the user and the interpreter. From these results, it has been proven that non-verbal communication is culture based and some aspects of non-verbal expressions or communication are universal. It is very pertinent to note that every culture and social group has its own peculiar body language. This research discovers that there is a meaning attached to every expression and as a result, the population should be aware

that these non-verbal expressions which are the meaning of communicating ideas, emotions and messages are either culture specific or universal. Non-verbal communication is extremely complex yet integral part of overall human communication skills.

These earlier works have concentrated on speeches among schools, natural conversation and the likes neglecting political speeches especially presidential debates. Examining the use of non-verbal as a communicative strategy in the debates will reveal the personality of each aspirant and can serve as a way of convincing the audience in choosing the right candidate. This study intends to fill the gap.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Gesture for Establishing Solidarity

Gesture simply means the use of the hand, arms and head for meaning making. Some examples of gesture made by the aspirants in the debate are identified and analysed below:



Plate 1: Illustrates ASPIRANT A Greeting the Audience by Waving his Right Hand.

(Drawn from the second session of the debate)

The picture above shows ASPIRANT A waving his right hand as a sign of greeting to the audience as he came to the podium. Greeting is the first communication exchange a Nigerian makes when he/she opens a conversation in interactional discourse as a sign of recognition, respect and friendship. It can take the forms of verbal greeting, handshake, embrace, waving of the right hand or both hands, as well as smiling and eye gaze at the same time. Nigerians cherish greeting a lot and they see it as a virtue. Also, they interpret the use of the right hand in greeting as a mark of respect while the use of the left hand signifies snobbery. The illustration of this gesture in the debate depicts the humility of the aspirant, his respect for and recognition of the citizens whom the audience stands for. By this gesture, the aspirant portrays himself as a humble and accommodating Nigerian who will use his post as the president to serve his fellow Nigerians.



Plate 2: Illustrates Aspirant B Demonstrating the Manual Tilling of Ground with Hoe (Drawn from the second session of the debate)

The plate shows the picture of aspirant I demonstrating hoe and cutlass system of farming which is commonly practised in Nigeria when he was responding to the question that he should tell Nigerians how his government would improve agricultural sector if he becomes the president. He used the gesture to emphasise his utterance that we will not be able to make a quantum lead in agricultural production if we continue with traditional farming practices – hoe and machete. He deployed the gesture to create the picture of hardship, low productivity, health hazard and exertion of energy that are involved in this system of farming in the minds of the people compared to mechanised system he promised them which will yield abundant produce with ease. He used this to convince them that if voted in as the president, the agricultural sector would improve rapidly. Moreover, by demonstrating the tilling of ground with hoe, he identified himself with local farmers to show them that he knows the hardship involved in that system and if he is voted as the president, their story will change for better.



Plate 3: Illustrates Aspirant B Making Quotation Signs on “Democracy” with his Fingers (Drawn from the second session of the debate)

The picture of ASPIRANT B in the plate above shows the aspirant illustrating opening and closing quotation marks with his fingers in his description of the type of democracy that operates in Nigeria. In his response to the question on how his government will improve agriculture if he wins the election, he stated that in this country, few decades before our “democracy”, we had agricultural extension service which provided technical service. This means that there was more competence and development in the country during the undemocratic regime than the time of democracy. This view prompted his deployment of the gesture to lay emphasis on his opinion about Nigerian democratic system which he thinks does not meet the standard of democracy. The attitude of the presidential aspirant was influenced by his ideology as a human right activist. He therefore concluded that democracy in Nigeria is just a child’s play and not in full practice. The import of this is that the aspirant is depicted as a revolutionary who would not do the things, he thinks are contrary to democracy which were practised by the past government when he becomes the president.



Plate 4: Illustrates ASPIRANT C Making a Gesture of Kiss to Nigerians to Signify his Love for Nigerians (Drawn from the second session of the debate)

This plate shows the picture of ASPIRANT C signifying his love for Nigerians by making a gesture of kiss to them. He illustrated this by kissing his fingers and raising them to the people. This is another way of telling Nigerians that his love for them is deep, thus, he will not be involved in anything that would hurt them. It is a sign of assurance to them that he will do everything within his power to make them happy. Moreover, the gesture is common among Nigerian youth, the aspirant may have used the sign to identify himself with them

Facial Expression

Facial expression accompanies verbal expression to express emotion and it manifests by eyebrow position, eye shape, mouth shape, nostril size, and so on. Instances of facial expression are analysed below:



Plate 5: Illustrates ASPIRANT B Expressing Emotion of Anger (Drawn from the second session of the debate)

The plate shows the picture of the face of the aspirant expressing anger. His eyebrows moved down with wrinkles a little above them, contracted nostrils, narrowed eyes and straight cheeks forming a squeezed face. He showed this attitude to emphasise his displeasure at the high rate of stealing of public funds in Nigeria by the leaders and government officials. This portrays the speaker as a person that has moral value and it was deployed to convince the voters that in addition to the fact that he will not involve himself in stealing of the public fund, he will deal with those who did so and recover the stolen money if he becomes the president.



Plate 6: Illustrates ASPIRANT D Expressing Emotion of Sadness (Drawn from the second session of the debate)

The picture in plate 11 shows the facial expression of sadness by the aspirant as she criticises Nigerian leaders for paying themselves fat salaries in the midst of economic crisis. This is indicated by her narrowed eyes, the position of her eye brows which moved down closer to her eyes, the straightness of cheeks and the somber look on her face. She exhibited this emotion to show her displeasure, and disapproval of the greed and inconsideration of the leaders who receive such unjustifiable pay in such critical period in the country. This portrays her as an honest, caring and moral person who would govern with justice and fairness if she eventually becomes the president.



Plate 7: Shows ASPIRANT E's Expression of Disappointment as he Mentions Nigeria's High Position in the Global Corruption List (Drawn from the first session of the debate)

The aspirant in the picture above shows a sad look on his face to depict his disappointment at the degree Nigeria has reached in corruption as he recounts the position of Nigeria in the corruption list as 75th position in the world. The narrowed shape of his eyes, the lowering of his eyebrows, the contraction of the size of the nostrils, the wrinkles a little above his eyebrows and the somber look on his face are the indications of this. The display draws the feelings from the audience that the aspirant is a man of integrity who would inject discipline into the system in order to redeem the image of the country if he emerges as the president.



Plate 8: Illustrates ASPIRANT D's Expression of Sincerity as she Admonishes Nigerians to Set to Work to Move the Country Forward (Drawn from the second session of the debate)

Plate 8 above shows the facial expression of ASPIRANT D as she was making a call to Nigerians to rise up to prevent the country from further degeneration by contributing sincerely towards her development. The raised eyebrows, the wide-open eyes and the somber look signify the frankness in her mind concerning the call, the importance of this call and how disastrous it will be if they do not heed to the call. This portrays the speaker as a patriotic Nigerian who loves the prosperity of her country and will do all she can to rescue the country from further deterioration by providing developmental policies that will benefit the citizens. The import of this is to convince the audience that she is not a deceiver and such a sincere person is needed in the presidential position in order to make the change Nigerians are agitating for.



Plate 9: Illustrates ASPIRANT F's Facial Expression of Surprise (Drawn from the first session of the debate)

The picture above illustrates ASPIRANT F's expression of surprise as he explains to the audience his achievements when he was the governor of Ondo State. He made an expression of surprise at the big gap in their agricultural increase from 3% to 74% within two years which he was able to make when he was the governor. The indications of this are the wrinkles on his forehead, the raised eyebrows and the wide-open eyes. The expression signifies his expectation of surprise from the audience too at the high increase in agricultural product he was able to achieve within that short period of time. This was intended to convince them to see him as an astute and honest leader who can use that experience to improve the Nigerian economy if elected as the president of Nigeria.



Plate 10: Shows ASPIRANT G Frown at the Low Megawatts Generated from Power (Drawn from the first session of the debate)

The plate shows ASPIRANT G frown his face as he stated that the megawatts generated from power was 3,000 or 4,000 instead of 170,000 megawatts. This was indicated by his lowered eyebrows, reduced eyes size, contracted nostrils and sad look on his face. This shows that he is not pleased with the amount of power being generated because he believes there is possibility of generating more if diversification and decentralisation of power supply were introduced into the system. Power contributes largely to the livelihood of the people in the society, thus, insufficient power supply in the country is regarded as a threat to survival of the people and the economy. The import of this is that by unconsciously expressing the emotional feelings, the aspirant sincerely identifies with the suffering of the people which he believes could have been avoided. This implies that the aspirant is loving, caring, and will be in the position to render good service to the people if he is elected the president.

Gaze as Emotional Qualifier

Listeners' eye gaze at the speaker is a feature by which listeners indicate their attention to what the speaker is saying in an interaction. It also signifies that the listener has interest and regard for the subject matter being discussed. Speakers also deploy eye gaze to indicate their addressees and to monitor their listeners' attitudes during their speeches. Instances of eye gaze are analysed below:



Plate 11: Illustrates ASPIRANT A Gazing at the Panelist while he Asked him Question in the debate (Drawn from the second session of the debate) The picture shows ASPIRANT A directed his gaze at the panelist who was asking him a question. His two eyes were narrowed and directed at the panelist to signify that he paid rapt attention to the speaker as the question had to do with national matters. The calm

look in his eyes indicates that he understood the question, had interest in it, and is prepared for the response with the help of the experience he gathered as the incumbent president. This portrays him as a leader who is committed to things that concern the country and will not hesitate to pay attention to the plight of the people he is leading with understanding if he wins the election again.



Plate 12: Illustrates ASPIRANT F Directing his Gaze at his Co-Contestant as he Appreciates their Attendance to the Debate (Drawn from the first session of the debate)

Plate 12 shows the picture of ASPIRANT F directing his gaze at his co-contestants while greeting them in order to show that they were the ones he was addressing. He saw them as his fellow Nigerians, not like enemies and he acknowledged their response to nation's call. He deployed this feature to depict friendliness, humility and unity; that is, all of them were there for the same purpose of moving the country forward, notwithstanding the parties they belonged to or the tribe they came from. His deployment of this feature may be to register in the minds of the voters that since his major target was to move the country forward, he will be accommodating and not sentimental if he wins the election.



Plate 13: Shows ASPIRANT H's Expression of a Disdainful Look to Criticise the Hypocrisy of Leaders in their Fight against Corruption (Drawn from the second session of the debate)

The plate above illustrates ASPIRANT H's expression of disdainful look to criticise the hypocrisy of the leaders and top officials who condemn corruption publicly whereas they are the ones engaged in the act through their display of nepotism, favouritism, sentimentalism and tribalism. The expression was indicated through the raising of his eyebrows, lowering of his eyes and directing his gaze at nobody. This portrays him as

a diligent person who will not only proffer solution to problems but also to their causes. It is also capable of convincing the voters to see him as an advocate of transparency and national unity.

Conclusion

This study has been able to demonstrate the use of non-verbal communication by the aspirants in the presidential debates. The study has analysed the interactional sociolinguistics of non-verbal feature in the responses of the presidential aspirants. The findings revealed various verbal features which manifested through different non-verbal features. The non-verbal features discovered during our analysis included kinesics which manifested as gestures, facial expressions and eye gaze. Our findings on the non-verbal features in the aspirants' responses showed that kinesics such as gestures, facial expressions and gaze were preponderant in the responses. They were illustrated to reveal the aspirants' emotional feelings towards the electorate and the country.

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