A Socio-Cognitive Critical Discourse Analysis of Peter Obi's "Our Democracy is the Victim" Speech

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Abstract

Political discourse is a vehicle for shaping public perception, influencing collective ideologies, and fostering unity or division within a society. This is especially true in a country like Nigeria, marked by diverse ethno-cultural and political affinities. This study examines the complex connection between Peter Obi's linguistic choices, the ideologies they reflect, and their potential to either bridge divides or exacerbate tensions within Nigeria's democratic sphere. With insights from Teun van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the analysis of Obi's "Our Democracy is the Victim" speech reveals five principal linguistic strategies. These are inclusive pronouns, quantifiers, references to national interest, appeals to shared moral and democratic values, and references to shared national spaces. Together, they construct national unity. These strategies position Obi and his audience as members of a single national community, bridging ethnic and religious divides. Some expressions, however, carry a latent divisiveness. Obi mitigates this through appeals to compassion and the common good. The speech thus constructs national unity as a strategic, and at points negotiated, achievement. It also functions as a tool of political legitimation.

Introduction

Political discourse is a powerful means for shaping public perception, influencing collective ideologies and fostering unity or division within a society. In Nigeria, the language of political leaders often carries profound implications for national cohesion and democratic ideals. Peter Obi, a prominent Nigerian politician and former presidential candidate, delivered his speech titled "Our Democracy is the Victim" in the context of Nigeria's evolving political climate. In his speech, he addressed critical issues of governance, electoral integrity and societal values. His speech provides a rich text for examining how language serves as a tool for ideology and unity in a democratic setting. This study illuminates how Obi constructs narratives of unity and critiques democratic shortcomings. It offers insights into the broader interplay of language, power and identity in contemporary Nigerian politics.

This study uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to make explicit the connection between Obi's linguistic choices and the ideologies they reflect. It also examines their potential to either bridge divides or underscore tensions within Nigeria's democratic sphere. The research examines how Peter Obi's "Our Democracy is the Victim" speech reflects and constructs the concept of unity through language. This is to determine whether the speech is a genuine appeal for societal cohesion or a strategic ideological tool.

Social and Political Conditions in Nigeria

Nigeria's socio-political landscape is closely tied to its colonial and post-independence history, which has significantly shaped its national unity. The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914 by the British colonial administration created a single entity. It also set the stage for ethnic and regional disparities that continue to challenge Nigeria's unity. In the words of Sam Oyovbaire, the amalgamation of Nigeria has been extensively discussed, covering its political, economic and social implications. In brief, Nigeria's amalgamation was primarily driven by British colonial interests. It was tailored to solidify their economic control and prevent rival European

powers from expanding their influence in the region. Notably, this amalgamation did not unify colonial policies or establish an integrated administration, but rather served British imperialist objectives (10).

Following independence in 1960, Nigeria faced immediate challenges to its unity. These culminated in the Nigerian Civil War (1967 to 1970), also known as the Biafran War. According to Abdul Mustapha, the Biafran secessionist movement and the subsequent civil war posed a challenge for radicals seeking to promote Nigerian unity and progress, despite differences within the ruling class. To achieve this, radicals had to move beyond a mindset still shaped by the tragic events of the past. The experience of Biafra showed that radical groups still harboured chauvinistic feelings. These feelings had to be overcome for them to truly contribute to Nigeria's unity and progress (91). The war's aftermath saw efforts to foster unity, such as the establishment of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) in 1973, which requires graduates to serve in different parts of the country to promote cultural exchange and understanding.

Nigeria's ethnic and religious diversity is a central factor in its socio-political conditions and challenges to unity. With over 250 ethnic groups, including major ones like the Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, and a religious divide between the predominantly Muslim North and Christian South, these identities often lead to competition for political power and resources. This competition has led to stark ethnic disparities in federal civil service hiring. Widespread exclusion from federal initiatives, along with other social, economic and political inequities, has fuelled unrest. As a result, numerous indigenous groups have emerged to express the frustrations of the Igbo people. Among the most prominent of these are the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) (Chigozie 28).
Religious differences further complicate unity. The reintroduction of Sharia law in 12 northern states in 1999 has been contentious. The law reflects the divide between Islamic and secular governance models. Incidents like the blasphemy case in Kano in April 2022, which resulted in a 24-year sentence, underscore ongoing religious tensions. Security threats also pose significant challenges to national unity. The Boko Haram insurgency, which began in 2009, is rooted in socio-political grievances, including the marginalisation of Islamic education and economic disparities in the North. The group’s activities have caused widespread violence, strained national resources, and deepened regional mistrust, undermining unity. Following the 2007 general elections in Nigeria, extensive violence erupted, mirroring patterns seen in prior elections.

The country continues to face widespread ethno-religious conflicts today. Militancy has evolved into a terrorist and regional movement widely known as Boko Haram. Corruption remains pervasive and almost systemic. Nigeria is consistently listed among the world's most corrupt countries, with mismanagement hampering its progress in numerous areas. Factors such as terrorism, militancy, inconsistent and fragile policies, corruption, and insufficient education have created an unfavourable investment environment. Despite efforts to draw foreign direct investment, these factors have prompted existing industries to shift operations to Ghana and other regions (Olayinka 33). Weak governance and pervasive corruption remain significant socio-political conditions affecting Nigeria's unity. Corruption, with Nigeria often ranked among the world's most corrupt nations, erodes trust in institutions and exacerbates socio-economic inequalities. Nigeria’s socio-political conditions significantly affect its national unity. Historical legacies, ethnic and religious diversity, governance challenges, and security threats together create a complex environment. Policies such as the Federal Character Principle, the NYSC and unity schools have been implemented to foster cohesion. However, persistent issues such as corruption, ethnic rivalry and economic disparities continue to pose challenges.

Methodology

The study is descriptive and interpretative. The data consist of the full text of Peter Obi's "Our Democracy is the Victim" speech, sourced from https://www.vanguardngr.com, a reliable and verifiable source. The study employs a structured Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, guided by Teun van Dijk's socio-cognitive model. This framework offers a consistent springboard for analysing the interaction of language, ideology, and social context in the speech.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Teun van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). It provides a robust and multidimensional theoretical lens for analysing Peter Obi's "Our Democracy is the Victim" speech. This approach is chosen because it posits that the relationship between discourse and society is cognitively mediated. This means that social interactions, situations and structures influence text and talk only through people's interpretations of their social environment. Critical Discourse Analysis is a contemporary, multidisciplinary approach that addresses a large number of social problems. CDA, an offshoot of Discourse Analysis, posits that language is never neutral. Instead, it reflects and shapes our social selves, relationships, and belief systems (Ayoola qtd. in Taiwo 2). Many people's social backgrounds often influence their language use and attitudes, which are then reflected in their discourse style. Correspondingly, social issues are manifested through language. According to Taiwo, language is never used in isolation. It is always embedded within a broader linguistic framework that mirrors the dominant social, cultural and ideological contexts (220).

Central to van Dijk's framework is the idea that the connection between language, discourse and society is filtered through people's thoughts, perceptions and interpretations (64). This perspective distinguishes itself from traditional linguistic analyses. It foregrounds social cognition, the mental models that connect individual interpretations to collective ideologies. As such, it offers a nuanced tool for dissecting political rhetoric. Discourse patterns and social structures are separate entities that can only be connected through the mental frameworks and interpretations of individuals or groups who use language (van Dijk vii). This means that social contexts, situations and structures can only shape language and communication indirectly, through the ways individuals perceive and make sense of their social surroundings. According to van Dijk, CDA examines how language and communication are used to exercise power, perpetuate inequality, and assert dominance, as well as how individuals and groups resist and challenge these dynamics in social and political contexts (353).

In line with the above, Ikenna Kamalu and Ayo Osisanwo note that CDA draws on societal context, as it focuses on social and political issues. The scholars add that CDA aims to challenge social injustices, uncover hidden social problems, and confront how these issues impact individuals and society as a whole (190). In Wodak's words, CDA primarily examines how language reflects and reinforces social hierarchies. It focuses on the subtle and overt ways power, control, discrimination and dominance are embedded in and exercised through language (2). Wodak similarly emphasised the role of discourse in power and ideology.

In contrast, van Dijk's integration of cognitive dimensions addresses the mind, memory, and the cognitive processes involved in discourse production and comprehension (66). In the context of this study, this approach is particularly relevant for unpacking how Obi's speech constructs unity and ideology within Nigeria's pluralistic socio-political sphere. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach is highly suited to this study because it bridges the linguistic construction of unity and ideology with their cognitive uptake and social implications. It provides a dynamic way to explore not only what Obi says but also how his words shape thought and reflect power in Nigeria's complex socio-political sphere.

Data Presentation and Analysis

TEXT 1

> If there is one thing that has immensely gladdened my heart in the course of the struggle of the past 18 months, it is the passionate desire of our people, especially our young people across ethnic and religious divides, to build a new, restructured Nigeria that works for all Nigerians. That goal remains my guiding light and abiding inspiration.

Table 1

LINGUISTIC FEATURES	TEXT	SUMMARY
Inclusive Pronouns	*our people*	Obi emphasises unity across divides and a shared goal for all.
Emphasis on Diversity and Unity	*young people from across ethnic and religious divides*	He acknowledges Nigeria's diversity but emphasises unity in purpose. This linguistic choice highlights the transcendence of traditional divides and promotes an ideology of inclusivity.
Significant Goal for All	*to construct a new and restructured Nigeria that will work for all Nigerians*	Obi presents a goal that benefits everyone, reinforcing equality and national cohesion.
Personal Commitment	*That goal remains my guiding light and abiding inspiration*	Obi uses emotional and metaphorical language to reinforce their dedication to unity.

Obi constructs a mental model where the past 18 months are marked by struggle. Within this, however, there is a positive model of the people, especially the youth, united in their desire for a restructured Nigeria. This model is shared with the audience to promote hope and collective action. The text assumes the audience is aware of Nigeria's ethnic and religious divides, as well as its ongoing struggles, including the economic and security challenges documented in recent reports. Obi expresses a positive attitude towards the Nigerian youth's passion and the goal of unity. He uses emotional language, such as *'immeasurably gladdened my heart*,' and a *passionate desire* to connect with the audience. The underlying ideology is one of inclusivity and progress, where unity across divides is seen as essential for a better Nigeria. This challenges existing power structures that may prompt conflict and division. It aligns with van Dijk's focus on discourse as a tool for social change.

The text addresses power dynamics by calling for a new, restructured Nigeria, indicating dissatisfaction with the current system. This critiques dominant narratives that may maintain ethnic or religious divisions for political gain. The focus on the Nigerian youth shows they are seen as a force for change. In this sense, the youth are challenging older, established power structures. This aligns with van Dijk's analysis of how elite discourse can legitimise or reproduce dominance, as seen in his work on parliamentary debates.

Obi uses this discourse to gain support and possibly legitimise his leadership, while also addressing calls for restructuring that have been prominent in Nigerian politics, as seen in recent youth movements and political debates. His utterances are directed towards maintaining or challenging inequalities. The text's potential to challenge inequalities lies in its call for a system that works for all. However, without tangible reforms, it risks being perceived as mere rhetoric, especially given Nigeria's history of unfulfilled promises.

TEXT 2

> As someone who has previously benefited from the rulings of the Supreme Court on electoral matters, I have, after a period of deep and sober reflection, decide to personally and formally react to the recent judgment as most Nigerians have. Because we are confronted with very weighty issues of national interest, I will speak forthrightly. As students, young lads at CKC, Onisha, we were taught values, and admonished to always "choose the harder right, instead of the easier wrong."

Table 2

LINGUISTIC FEATURES	TEXT	SUMMARY
Inclusive Pronouns	*we are confronted, we were taught*	Creates collective identity, fosters togetherness
Quantifiers	*most Nigerians have*	Suggests majority consensus, aligns with public
National Interest Reference	*very weighty issues of national interest*	Frames issues as collective concern
Significance	*choose the harder right, instead of the easier wrong*	Appeals to common moral and educational background

Obi's use of past Supreme court rulings depicts his knowledge of the legal and electoral system. It creates an understanding of the recent judgment. The description of issues as weighty and of national interest, along with his decision to speak forthrightly, demonstrates a serious and patriotic attitude. This conforms to a cognitive model that prioritises national welfare. The moral lesson from his school days also indicates an ideology of principled action, even when difficult. This ideology is presented as significant. It resonates with many Nigerians, thereby reinforcing unity through a common ethical framework.

Obi's alignment with most Nigerians and his emphasis on national interest reflect a discourse aimed at rallying collective support. He positions Nigerians within the national conversation. This aligns with van Dijk's view that discourse structures relate to social structures via cognitive mediation, promoting unity in response to a collective national challenge. There is tension in the expression *choose the harder right, instead of the easier wrong.* Most Nigerians reacted similarly, indicating that the harder right is socially accepted. This potentially contradicts the idea of it being difficult. However, it can also be interpreted as Obi justifying his stance by appealing to a moral principle, emphasising unity through collective principled action.

TEXT 3

> In disagreeing very strongly with the ruling of both the Presidential Petitions Court (PEPC) and the Supreme Court on the outcome of the February 25 2023 Presidential election as declared by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), as democrats who believe in the rule of law, we recognise that the Supreme Court is the

end stage of the quest for legal closure to the matter. As a party and as a candidate, Datti and I have now exhausted all legal and constitutional remedies available to us. However, this end is only another beginning in our quest for the vindication of the hope of the common man for a better country. After all, sovereignty belongs to the people! If only for historical purposes, it behooves us to place our disagreement with and deep reservations about this judgment on public record.

Table 3

LINGUISTIC FEATURES	TEXT	SUMMARY
Inclusive Pronouns	*our quest for the vindication of the hope of the common man for a better country, as democrats who believe in the rule of law, we recognise*	Creates collective identity, goal, fosters togetherness
Quantifiers	*as democrats*	Suggests majority consensus, aligns with public
National Interest Reference	*the hope of the common man for a better country*	Frames issues as collective concern
Significance	*sovereignty belongs to the people*	Appeals to common moral and democratic background

Obi's invocation of the common man's hope for a better country indicates a desire for a better future for all Nigerians, regardless of their differences. His use of *sovereignty on behalf of the people* reinforces the notion that power resides with Nigerians. This signals a sense of unity and possession. Again, Obi's use of 'our' and *'better country*' in his quest to vindicate the hope of the common man shows a collective purpose, giving rise to a sense of national unity. Despite the unity perceived in Obi's utterances, there may be a possible tension in the expression *'disagreeing very strongly' with the ruling*. This could be seen as divisive, or as challenging the legitimacy of the Supreme Court's decision. However, Obi tempers this by recognising the Supreme Court's finality. He frames his continued quest as being *for the common good*, which suggests a balanced approach to unity.

TEXT 4

Our commitment is to a nation anchored in the principles of prudent resource management to quickly pull millions out of multidimensional poverty, ensuring transparency and accountability in the equitable distribution of opportunities, resources, and privileges. In the new Nigeria, we aim to address all unmet needs by showing compassion for all those left behind by the present system.

Table 4

LINGUISTIC FEATURES	*TEXT*	SUMMARY
Inclusive Pronouns	*our commitment, we aim*	Creates collective identity, fosters togetherness
Quantifiers	*all unmet needs, all those left behind*	Suggests comprehensive inclusion, aligns with public
National Interest Reference	*nation, new Nigeria, multidimensional poverty*	Frames issues as collective concern
Significance	*Prudent management, transparency, equitable distribution*	Appeals to common moral and governance background

Obi's mention of multidimensional poverty indicates a knowledge of development issues that shapes his understanding of national challenges. His commitment to transparency and accountability, and his compassion, reflect a serious and patriotic attitude. This aligns with a cognitive model that prioritises national welfare. The focus on equity and compassion reveals an ideology of social justice which resonates with many Nigerians. It reinforces unity through a common ethical framework. Obi addresses the state of the nation while proposing a new Nigeria. His acknowledgement of unmet needs and his emphasis on national interest reflect a discourse aimed at rallying collective support. He positions Nigerians within the national conversation. This aligns with van Dijk's view that discourse structures relate to social structures through cognitive mediation.

While Obi's utterances primarily promote unity, there is tension in the expression of *those left behind by the present system.* This identifies a specific group, possibly creating disunity. However, Obi's expression of compassion and his commitment to addressing their needs mitigate this. His voice here indicates inclusivity rather than exclusivity.

TEXT 5

> We are glad that the nation has heard us loud and clear. We shall now expand the confines of our message of hope to the rest of the country. We shall meet the people in the places where they feel pain and answer their needs for hope. At marketplaces, motor parks, town halls, boardrooms, and university and college campuses, we all carry and deliver the message of a new Nigeria. We shall remain loyal to our manifesto. We shall continue to canvass for good governance and focus on issues that promote national interest, unity and cohesion. We will continue to give primacy to our constitution, the rule of law and the protection of ordered liberties.

Table 5

LINGUISTIC FEATURES	TEXT	SUMMARY
Inclusive Pronouns	*we are glad, we all carry*	Creates collective identity, fosters togetherness
Quantifiers	*the rest of the country, we all*	Suggests broad inclusion, aligns with public
National Interest Reference	*national interest, unity and cohesion, new Nigeria*	Frames goals as collective concern
Significance	*Good governance, rule of law, our constitution*	Appeals to common ethical and political background
Geographical Inclusivity	*Marketplaces, motor parks, town halls, boardrooms*	Bridges social divides, unites diverse groups

Obi's references to diverse venues and issues, such as governance, indicate knowledge of Nigeria's social and political landscape, which shapes his approach to national challenges. The positive tone of his message of hope and his commitment to addressing people's needs reflect an optimistic and empathetic attitude. The focus on unity and cohesion, the rule of law and good governance reveals an ideology of democratic inclusivity. The above text addresses the outcomes of the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. Obi emphasises meeting people where they feel pain and promoting *national interest, unity and cohesion.* This reflects a discourse aimed at healing divides and rallying collective support. It aligns with van Dijk's view that discourse relates to social structures through cognitive mediation, promoting unity amid national challenges. The expression *the nation has heard us loud and clear* implies a division between *us* and others who have not heard. However, the subsequent phrase *we all carry* allays this by indicating an expansion of *us* to encompass the entire nation.

Conclusion

Across the five texts, four recurring linguistic strategies construct Obi's narrative of national unity. Inclusive pronouns such as *'our people' recognise* and build a shared identity between the speaker and his audience. Quantifiers such as *most Nigerians, all unmet needs* and *the rest of the country* extend this identity to the whole nation, suggesting consensus and comprehensive inclusion. References to national interest, including *unity and cohesion and the hope of the common man for a better country,* frame Obi's political concerns as collective rather than partisan. Appeals to shared moral, democratic, and governance values, such as *sovereignty belonging to the people and choosing the harder right over the easier wrong*, ground the call for unity in principles that resonate widely with Nigerians. In Text 5, geographical references to marketplaces, motor parks, town halls, and university campuses further extend this inclusivity across social and regional divides. These linguistic features are not isolated. They form a narrative structure that begins with Obi's emotional response to the political struggle, moves through appeals to shared values and national interest, and ends with a reaffirmation of commitment to unity. This structure makes the message persuasive and memorable.

Read through van Dijk's socio-cognitive perspective, these features show that national unity in Obi's speech is constructed through inclusive language, common values and alignment with public sentiment, rather than through explicit ethnic or religious appeals. They reflect cognitive structures of knowledge, attitudes and ideologies that resonate with the Nigerian social context. These structures are strategically deployed to influence public perception and mobilise support for unity, particularly in the aftermath of Nigeria's contested 2023 presidential election.

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