



Women's Stance and Subjectivity in Nigerian Politics

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Abstract. On March 1st, 2022, the male-dominated federal parliament of Nigerian National Assembly voted against five (5) gender equality bills which were proposed to strengthen democratic practice and ensure the full participation of women and equitable representation in governance. These proposals are in dissonance with Agenda Five of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Sixty-three years after gaining independence from the colonial masters, Nigerian women still struggle for representation in elective politics, and this poses as one of the development challenges in Africa. Several scholars have explored this under-representation in politics from the cultural, economic, and social perspectives. However, the linguistic portrayal of women, as better candidates in politics, has not been given adequate scholarly attention. Therefore, this study specifically explores the engagement of stance and subjectivity in the discourse of female gubernatorial and senatorial candidates towards projecting positive self-image, voicing opinions and raising women's consciousness in Nigerian political context towards the actualization of Goal Five of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Africa. The study engages discourse stylistics in establishing the resourcefulness of stance-taking and subjectivity in women's projection of credibility in elective politics. In furtherance of that, Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) complements the framework in contextualizing the political discourses. With data gathered from the interview responses of three gubernatorial and three senatorial aspirants towards Elections in the Fourth Republic, this paper unveils the extent Nigerian women have gone in negotiating for wider representation and projecting themselves as better candidates in a male-dominated Nigerian politics.

Keywords: Women discourse, Stance, Subjectivity, Nigerian politics, SDGs

1. Introduction

It has been scholarly established that the development of any nation largely requires the equal participation of both female and male citizens; but sixty-three years after gaining independence from the colonial masters, Nigerian women still struggle for representation in elective politics, and this poses as one of the development challenges women face in Africa. The lesser visibility and underrepresentation of women in elective political positions insinuate the impression that men's dominance in elective political positions is the norm. Several scholars have explored women's under-representation in politics from cultural, economic and social perspectives, however, few exist from the linguistic viewpoint especially how women use language to project stance and subjectivity in establishing a positive self-image in political discourses.

Interestingly, the Agenda Five of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) strives towards achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls in actualising their potentials in all spheres of activity. Therefore, their active political participation should be one of the yardsticks for appraising the progress of democracy in any country. Considering the many orientations that have been used to measure women's underrepresentation and invisibility in politics, it is quite expedient and timely to examine how women construct a positive-self through stance-taking in Nigerian politics. In that vein, Zamfirache (2010:177) observes that an issue that is worth interrogating is how women politicians describe and project themselves as being credible and competent aspirants in political context.

2. Existing Studies and Problem Statement

Women sometimes revolve their rhetorical communication around personal experiences either at home, work, or growing-up years in order to have a shared mutual background and establish rapport with

their audience. Their feminine style is engaged in expressing feelings, maintaining unity and harmony among groups. The engagements of personal experiences and self-disclosure methods are useful tools in political discourse because they establish political speakers as genuine or reliable persons and make the audience feel they know them inside out. Oftentimes, female politicians adopt these tools to project, persuade and establish credibility with the audience. Studying the speeches of fifteen female activists between 1840 and 1920, Campbell (1989) concludes that women's rhetoric is a 'double-bind' that serves as a tool for the advancement of social agenda in politics. In the same vein, Dow and Tonn (1993) observe that women's rhetoric is not just a strategy to unite or empower an audience, but also an avenue to validate reasoning, celebrate strength and assume authority. The investigation of forty-five politicians' utterances made Blankenship and Robson (1995) agree that women's rhetoric expresses and supports women's issues in politics. On the contrary, many scholars have posited that women politicians sometimes engage masculine rhetoric to portray toughness, aggression and 'masculine energy' in political communication (Rosenwasser, Huddy and Terkildsen 1993). Likewise, Bystron (2004:34) stresses that women engage more of logical than ethical appeal in political communication.

Larner (2009) argues that unlike men whose language is considered commanding, instrumental, dominating and active; women's language is ascribed weak, intimate, unifying and too passive for politics. Using English pronouns as a point of divergence, she observes that men's pronominal engagement is exclusive while that of women is inclusive and supportive when communicating with either active or passive audience. In fulfilling the traditional roles assigned to them by the society, women's linguistic behaviour tilts towards nurture, conciliation, support, emotion, and inclusivity. In agreement with Spender (1980), Larner accedes that women adopt more of inclusive pronouns (we and us) and modal auxiliaries (may and could) in political discourse. However, she contests Spender's claim and asserts that women are not characterised with the use of hedges, unnecessary modals, expletives and tag questions when they are vying for a 'higher political position'. She posits that women vying for higher political positions, whether at the state or federal levels, revolve their speeches around certain rhetorical issues in maintaining their female-inclined goals in politics which make their language usually co-operative, sensitive, personal, nurturing, and identity represented.

Moscovici (1961) elucidates that social and identity representations are systems of values, ideas and practices which enable communication among members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange, naming and for classifying unambiguous various aspects of their world as individuals and as a group (pg. xiii). In the same vein, Jodelet (1991) contends that social representations are meanings which are concentrated in ideologies, and which helped people understand their experiences. Based on these, Scollon and Scollon (2001) assert that the concept of social representation, which has been widely researched by social psychologists, has a lot of influence on other fields like psychology, linguistic, language education and so on.

Invariably, social representation helps in one's interaction with other people (Gillespie, 2006). Bal-Tal (1997:493) agrees that people are guided in their behaviours and discourses through the cognitive order of the stereotypes they have formed and learnt within their groups. The need to identify and generate an identity occurs anytime interaction arises between two or more people. Therefore, social representation emerges in the interrelationship between 'self' and 'other', which is the way people construct, reconstruct or deconstruct their identities. On the representation of 'self'; individuals incline towards narrating themselves 'positively' in interactions; while the 'other' is usually reduced to mere stereotype when talking about them, and this can be because of diverse motives such as educational background, position of the media, national or political inclinations. Basically, it is safe to assume that identity and representation of 'self' and 'other' are necessarily unpredictably created through relationships established with others.

Of all the English pronouns, 'I' is the most 'innocent', self-referential, incontestable, and credible pronoun that proclaims and supports the 'self'. It can operate in many instances. First, it can project the other half of the 'other', that is, it can oppose any 'you' or 'they'. Secondly, it can operate by showing relationship between objectivity and subjectivity and lastly, it is capable of shifting reference, that is, it can mean different things in different contexts just as pronoun 'we' does (Pennycook, 1994:177). The political functions of pronouns transcend the traditional understanding of replacing nouns and playing deictic functions in rhetorical contexts. The idea of pronouns being political arises because they are intensely inherent in naming people, groups and implying relations to power. It also plays important roles in the political

context of legitimising ‘self’ and delegitimising ‘others’.

From the foregoing, this study, therefore, examines the linguistic strategies engaged in taking stance and projecting subjectivity in politics. Specifically, the study focuses on how Nigerian women political aspirants engage the tenets of language to project subjective stances in political contexts with a view to enhancing visibility and audibility in elective politics.

3. Theoretical Orientation and Methodology

Stance or stancetaking is that aspect of interpersonal meaning that affords speakers or writers the opportunity to express their personal feelings, judgments, assessments, and attitudes towards any proposition made or written and it is central in understanding the indexicality of language. According to Osunbade (2016:207), stance is a linguistic construct marking attitudes which are expressed interactively or individually in communication. It is an act that focuses on the utterance of speakers and writers in a linguistic context. Du Bois (2007:139) maintains that stance has the power to assign value to objects of interest, position social actors with respect to those objects, calibrate alignment between stance takers, and invoke presupposed systems of socio-cultural value. Englebreston (2007) also posits that stance taking is a multifaceted activity, including not only linguistic and discursive components, but also sociocultural, historical, cross-linguistic, epistemic and psychological components.

Thompson and Hunston (2000) observe that when speakers produce utterances, they usually leave traces of their attitudes and emotions in whatever they enunciate. Through a speaker’s stance, an audience can easily decipher the position of such speaker in relation to the subject of discussion. For categorization, this study focuses on the few types that have been earlier cited by scholars (Hunston and Sinclair, 2000; Thompson and Hunston, 2000; Osunbade, 2016). First, there is the *evaluative stance* which is how specific socio-cultural attributes influence the expression of a speaker. That is, the positioning of a speaker towards the realisation of truth conditions. Secondly, *epistemic stance* presents a speaker as being knowledgeable or ignorant. It focuses on how a speaker is committed to the amount of certainty, likelihood or possibility enunciated in a proposition. Osunbade (2016: 216) affirms that this stance is usually expressed through pronouns, adjective, verbs, noun phrase, prepositional phrase and verb phrase. Thirdly, there is the *evidential*

stance, which is the source of the knowledge expressed and the speaker-based evidence for the proposition articulated. Finally, there is the *affective stance* which focuses on the emotion expressed by the speaker. It depicts the expression of a speaker’s emotional intensity in culturally peculiar attitudinal propositions. Based on the above, the study examines how stance is encoded in the interview responses of the selected Nigerian women politicians. In view of this, this study examines selected female aspirants’ construction of positive self, attitudes, and political goals in the stances subjectively taken during political interviews.

Six Nigerian women political aspirants’ interviews are purposively selected for this study. This selection comprises interviews granted by three gubernatorial aspirants (Mrs Omolara Abike Cudjoe Alakija, Lagos State, 2011; Senator Chris Anyanwu, Imo State, 2015; and Dr Ada Chenge, Benue State, 2015) and three senatorial aspirants (Dr Mary Bent, Adamawa State, 2007; Mrs Esther Usman Walabai, Adamawa State, 2011; and Dr. (Mrs) Abisola Sodipo-Clark, Ogun State, 2015) towards the General Elections in the Fourth Republic. Specifically, we have purposively selected pre-election interviews obtained from different print and online newspapers, among which are, Nigerian Tribune, Saturday Tribune and Punch etc. Owing to time and space constraints, we randomly selected and analysed ten excerpts. This study is limited to the identification and description of the lexical items indexing markers of epistemic, evidential and affective stance as used by the aspirants in their interview responses.

This study does not border on the interviewers but mainly on the responses given by the selected interviewees. The data were subjected to qualitative analysis in describing how women generally take stance in positioning themselves subjectively in political discourse. The analysis was based on theoretical orientations from Halliday’s model of Systemic Functional Linguistic and Englebreston’s perspective on stance taking.

4. Analysis and Discussion

It is an established fact that speakers do not perform stance types but stance acts which are fully domiciled in specific sequential and dialogical contexts. Since Biber and Finegan (1989:92) have posited that stance is the lexical and the grammatical expressions of attitudes, feelings, judgments and commitments, this analysis focuses on the lexical predicates encoded in the expressions enunciated by the aspirants, which are to exemplify their stance positions in the

responses given in the interviews. Basically, we identify and describe the lexical items indexing markers of stance and subjectivity.

4.1 Epistemic Stance Taking and Women Political Discourse

This is the knowledge and competence of a speaker as displayed in the stance taken. It usually shows the commitment of a speaker towards a proposition uttered. In other words, it shows the ways a speaker carries out a stance act aimed at estimating the likelihood of the manifestation of a proposition. The female aspirants illustrate, through their interview responses, that they are knowledgeable and competent in the act of governance and their wealth of experiences have prepared them for the ordeal of politics. This stance is usually indicated through first person pronoun 'I', which is significant in its syntactic subjective position, with respect to the role the speaker is playing, while the predicate employed in stance delineates the stance taker's position towards virtues of competence and knowledgeability. Adapting Osunbade (2016:216), epistemic stance is pragmatically marked for the display of certainty towards the necessity of expression of a proposition. The selected female aspirants display their certainty to the proposition uttered in the excerpts below:

Excerpt 1

And if you are talking of zoning, women are saying we have never had it; I think I, as a woman, should benefit from the 35 per cent affirmative action. (Rosaline Ada Change)

In excerpt one, Rosaline Ada Change displays *certainty* in her stance when she asserts that, '*I think I, as a woman, should benefit...*' This proposition is not just made, but it was premised on the prior knowledge that women have never enjoyed zoning pattern in Nigerian political system. The aspirant has positively positioned herself with the truth conditionals manifested in the epistemic stance taken. The stance predicate 'think' used with pronoun 'I' is a cognitive predicate which is used to demonstrate a fact or opinion about the aspirant's proposition. Based on the fact that a woman has never emerged as a governor in Nigeria, her stance displays commitment to the certainty of benefitting from the 35 per cent affirmative action. The engagement of modal verb '*should*' epistemically buttress the previous knowledge displayed in the utterance, which is indicated in '*women have never had it*'. The subjectivity of the speaker is displayed in the engagement of personal pronoun '*I*' with modal verb

'*should*' which pragmatically displayed the level of the aspirant's certainty in the proposition made.

Excerpt 2

We will ensure the welfare of the people is paramount in our programmes because we cannot do without giving people quality education and healthcare delivery systems. (Omolara Abike Cudjoe-Alakija)

In the above, Abike Omolara Cudjoe-Alakija displays her commitment to the proposition uttered through the stance predicate employed. The predicate 'ensure' presupposes her commitment to the certainty of the stance. 'Ensure' being a transitive verb collocates with other verbs like 'ascertain', 'guarantee', 'secure', 'insure', and so on, which are all indicative of commitment to a proposition. The aspirant positions herself with her party through the engagement of 'we'. In the engagement of pronoun 'we', there is the need to look at the individual ideas and practices within a collective whole. The aspirant has been able to portray collective subjectivity which has reinforced a collective goal in the shared responsibility. The epistemic stance taken in this utterance portrays that the aspirant is a credible person who made attempt to promise what she can deliver. The linguistic employment of the stance predicate conceptualises her as a visionary leader who is competent and confident about what she does.

Excerpt 3

Well, I know I am confident and I am competent with my wealth of experience. I think that I have an upper-hand; some of them are just joining politics. (Mrs. Esther Usman Walabai)

Here, Esther Usman Walabai projects herself as a competent aspirant through the proposition given. She enunciates her knowledge, competence, confidence and commitment in a male-dominated Nigerian politics. The linguistic resources encoded in the stance predicates 'know', 'think', and 'have' give credence to the aspirant's credibility. As displayed in the excerpt, the stance predicates engage with other stance adjectives to position the aspirant in a dialogical authorial voice. This dialogical-authorial voice reverberates the aspirant's interpersonal stance style, which subsequently gives the proposition a rhetorical effect. The subjective position of this senatorial aspirant is based on the knowledge that her political contenders just joined politics, which literarily depicts their inexperience and incompetence. Therefore, she is confident that her wealth of experience could possibly afford her the senatorial position in her state.

4.2 Evidential Stance and Women Discourse

Given the fact that women are underrepresented in Nigerian elective politics, they tend to table facts and evidence which help discredit their political opponents who are usually men. This stance usually has the markers which emphasize the acquisition or availability of information. Sanders (1999: 478) postulates that speakers can have direct or indirect access to facts and evidence which could be presented as sign, direct proof or claim. In the excerpts below, we have evidential stance displayed through the aspirants' academic and political experiences.

Excerpt 4

I have been here for two terms and people have tested a female public servant and they have observed me the way I have conducted myself, the types of things that I have done, the compassion I have shown in working for people. (Sen. Chris Anyanwu)

In the excerpt above, Chris Anyanwu conjures an evidential stance based on her experiences in politics. The aspirant engages the place demonstrative deixis 'here' which indicates 'location' whose reference can only be determined in relation to the context of the utterance in which they occur. 'Here' in this context encodes the aspirant's senatorial experience at the National Assembly. The aspirant premised her evidential stance on the belief that her two-term experience at the Senate has proven her worthy of Imo people's support. She claims through this stance that given the fact that Imo people voted for her twice at the senatorial election is enough to convince them that she is a better candidate for the gubernatorial seat. The subjectivity of the aspirant is displayed through the pronominals 'I', 'me', and 'myself' which conflate with stance predicates like 'have been', 'observed', 'conducted' and 'shown'. In this excerpt, there is the recognition of the stance object 'people' which is represented as the 'Imo people'. Chris Anyanwu subjectively introduces the stance object to give credence to her proposition. She evidentially evokes that Imo people have 'tested' and 'observed' her during her stay at the Senate and they will support her based on such evidence.

Excerpt 5

I started politics at the grassroots level. I was a woman leader of my political organisation and at that position; I was able to mingle with women at the grassroots level. (Omolara Abike Cudjoe Alakija)

The stance predicates 'started' and 'was' engaged in Excerpt 5 provide the background for the evidential

stance taken by the aspirant. This stance is displayed in the aspirant's experience-driven evidence in grassroots politics in Lagos State. The aspirant subjectively maintains her position that her political involvements at the grassroots level and also being the women-leader of her political organisation have afforded her the experience needed to contest for the gubernatorial seat of Lagos State. This stance invokes the attitude of competence and knowledgeability in the aspirant. Therefore, the aspirant endears Lagos citizens to support her based on the rationality shown in the evidential stance taken.

Excerpt 6

In the part of Nigerian from where I am contesting a senate seat, the impression is that men have failed Nigerian politically. During my tour of the nine local governments that comprise the southern senatorial zone, the people gave me rousing welcome with promises of overwhelming support for my aspiration. (Mary Bent)

In the excerpt above, Mary Bent acknowledges, through evidential stance, that Adamawa citizens prefer her to any other male aspirant for the senatorial seat. The evidential stance predicate phrase which reveals this is the 'rousing welcome' given to her on her tour to the nine local governments which make up her senatorial district. She indirectly portrays that in Adamawa State, there is the general impression that men have failed Nigeria politically, which is the more reason why they gave her an enthusiastic welcome and promises to support her senatorial candidature. In Excerpt 6, Mary Bent claims that the joyful and concerted welcome accorded her in her senatorial district is enough evidence that the electorates will support her.

In the excerpts above, we have projected how female aspirants use political experience in taking evidential stance in political discourses. However, evidential stance can also be taken using academic achievement as a pedestal in projecting competence in politics.

Excerpt 7

By the grace of God, I have Masters' degree in Production Engineering and the degree is not meant just to be accepted but to be practicalised. (Rosaline Ada Change)

The aspirant above highlights how her academic achievement will politically help her in Benue State. Rosaline Ada Change relies on her political and academic experiences in winning Benue people's support in the gubernatorial election. The aspirant uses her academic knowledge to invoke her

evidential stance in her interview responses. Based on her academic achievement in Production Engineering; she enunciates that the issue of electricity will be dealt with given the fact that it is turf. The stance predicate 'have' reveals the evidential stance taken in the utterance.

4.3 Affective stance and women political discourse

This focuses on a speaker's emotions as expressed in a proposition taken. This stance orients towards a stance-taker's socially recognised mood, feeling, attitude or emotional intensity towards the propositional content of a message (Ochs, 1990:2). It shows a speaker's involvement in emotions such as anger, sadness, love, solidarity, loyalty or hate. The affective markers can be encoded in nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives, which can be engaged positively or negatively to show the position of the stance taker. Whether it portrays positivity or negativity, it is meant to influence the audience to support the speaker. Given the fact that political public opinion is often shaped by the mood and feelings of the citizens (Marcus, 2000), affective stance is of high necessity in political discourse. In the excerpts below, we examine the engagement of linguistic items in taking affective stance towards the projection of a positive self-image to the electorates. As a matter of fact, we look at the import of the grammatical expressions that convey emotions to the audiences and, how the aspirants have constructed themselves as better candidates in the interview responses.

Excerpt 8

What we are interested in is to better the lives of our people in Ogun State. (Bisola Sodipo-Clark)

Excerpt 9

If I had initial plan to serve the people well at the Senate, by the overwhelming victory that I got at the PDP primaries, I have to double my commitment now that I feel more indebted to the people. (Mary Bent)

Excerpt 10

When I promise, I keep my promise. I don't promise too much; I promise what I can deliver. And my promise to Imo people is that I will do everything humanly possible to help bring about transformation. (Sen. Chris Anyanwu)

From the excerpts above, it is noted that affective stance accentuates the mood of the stance taker. For this reason, the selected aspirants use affective stance to reach the core of their audience's hearts in a more

emotional manner. When the female political aspirants take affective stance through positive linguistic items like 'interested', 'better', 'double my commitment', 'indebted', 'promise', 'keep', 'do everything humanly possible', 'transformation', they are simultaneously projecting themselves in a positive light to the electorates. Through these lexical items engaged, they do not only project their feelings, but also invoke and provoke emotions from their audiences through the positive evaluative meanings embedded in the affective stances taken. Using this as a backdrop, we observe that affective stance is an important aspect of political positive framing which avails political aspirants the opportunity to construct positive frames based on identifiable social meaning between themselves and their audiences (Park, 2011:266).

Asides Bisola Sodipo-Clark that engages pronoun 'we' to conceptualise the party and herself as 'one'; the other aspirants in the above excerpts make use of personal pronoun 'I' to show their emotions towards the proposition and promises enunciated. Pronoun 'I' is usually used subjectively in politics to refer to 'self' alone and this is not only for referential purpose, but to give credence to the subjectivity and positions of the stance-taker. It establishes the personal involvement and commitment of the stance taker to the proposition made. Moreover, in affective stance, pronouns 'We' and 'I' are used to avoid obscurity of reference. The choices of pronouns, either 'We' or 'I', do not merely exist for deictic or anaphoric purposes in the above excerpts, but they function in relation to identity and solidarity for the main purpose of portraying a positive self-image, establish credibility and seek the total support of electorates.

5. Conclusion

One of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is achieving gender equality and empowering all girls and women in actualising their potentials. Therefore, the erroneous perception of women being inferior in politics is a development challenge which should be eradicated. There can be no equality if women are considered inferior to men in all spheres of activity. Based on that, women's contribution to national development should be unilaterally recognised in elective politics and leadership.

This study has paid particular attention to how women employ stance and subjectivity to project themselves as better candidates in elective politics in Nigeria. In doing this, we have highlighted the stance acts usually used by women aspirants and described

the lexical items engaged in taking the highlighted stances. We observe that against the stance types identified by Englebretson (2007), the selected women politicians in this study only engaged epistemic, evidential and affective stances in their interview responses.

The analysis also indicated that Nigerian women politicians project themselves as being competent, confident, and knowledgeable and these are evidently manifested in their linguistic resources in taking stance and aligning positions on political matters. Their subjectivity is also displayed in their careful selection of pronominals which help position the stance-takers positively towards the propositions uttered in their interview responses. The engagement of pronoun 'we' and 'I' is more prominent than any other pronouns, and they are politically engaged to show the relationship between 'aspirants and party members'.

The concepts of stance and subjectivity have helped us understand how Nigerian women politicians position themselves and take subjective stance in politics. This reveals the concerted efforts women make to shatter the political glass-ceiling blocking them from attaining their full sustainable potentials in elective politics.

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