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An Appraisal of President Muhammadu Buhari's Democracy Day Speeches

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Abstract

The study examines Muhammadu Buhari's Democracy Day Speeches through the attitudinal subsystem lens of Appraisal Theory, a component of Systemic Functional Linguistics. The analysis focuses on Affect, Judgement and Appreciation to uncover how evaluative language is strategically deployed in political discourse. The study is qualitative, using the purposive sampling method. Findings reveal that Appreciation features prominently, enabling the president to assess national conditions, highlight achievements and frame socio-political realities, while Affect is used to express emotions, build empathy and foster connection with citizens. Furthermore, there is an indication of co-occurrence of positive and negative evaluations, which allows for a balanced narrative that acknowledges challenges while projecting optimism and control. Conclusively, the speeches demonstrate a predominantly positive evaluation, reflecting a strategic effort to reinforce leadership credibility and national unity.

Keywords: Appraisal theory, Political discourse, Evaluative Language, Muhammadu Buhari

1. Introduction

Politics is a struggle for power that aims to put certain political, economic, and social ideas into practice. Therefore, language becomes an important vehicle in actualizing these political practices (Bayram, 2011). Politicians make their intentions known through debates and speeches. Speeches are important to politicians since they aim at a wide range of audiences. These speeches could persuade, impose or influence the audience. Politicians use language that commits them to the people. Through their use of language, a lot of people have high expectations. Flowery, figurative language, often ambiguous, is mostly employed in politicians' speeches. Man uses language as an instrument to achieve and sustain political ambition (Ogunsiji, 2013).

Stuart Chase, in Sani (2015), in his comment on the nature of political speech and major political terms, compares political campaign speeches to a kind of formal ballet in which individuals simply perform what he views as a predetermined ritual. This comment seeks to address politicians' approach and response to issues that concern the people. Orwell (1972; 19) warns that political language is capable of corrupting society and he provides some advice.

> In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British, India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of atom bomb on Japan, can indeed be defended but only by arguments

> which are brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of political parties. Thus, political language has come to consist largely of euphemism, question begging and sheer cloudy vagueness.'

Here, linguistic items are used to hide truths about actual events. What is said and what is done most of the time do not relate. Political language presents itself as an easy place to discern this double standard because it deals directly with issues of general concern to the public. For Sani (2011), speechmaking is the most important, tangible aspect of political campaigning. He further says that political communication presupposes the existence of a speaker, a setting and an audience.

Political discourse studies have extensively examined presidential speeches using frameworks such as Critical Discourse Analysis. Muhammadu Buhari's speeches in Nigeria have attracted scholarly attention. However, despite this growing body of research, there remains a limited focus on the interpersonal meanings encoded in these speeches, particularly through the lens of evaluation. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how evaluative meanings are constructed through the attitudinal subsystem of Appraisal Theory in Democracy Day Speeches of President Muhammadu Buhari, with a view to uncovering how language is used to express emotions, make moral judgements and evaluate national events in the context of Nigerian political discourse.

2. Democracy Day Speeches

Democracy Day speeches are forms of political communication that provide an opportunity to review the state of democracy worldwide. Democracy as a process needs the support of the international community, national governing bodies, civil society and individuals for it to be enjoyed by everyone, everywhere. The values of freedom, respect for human rights and the principle of holding periodic elections by universal suffrage are essential elements of democracy.

In Nigeria, until June 6, 2018, Democracy Day was held annually on May, 29. This day marks the day the military handed over power to an elected civilian government on 29th May, 1999, marking the beginning of the longest civilian rule since independence in 1960. Democracy Day in Nigeria is marked by a public holiday and the president's speech, which reassures Nigerians of the government's progress and challenges.

Presidential discourse as a form of institutional communication is inherently strategic. It is used not only to inform but also to persuade, justify, and align audiences with governmental policies and ideologies. According to Van Dijk (2018), political discourse often reflects underlying power relations and ideological structures, making it a crucial site for discourse analysis. Similarly, Fairclough (2015) emphasizes that language is a social practice through which power and dominance are enacted and reproduced. Within this framework, the study of evaluative language becomes essential for understanding how political actors construct reality and influence public perception.

Previous contributions on political speeches in Nigeria include Shardama (2015), who examined A Critical Discourse Analysis of President Muhammadu Buhari's inaugural Speech. The nuanced evaluative mechanisms captured by Appraisal theory are usually overlooked despite their significance. Nanavaratorn (2025) carried out a study on how two major U.S. newspapers used evaluative language to assess U.S. presidential candidates Joe Biden and Donald Trump during the 2024 election campaign. The study focuses on judgment of social esteem and social sanction. The findings indicate that Biden was portrayed positively, whereas Trump was portrayed negatively. Akinwotu and Abubakar

(2020) carried out an Appraisal Analysis of Olusegun Obasanjo's Open Letters to President Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari. The study reveals that media political correspondence from past presidents may serve as an alternative guide for the incumbent president and strengthen governance when properly deployed. These works differ from the present study as the present study seeks to examine how attitude is deployed in Democracy Day Speeches of President Muhammadu Buhari by uncovering the linguistic strategies through which political meanings are constructed and communicated. The speeches present a valuable corpus for such analysis. His administration was characterized by a strong emphasis on anti-corruption measures, security reforms, and economic restructuring. These themes are frequently reflected in his public addresses, making them rich in evaluative content. This study will bridge the gap between political discourse analysis in Nigeria and linguistic theory. This study, by applying the Attitude subsystem of the Appraisal theory, offers a systematic approach to understanding how evaluation operates in presidential speeches. It also provides insight into the role of language in shaping political realities in a developing democracy. Furthermore, the study provides a platform for unraveling how political leaders use language to influence public perception, construct national identity, and legitimize governance.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the data analysis for this study is the Appraisal theory. The Appraisal theory is a suitable model for the analysis of speeches. This model is based on the works of Martins and White (2005) and Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, with a focus on the interpersonal meta-functions. The framework is organized into three main subsystems:

i. Attitude (evaluation of emotions)
ii. Engagement (sourcing and negotiation of voices)
iii. Graduation (intensity and scaling of evaluation)

For the purpose of this study, Attitude is central because it directly addresses evaluative meaning in discourse.

2.1.1The Attitude Subsystem

Attitude refers to the values, such as responses to emotions or culturally determined evaluation systems. Attitude is divided into three categories: Affect, judgment and appreciation (Martins and White, 2005).

i. Affect deals with the expression of emotion. These emotions can be expressed explicitly with positive or negative sense of emotion in words such as hate, love, happy, worried, sad and so on. It can also express an implicit sign of emotion. On the other hand, Judgment assesses human behaviour by reference to social norms. One's behavior is judged in a positive or negative light. Affect is often used to inspire hope and optimism, express concern or empathy and mobilize public support
ii. Judgment assesses human behaviour by reference to social norms. One's behavior is judged in a positive or negative light. In political discourse, judgment is frequently used to praise government achievements, criticize opposition or previous administrations or evaluate citizens' actions.
iii. Appreciation deals with the assessments of aesthetic characters on the text, process or phenomenon. This can be used to evaluate national progress, describe economic performance and frame policies and initiatives.

3. Methodology

The data for this research were collected through the internet, library resources, and relevant writings and publications. A total of five speeches delivered on different dates by President Muhammadu Buhari were downloaded from the internet for critical analysis. These speeches vary in length and number of sentences. Excerpts from the speeches are studied to identify instances of affect, judgment, and appreciation, and are then categorized for discussion of patterns.

The study adopts a purposive sampling technique to select five speeches by President Muhammadu Buhari, specifically those delivered on Democracy Day. Thus, extracts from five Democracy Day speeches were selected as a sample.

4. Presentation of Data Analysis and Discussion

Instances of Attitude

Attitude concerns people's reactions to many aspects of the mental process. White (2015) asserts that attitude refers to the subsystem of evaluative meanings by which addressees are positioned to adopt a positive or negative view of experiential phenomena or propositions about those phenomena. The three broad subtypes of attitudinal meanings are affect, judgment and appreciation.

Excerpt 1:

> It is one year today since our administration came into office. It has been a year of *triumph* [affect: positive assessment via emotional reaction of satisfaction], consolidation, *pains* [affect: negative assessment via emotional reaction of dissatisfaction] and *achievements* [judgment: positive assessment of human tenacity]. By age, instinct and experience, my preference is to look forward, to prepare for the challenges that lie ahead and rededicate the administration to the task of fixing Nigeria (29th May,2016).

The different ways in which affect is realized in the excerpt above are both positive and negative AFFECT. The president feels elated to have been elected to power for one year; he declared his triumphs, achievements, and pains, which could be culturally understood as good or bad, with satisfaction or dissatisfaction. He believes that leadership has to do with age and instinct, but leadership is beyond age and instinct. Consequently, he presumed that he would succeed in his experience, thus the positive judgment.

Excerpt 2

> So, today, I am *happy* [affect: positive assessment via emotional reaction of happiness] to formally launch, by far the most ambitious social protection program in our history. A program that both seeks to start the process of lifting many from poverty, while at the same time creating the opportunity for people to fend for themselves (29th May, 2016).

The President is elated to set his plans in motion to move the country forward by launching a program, which is why he is in a happy mood. This program, as proposed by the president, would lift citizens out of poverty and make them self-reliant. The essence of his happy mood is not questionable because he wants the best for the people.

Excerpt 3

> The past years have *witnessed huge flows* [appreciation: positive assessment of valuation] of oil revenues. From 2010 average oil prices were

> $100 per barrel. But *economic and security conditions were deteriorating* [judgment: negative assessment of capacity]. We campaigned and *won* [appreciative; positive assessment of valuation] the election on the platform of restoring security, tackling corruption and restructuring the economy. On our arrival, the oil price had *collapsed* to as low as $30 per barrel and we found nothing had been kept for the rainy day. Oil prices have been *declining* [judgment: negative assessment of capacity] since 2014 but due to the neglect of the past, the country was not equipped to halt the economy from declining (29th May, 2016).

The words and phrases that signify negative judgmental attitude are: 'deteriorating, collapsed, and declining', while positive appreciative attitudes are 'have witnessed huge flow and won'.

Excerpt 4

> My Dear Nigerians! Today marks the 19th year of our nascent democracy and the 3rd Anniversary of this administration. I am *thankful* [appreciation: positive assessment of evaluation] to Almighty God for bringing us thus far. This administration came at a time that Nigerians needed Change, the Change we promised and the Change we continue to deliver. We have faced a lot of challenges on this journey and Nigerians have stood by us in achieving the three cardinal points of this administration namely: Security, Corruption and the Economy (29th May, 2018).

The President is thankful for another year of change, which Nigerians have neither seen nor experienced, yet he remains hopeful that one day they will. He appreciates the Almighty God for another opportunity to be in office, which is not by his power but by the grace of God. In his evaluation, they are delivering the change they promised to Nigerians. Nigerians, on the other hand, stood by them in overcoming their challenges.

Excerpt 5

> The Niger Delta Region has *enjoyed relative peace* [affect: positive] through social inclusiveness and cooperation of the Elders and the good people of the region. Government is committed to implementing *the comprehensive peace,* [affect: positive] security and development plan for the region. The environmental clean-up of the region which commenced with the launch in Bodo, Ogoni in June, 2016 is progressing satisfactorily. Furthermore farming *assets are being revived* [judgment: positive] and investors in cocoa and palm oil plantations are showing serious interest (29th May, 2018).

In the example above, 'has enjoyed relative peace' is used by the President to show a state of tranquility being experienced by the people of the Niger Delta. The Niger Delta region is a petroleum-rich region and has been the center of international concern over extensive pollution, which is often used as an example of ecocide. Therefore, the struggle for oil wealth and environmental harm over its impacts has fuelled violence between ethnic groups, causing the militarization of nearly the entire region by the ethnic militia groups, Nigerian military and police forces. Nevertheless, through social inclusion and cooperation among all the people involved, relative peace has been restored. Consequently, the President also used positive judgmental attitude to assess the farmers' assets that are being revived for a bountiful harvest.

Excerpt 6

> And my firm belief is that our people above all want to live in *peace* [affect: positive assessment via emotional feeling] and harmony with their fellow Nigerians. They desire opportunity to better themselves in a safe environment. (12th June, 2019)

In the example above, 'peace' is used by the President to convey an emotion free from the war and fighting that exist among Nigerians, and to express the desire to live with other people. The people desire to live in harmony with other Nigerians. The President further stated that most instances of inter-communal and inter-religious strife and violence are either sponsored or incited by ethnic, political or religious leaders to benefit themselves and weaken our country.

Excerpt 7

> Thus far, we Nigerians can be *proud* [appreciation: positive assessment of quality] of our history since Independence in 1960. We have *contributed* [appreciation: positive assessment of impact] to UN peace-keeping responsibilities all over the world; we have *stabilized* Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast and two years ago we *prevented* [judgment: positive assessment of propriety] the Gambia from degenerating into anarchy (12th June, 2019).

The President asked Nigerians to be proud of their history since independence in 1960, which is realized in an appreciative attitude. Regardless, they are multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nation, they still exist as one nation. He also appreciates Nigerians for contributing to UN peacekeeping and helping stabilize and restore law and order in other African countries. In this excerpt, an attitude of appreciation is expressed in two ways: a positive assessment based on quality and one based on impact. In addition, a judgment attitude is realized via propriety to prevent lawlessness in Gambia.

Excerpt 8

> Most of the instances of inter-communal and inter-religious strife and violence were and are still as a result of sponsorship or *incitements* [judgment: negative assessment by reference to reaction quality by ethnic, political or religious leaders hoping to benefit by exploiting our divisions and fault lines, thereby weakening our country (12th June, 2019).

Without mincing words, the President bluntly stated that the causes of anarchy among the six geo-political zones in Nigeria are to be blamed on the political and religious leaders at the detriment of the poor masses. However, the attitude of negative judgment is evident in the president's incitement. The words and phrases used to realize this negative judgment include; ''incitements, exploiting our divisions and fault lines, thereby weakening our country''. The judgment reveals the negative effect of the hate speech our leaders used to incite the people in dealing with one another.

Excerpt 9

> It is *sad* [affect: positive assessment via emotional feeling of sadness] that in the course of securing our democracy, some of your colleagues have had to pay a heavy price. (2020)

The President expresses an emotional feeling of sadness (affect) for some of our journalists who are killed in their duty post. They are an effective watchdog for securing our

democracy, especially those in public office. This becomes certain when they have concrete and accurate evidence of a particular issue.

Excerpt 10

> It is a day to *honor* [appreciative: positive] our founding fathers who *toiled to establish* our republic and every Nigerian who has *worked tirelessly to sustain* it. We are *celebrating* [appreciative: positive] this year Democracy Day despite the COVID nineteen pandemic which afflicts our nation and the whole world (12th June, 2020).

The President is appreciative, despite the unanticipated COVID-19 pandemic having taken its toll on the people. He is grateful to the founding fathers who have worked hard to keep the country going. He positively appreciated their use of the following phrases: 'toiled to establish', 'honor', and 'worked tirelessly to sustain'. He believed that if not for the founding fathers keeping Nigerians together, he would not be where he is now.

Excerpt 11

> I *regret recent sporadic incidents with tragic loss* [judgment: negative] of lives in Kastina and Borno States as a result of criminals taking advantage of COVID-19 restrictions. Security Agencies will *pursue the perpetrators and bring them swift justice* [judgment: positive]. (12th June, 2020)

The excerpt highlighted above is a judgmental verbal phrase that assesses the behaviour of the President and the Security Agencies. The President was not happy about the Boko Haram and banditry attacks on the people of Kastina and Borno States, which resulted in the tragic loss of lives. It implies that these criminals have been attacking the people and that the Security Agencies have been defending them, but this was a sudden attack that led to the loss of lives. Nevertheless, the Security Agencies were ordered to arrest the perpetrators and bring them to book.

Excerpt 12

> Once again, I want to render my sincere and heartfelt *condolences* [appreciation: snegative assessment by reference to reaction quality] to the families and friends of our gallant servicemen and women who lost their lives in the line of duty and as a sacrifice to keep Nigeria safe. I extend the same *condolence* [appreciation: negative assessment by reference to reaction quality] to the families and friends of our countrymen, women and children who were unfortunate victims of such senseless arsons, kidnappings and murders. I also share the *pains* [affect: negative via emotional reaction of dissatisfaction] of families and direct victims of ransom-seeking, kidnapped victims who went through unimaginable trauma in the course of their forced imprisonment. Let me assure my fellow citizens that every incident, however minor gives me great worry and concern and I immediately *order* [judgment: positive assessment by reference to social sanction, veracity] *security agencies* to swiftly but safely rescue victims and bring perpetrators to justice. (12th June, 2021)

These sincere heartfelt condolences are expected from the President who commiserates with the families and friends of our servicemen who lost their lives to keep Nigeria safe. Although they have passed on, their memories remain with their families and friends. The families and friends of our kidnapped victims were not left out in this traumatic experience. This excerpt shows a negative appreciation reaction to the quality and a negative emotional

reaction that is dissatisfactory about kidnapped victims who went through unimaginable trauma at the hands of their abductors. However, the order for security agents to be proactive is a genuine, positive judgment. Therefore, language is used by the president to express his feelings, ideas and emotions to the public in order to seek their support

Excerpt 13

> In the last two years we have witnessed and overcome a good number of testy challenges that would have destroyed other nations especially relating to our collective security. The indefatigable CAN DO Spirit of the Nigerian has sustained us and would keep pushing us to put these challenges behind us. Unfortunately some of these challenges came in the shape of violent outrages leading *to the loss of lives of many of our dear compatriots* and the *destruction of some of our infrastructure,* including those *devoted to improving our democratic processes* [judgment: negative assessment of capacity]. (12th June, 2021)

The first two lines are a positive appreciation. The President praised Nigerians for how resilient they are in the face of challenges, and a challenge which could have destroyed other countries. As a true leader, he encouraged the people to continue to forge ahead, except for an outrage which led to the death of our compatriots and loss of properties; we were supposed to have been forging ahead. However, the judgment attitude via assessment of capacity is realized by these words: 'the loss of lives of many of our dear comsspatriots, and destruction of some of our infrastructure'.

5. Findings of the Study

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Attitude subsystem of the Appraisal theory, as developed by Martins and White (2005), provides an effective framework for creating clarity in the evaluative meaning of political discourse. The analysis of Muhammadu Buhari's Democracy Day speeches indicates that the language of evaluation is deliberately deployed to construct political legitimacy, national unity, emotional solidarity and ideological positioning.

One major finding is the use of appreciation to frame national unity, achievements, government policies, and historic contributions. Positive Appreciation is used to highlight progress as seen in the speeches with the use of lexical items like "huge flows," "won," "can be proud". The aforementioned celebrate unity and national identity, and frame government initiatives as successful. This is supported by Fairclough's (2015) argument that political leaders use language not merely to communicate information but to shape social realities and sustain power relations. On the other hand, Negative. Appreciation appears when acknowledging crises (economic decline, insecurity) and expressing sympathy (condolences, for tragic events). This supports Van Dijk's (2018) view that ideological discourse is usually operational through the strategic emphasis on positive presentation while carefully managing negative realities. This indicates that Appreciation is central in constructing narratives about the state of the nation, allowing the President to balance realism with optimism.

The study further uncovers the use of Affect primarily to express personal emotions ("happy," "sad"), build emotional connection with citizens, show empathy during crises and inspire hope and unity. Positive Affect: "happy," "peace," "hope" are used to inspire confidence, while the Negative Affect: "sad," "pains" is used to express empathy and concern. This suggests that Affect is carefully controlled, avoiding excessive emotionality

while still being relatable. Thus, this finding supports the argument that political speeches rely heavily on emotional appeal to foster solidarity between leaders and citizens, as pointed out by Hobolt, Osnabrugge & Rodon (2021).

Another key finding is the simultaneous use of positive and negative evaluations within the same discourse. For example: Acknowledging challenges (negative Judgment/Appreciation) immediately followed by optimism or solutions (positive Attitude). This pattern serves to present the President as realistic (acknowledging problems) and maintain authority (offering solutions and hope). Thus, the speeches construct a balanced narrative of crisis and control.

The study further suggests that Buhari's speeches frequently use evaluative language to construct a collective national identity: Nigerians are portrayed as resilient, strong, and cooperative. References to history and global contributions reinforce pride. This supports Anderson's (2006) concept of the nation as an "imagined community" constructed partly through shared narratives and symbolic language. Through this, the President uses language to promote unity in a multi-ethnic society and encourage collective responsibility. In this regard, the speeches function not only as political communication but also as nation-building instruments.

A recurring pattern is the use of negative Judgment to assign responsibility for national problems to past administrations, criminal elements, political and religious leaders. This shifts accountability away from the current administration and frames challenges as inherited or externally caused. Through negative Affect and Appreciation (e.g., condolences, sadness), the President aligns emotionally with victims of violence

Overall, the speeches show a predominantly positive evaluative orientation, characterized by Positive Judgment of self and administration, positive Appreciation of national efforts. Negative evaluations are present but carefully framed, often redirected toward external factors. This reflects a strategic optimism typical of political leadership discourse.

5.1 Conclusion

The study has established that the Attitude sub-system of Appraisal Theory provides a valuable analytical framework for examining evaluative meaning in political discourse. Through the analysis of President Muhammadu Buhari's Democracy Day Speeches, the study provides evidence that evaluative language plays an important role in framing political identity, legitimizing governance, managing public perception and the promotion of national unity.

The findings indicate that appreciation is used extensively to shape government achievements, democratic progress and national identity positively while also acknowledging crises and societal challenges. Affect is strategically employed to create emotional solidarity with citizens, especially during periods of insecurity and national tragedy, whereas judgment functions to evaluate political actors, assign responsibility, and reinforce ideological positioning.

The study confirms that political speeches are not neutral communicative acts but ideologically loaded texts shaped by persuasive intentions. Evaluative language provides room for political leaders to influence public attitudes, justify policies and negotiate accountability. Therefore, the study contributes to existing scholarship in political discourse analysis, Systemic Functional Linguistics, and Appraisal Theory by investigating how linguistic evaluation functions as a strategic resource in Nigerian presidential

discourse. Thus, future studies may extend this research by comparing evaluative patterns across the speeches of different Nigerian presidents and examining other subsystems of Appraisal Theory, such as Engagement and Graduation.

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