Declaratory Illocutionary Acts as Language of Democracy in Nigeria: A Pragmatic Exploration

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Abstract
In this paper, we examine the roles of context and background knowledge in the interpretation of language in use. In pragmatics, the suitability or otherwise of a given speech act for a particular context is dependent on the pragmatic presuppositions, that is, the assumptions and beliefs about the context or the background of the conversation, which could be shared beliefs (Mutual Contextual Beliefs) or background information. In this regard, we identify three declaratory illocutionary acts - Aso Rock’s declaration of Vice President Atiku’s seat vacant; President Obasanjo’s declaration of the April polls as a ‘do-or-die affair’; INEC’s disqualification of Atiku from contesting the presidential election - and examine their pragmatic presuppositions. The result of the analysis points to the politicians’ choice of declaratory illocutionary acts, whose illocutionary force generates certain perlocutionary effects that violate the pragmatic presuppositions of such speech acts. In other words, the arbitrary and dictatorial underpinnings of such speech acts render them unsuitable for the socio-political context of a democratizing nation such as Nigeria. The nation’s democratic project can hardly be said to be on course given the politicians’ penchant for declaratory illocutionary acts, whose perlocutionary acts are inherently antithetical to the conceptual and practical content of constitutional democracy as a system of government. In the light of the foregoing, the paper calls for temperance in the use of language by the politicians and stresses the need for them to resist the allurements of investing the nation’s brand of democracy with institutional regimentation, command structure and barrack mentality, which are best consigned to the dustbin of history as fossilized shibboleths of military rule.
1. **Background**

The Obasanjo-Atiku feud came to a climax in the later part of 2006 with Atiku’s open declaration to contest the 2007 presidential elections on the platform of Action Congress. Following this development, Mallam Uba Sani, President Obasanjo’s official spokesman issued a statement declaring the Vice President’s seat vacant. “By his action, he has ceased to be the VP,” Sani said, citing section 146 of the Nigerian Constitution as the basis for the action. According to Adegbamige & Mukwuzi (2007: 22), “the special Adviser, who left no one in doubt that he had the backing of the President for his pronouncements, went on to declare that “… all necessary action would be taken to take the office away from him since he is no longer a member of the ruling PDP…” The Federal Government followed this up with its 27 December 2006 suit at the Appeal Court, in which it urged the court to restrain Atiku from parading himself as the Vice President and declared that Atiku had lost both legal and moral rights to remain in office, having renounced his membership of the PDP, the platform he used to become the Vice President in 2003. On his part, Atiku filed a counter suit the same day, asking the court to, among other things, restrain the President from effecting his removal as Vice President; determine whether the President can, by virtue of the provisions of Sections 142, 143, 144, and 146 of the 1999 Constitution or any other law declare the seat or office of the Vice President vacant; whether the President can, by virtue of the provisions of the Sections or any other law, declare the seat of office of the Vice President vacant other than upon a determination of such office and terms in accordance with the provisions of sections 143 and 144 of the Constitution that has to do with terms of removal. However, the Federal Government took steps to withdraw the case on Monday, 8 January 2007 through a notice of discontinuance of the suit field on its behalf by Chief Afe Babalola, (SAN) before it came up for hearing at Abuja Court of Appeal on Wednesday 11 January 2007.

As the simmering political subterfuge and maneuverings smoldered on both sides of the widening political divide, President Obasanjo declared at a political rally on 10 February 2007 that the April general election was a ‘do-or-die affair for the PDP and Nigeria’. In his attempt to play down the ‘verbal indiscretions’ of Mr. President and possibly douse the ensuing controversy generated by the presidential outbursts, Chief Tony Anenih, PDP Chairman of Board of Trustees was quoted as saying, “… Politics is a do-or-die game. If I lose election in Edo State, have I not died politically? If Obasanjo loses election in Ogun State, has he not died politically? If PDP loses the presidential election, has it not died politically?” In spite of the generic effects of the inflammatory statement on the already over-heated polity and the resultant public and voluble media criticisms, the President, notes Sanyaolu (2007:55), “insisted on his words and even repeated it. Now, the politicians all over the country,” continues Sanyaolu, “are conducting themselves in a do-or-die manner, unleashing terror and mayhem on law-abiding citizens.” As if to lend official credence to the combatant disposition of President Obasanjo towards the April polls, which he aptly code-named ‘operation totality’, the Inspector General of Police, Mr. Sunday Ehindero disclosed, while delivering a paper at a seminar on security organized by the Lagos branch of the Nigerian Union of Journalists that “an armada of arms and ammunitions had been procured to boost the capacity of his
men to firmly contain cases of insecurity in any part of the country during the
telectioneering period.” The acquisition, according to Odion (2007: 56), includes 40,000
pieces of Ak-47 rifles with 20 million rounds of bullets.” The Police Chief further added
that order had been placed for more bulletproof vests, helmets as well as arms and
ammunitions of other species. This startling disclosure coming after official designation
of a Party as a ‘garrison’ by the PDP Chairman, Senator Ahmadu Alli and declaration of
the April polls as a ‘do-or-die affair’, Odion averred that Nigerians ‘can only shudder in
fright’. According to Ayorinde (2007: 30), the Obasanjo’s gospel of do-or-die politics
has already caught on like a harmattan fire, spreading campaign violence nationwide as
thuggery and attacks on political opponents and all this has put the 2007 elections in
danger. In his words, “barely a month to the 2007 elections, politicians seem to be
playing true to President Olusegun Obasanjo’s description of the election as a do-or-die
affair, with violent combustions across the country.” Apart from the infernal clashes
reported in Ogun, Kwara, Lagos, Ondo, Oyo States, the campaigns carried out in the true
spirit of do-or-die politics by supporters of PDP and AC in Nasarrawa State left about
fifty people dead on 31 March 2007 as reported by the Daily Champion Newspaper in its
Tuesday 3 April 2007 issue. Meanwhile, the Vice President and the presidential flag
bearer of Action Congress had earlier alerted the nation and the international community
of Aso Rock’s N1100 Billion secret arms deal meant to serve as a final solution to the

In March 2007, the INEC released a list of presidential candidates of various
political parties qualified to participate in the April polls. By excluding Atiku’s name in
the list, INEC disqualified him from contesting the presidential polls. The Electoral body
stated that its decision was predicated on the section of the ruling which states that
“sections 137 and 182 of the 1999 Constitution also contain provisions that ab initio
disqualify an intending candidate aspiring to the office of the president and governor
respectively.” Quoting from section 147 (1) of the Constitution, INEC Chairman,
Professor Iwu noted that “a person shall not be qualified for election to the office of the
president if he has been indicated for embezzlement or fraud by a Judicial Commission of
Inquiry or an Administrative Panel of Inquiry or a Tribunal set up under the Tribunal of
Inquiry Act, a Tribunal of Inquiry Law or any other law by the Federal or
State Government respectively.” Sequel to INEC’s decision, a team of five Senior Advocates,
filed a suit on behalf of Atiku and Action Congress at the Federal High Court in Abuja,
applying for the determination of whether INEC has the constitutional right without
recourse to a court of law to disqualify Vice President Atiku from contesting the
presidential polls. Coincidentally, on 3 April 2007, two different courts sitting at Abuja
delivered conflicting judgments on Atiku’s disqualification by INEC. The Court of
Appeal, Abuja ruled that INEC is constitutionally empowered under Paragraph 15, 3rd
Schedule, Part 1 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 to organize,
undertake and supervise elections; it also has the constitutional authority to screen any
candidate and to take decisions on qualification and disqualification. On its own part, an
Abuja Federal High Court ruled that INEC has no authority or right to disqualify any
candidate; that the authority to disqualify a candidate vests with the court and not with
INEC. The electoral body chose to uphold the judgment of the appellant court, noting that
unless the Supreme Court decides otherwise, Atiku was not a candidate in the presidential election taking place on Saturday, April 2007. Atiku headed for the Supreme Court, which in its judgment, on Monday 16 April 2007, ruled that INEC is not constitutionally empowered to disqualify any candidate for the elections.

These three different but related events couched in speech acts, which could be viewed from the theoretical prism of pragmatics as declaratory illocutionary acts, form the focus of this paper. Specifically, we shall analyze the three speech acts - declaration of the office of the Vice President vacant; Obasanjo’s description of April polls as a do-or-die affair; and INEC’s disqualification of Atiku - from the theoretical perspective of pragmatics and determine the extent to which they impact on the nation’s evolving democratic governance. The value of such analysis would, perhaps, point to the importance of exercising a measure of restraint in the use of language by politicians such that it does not impinge negatively on Nigeria’s democracy.

2. Framework

In pragmatics, the notions of context, background knowledge, inference, and implicature play equally important roles in the interpretation of language in use. For any given speech event, there are certain basic assumptions, which the speaker needs to make concerning the hearer in relation to the subject matter on ground. Such assumptions are made without unnecessary objections from the interlocutors because they are built on an assumed common ground. In this regard, Osisanwo (2003: 85) identifies pragmatic presuppositions as the conditions required before a speech act can be considered suitable for a given context. In clearer terms, pragmatic presuppositions are assumptions and beliefs about the context or the information. A given speech event is characterized by a network of assumptions based on the three parts of communication - speaker, hearer, context. Closely related to this is, Bach and Harnish’s (1979) concept of Mutual Contextual Beliefs (MCBs). Usually, there are two parts to any given interlocution - the speaker’s intention and hearer’s inference - both of which are based on certain facts shared by them. Such facts, which are well known to both interlocutors and important for the encoding and decoding of messages, are what Bach and Harnish call Mutual Contextual Beliefs. According to Austin (1962), in every utterance a person performs an act such as stating a fact, stating an opinion, confirming or denying something, making a prediction or a request, asking a question, issuing an order, giving a permission, giving a piece of advice, making an offer, a wish or a promise, thanking or condoling someone. All these constitute speech acts. In spite of the disagreement of scholars on the number of speech act types (cf. Austin, 1962; Levin, 1977; Levinson, 1980; Allan, 1986), three types common to them are locutionary act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act. In terms of classification, scholars equally differ remarkably. For instance, Austin’s 5-way categorization into verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behavitives, declaratives differs from Searle’s (1969) categories of assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, declaratives. Allan’s (1986) more detailed classification principle has two major categories - (a) interpersonal illocutionary acts and (b) declaratory illocutionary acts. Included in the first group are speech acts used during interactions between speaker and hearer at the individual level. Under the declaratory illocutionary acts, hearer’s
interaction is not required for the speech act (usually performed by effective and verdictive performative verbs) to take effect. We have such expressives as baptizing, marrying, sacking, sentencing, naming, and verdictives such as casting verdicts, declaring decisions, umpiring and refereeing decisions, judging, vetoing, voting etc.

In this paper, we shall adopt the notions of context and background information to examine the declaratory illocutionary acts listed above and determine their suitability or otherwise in the socio-political context of contemporary Nigeria.

3. Pragmatic Analysis of the Speech Acts

3.1 The Context of Situation

Since the beginning of the 1970’s, linguists, according to Brown and Yule (1983:35), “…have become increasingly aware of the importance of context in the interpretation of sentences.” In addressing the methodological problem that confronts the discourse analysts as well as advocates of linguistic pragmatics, Sadock (1978) and Fillmore (1977) draw attention to the implications of taking context into account. According to Sadock (1978: 281), “given some aspects of what a sentence conveys in a particular context, is that aspect part of what the sentence conveys in virtue of its meaning… or should it be ‘worked out’ on the basis of Gricean principles from the rest of the meaning of the sentence and relevant facts of the context of utterance?” For Fillmore, the task of a discourse analysis is to “… determine what we can know about the meaning and context of an utterance given only the knowledge that the utterance has occurred…”

Firth (1957) also emphasizes the importance of context when he suggests that voices should not be entirely dissociated from the social context in which they function and that all texts in modern spoken languages should be regarded as having ‘the implication of utterance’, and be referred to typical participants in some generalized context of situation. He believes that the context of situation is best used as a suitable schematic construct to apply to language events, given that a context of situation for linguistic work brings into relation a number of categories like the relevant objects; the effect of the verbal action. In similar a vein, Dell Hymes’ (1962) approach, which emphasizes the importance of an ethnographic view of communicative events within speech communities, views the role of context in interpretation as, on one hand, limiting the range of possible interpretations and, on the other, as supporting the intended interpretation. In other words, when a form is used in a context, it eliminates the meanings possible to that context other than those the forms can signal: the context eliminates from consideration the meanings possible to the form other than those the context can support.

In the light of the central role, which the context of situation plays in interpreting language in use and determining the suitability of any given speech act, we shall examine the three speech acts earlier delineated as declaratory illocutionary acts within the context of Nigeria’s constitutional democracy. Democracy, as a political system, has often been described as ‘government of the people for the people and by the people’. Also, Onabanjo (2004) in Agbedo (2005: 20) sees the concept as “a political process that allows the plurality of political parties to ensure popular participation in the political decision making”. The US Information Agency Magazine listed some eleven principles, which it termed ‘The Pillars of Democracy’ as follows: sovereignty of the people, government
based upon consent of the governed, majority rule, minority rights, guarantee of basic human rights, free and fair elections, equality of the law, due process of law, constitutional limits on government, social, economic, and political pluralism, values of tolerance, pragmatism, cooperation, and compromise. In other words, democracy, like freedom, is opposed to arbitrariness, despotism, tyrannical, and autocratic rules. Its ultimate goal, notes Giovanni (1968) in Nwankwor (2004: 311), is “to minimize arbitrary and tyrannical rule and to maximize a pattern of civility rooted in respect and justice for each man, in short, to achieve a human polity.” Considered against the backdrop of the democratic context of situation, the three speech acts, (identified as declaratory illocutionary acts, which make use of effective and verdictive acts that do not require the hearer’s or addressee’s interaction to take effect), are grossly inappropriate. The declaration of the Vice President’s seat vacant, President Obasanjo’s dubbing of April polls as a do-or-die affair, and disqualification of Vice President Atiku in utter disregard of the explicit provisions of the Nigerian Constitution constitute speech acts, whose illocutionary force violate Austin’s felicity conditions and Gricean cooperative principles. They equally run counter to the basic relevant features of context, which Hymes’ ‘ethnography of speaking’ paradigm identifies for interpreting language in use and determining its suitability for a particular context.

3.2 Background Knowledge

According to Osisanwo (2003:82), the interpretation of language use is based to a large extent on our past experience and background knowledge. The knowledge we possess as users of a language concerning social interaction via language, as Brown and Yule (233) observe, is just one part of our general socio-cultural knowledge. This general knowledge about the world underpins the interpretation not only of discourse, but virtually every aspect of experience. As de Beaugrande (1980) in Brown and Yule notes, “the question of how people know what is going on in a text is a special case of the question of how people know what is going on in the world at all”. A number of meaningful attempts in psychological researches have been made to provide ways of representing knowledge stored in memory and how it relates to interpreting language in use. In this regard, researchers, notably Minsky (1975); Sanford & Garrod (1981); Schank & Abelson (1977); van Dijik (1981) have come up with such terms as frames, scenarios, scripts, schemata, mental models. The use of different terminology and considerations of different types of knowledge in these various research areas, rather than representing sets of competing theories, are seen by Brown and Yule (238) as alternative metaphors for the description of how knowledge of the world is organized in human memory, and how it is activated in the process of discourse understanding. One of the ways to represent the background knowledge, which is used in the production and understanding of discourse is found in Minsky’s (1975) frame-theory. Going by this theory, human knowledge is stored in the memory in the form of data structures, which Minsky calls ‘frames’, and which represent stereotyped situations. As a fixed representation of knowledge about the world, the notion of frame provides a process of fitting what one is told into the framework established by what one already knows.
To this effect, the background knowledge of democratic governance (or what we call ‘information in the human system’ and presented by the psychologists as ‘stored information from memory, which is related to an encountered language use) provides us the yardstick for interpreting language in use and determining the suitability of the declaratory illocutionary acts. According to Minnky’s frame-theory, when one encounters a new situation, one selects from memory a structure called a frame. Consider for instance, Mallam Sani Uba’s official statement, which announced Aso Rock’s decision to declare the seat of Vice President vacant and the subsequent suit filed at the Court of Appeal, Abuja by the Federal Government, urging the Court to restrain Atiku from parading himself as the Vice President of Nigeria. Naturally, the understanding of this received information by Alhaji Atiku and indeed all lovers of democracy can be described in terms of a Vice President’s tenure-frame, which has a slot that contains specifications about tenure and its termination. By implication, the specific issues raised in Sani’s official statement are expected to instantiate the stereotypic information slot in Atiku’s knowledge frame. In the process of fitting what Mallam Sani told him into the framework established by what he already knows about his tenure and its termination in a democratic setting, Alhaji Atiku experienced some difficulty. As Brown & Yule (240) observe, there are many situations in which discourse is produced where the intended audience can be expected, but not guaranteed, to have stereotypic knowledge of what is to be communicated. Discourse producer, such as Mallam Sani, makes his discourse reflect this fact, and present the information in a form, which serves as a reminder for those who already know and as an instruction for those who do not. For Atiku, it seemed that a substantial part of Sani’s frame, possibly incorporating a large number of sub-frames covering endless aspects of general stereotypic knowledge of a Vice President’s tenure and termination would have no function in his understanding of this piece of information. As Wilks (1979: 153) would say, ‘many frames are called, but few can be chosen’. To get around this problem of Sani’s activation of many frames, which were bereft of any utilitarian value, Atiku filed a counter-suit asking the Court to restrain the President from effecting his removal as Vice President.

In arriving at their unanimous ruling, the five judges relied on their specialized legal knowledge structures for coping with proper adjudication. In Minskyan terms, they went through the process of fitting the submissions of Atiku’s legal team into the framework established by what they already know about the Nigerian legal system. On the basis of this background knowledge, the Court ruled that the move to sack Atiku on account of his defection to the Action Congress, on whose platform he is contesting the presidency, was illegal. In pragmatic terms, the declaration of Atiku’s seat vacant by the Presidency’s spokesman, Mallam Sani, amounted to a counteractive presupposition. In other words, what he presupposed is not only untrue but also contrary to facts: the opposite of what is true. With the five judges sitting, the Appeal Court, according to Yusuf (2007: 23) “…unanimously agreed that Atiku must stay in office with Obasanjo till the expiration of their tenure on May 28, 2007.” While dismissing all the seven counter claims raised by the Presidency to the suit, the Court in its ruling, delivered by Justice Abadullah Umaru said, “Abubakar (Atiku) can only be removed if he qualifies as an employee of the President. He is not an employee of the President, but even if he is, it
is Nigerians who elected him into office’. Interpreting the section 142(1) of the Constitution, which provides that both the President and his Deputy must belong to the same political party, the Court disclosed that the section was only for the purpose of election. Once the election was over, as the court observed, “the bond that ties the President and the Vice President is loosened. The VP becomes the Vice President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and not of the party.” The landmark judgment, which was hailed by the Nigerian Bar Association, notes Adegbamigbe & Utomwen (2007: 19), “…finally put paid to any intention of the Federal Government to arrest or sack the Vice President”.

Viewed from the perspectives of context and background knowledge, the second speech act, which is credited to the President, Chief Obasanjo is also considered unsuitable for the context in which it was uttered. Specifically, Mr. President’s outbursts tended to violate the executive condition, which is one of the four aspects of Austin’s felicity conditions that an illocutionary act needs to meet before it can be considered to be felicitous. A speech act is said to meet the executive condition and therefore felicitous if it has been properly executed. Chief Obasanjo’s ‘do-or-die affair’ remarks are considered to be grossly inappropriate and quite unexpected of a person, occupying the exalted position of a President. This perhaps, explains the public umbrage at such executive recklessness. According to Akinfenwa (2007:25), “…the utterances (of President Obasanjo) have fallen under the sledgehammer of political analysts and commentators who see them as capable of derailing the electoral process… The Senators,” continues Akinfenwa, “have joined other Nigerians to condemn what they described as an unguarded comment of the Commander-in-Chief and Chief Security Officer of the country, especially on the April general elections, which he tagged ‘a do-or-die affair’ for himself and his party, PDP.” Also, the speech act does not tally with the background knowledge about democracy as a system of government, which emphasizes, inter alia, the encouragement of competitive party system, periodic free and fair elections based on universal franchise. Chief Obasanjo swore an oath of office, which does not permit him to make ‘reckless statements’ as a statesman, whose freedom of speech is not absolute. This informed a three-point resolution of the Senators, which drew the attention of Mr. President to the importance of transparency and strict compliance with the relevant sections of the electoral laws of Nigeria. As the resolution stated, “be it resolved, and it is hereby resolved that the Senate do urge Mr. President to desist from utterances, which raise doubts over the disposition of his administration to allow free and fair elections and sovereign expression of electorate’s will in the forthcoming election; that the Senate do draw the attention of Mr. President to the importance of strict compliance with all the relevant electoral laws and the laws on the supremacy of the 1999 Constitution (Section 1 (i), qualifications of candidates (Section 656, and 66, and 106 and 107, 131; and tenure of the office of president and hand over- (Section 135); incitement and public Order (Section 97(i) of the Electoral Act 2006); actions including language derogating the high office of the President (Seventh Schedule-oath of Office of the President).”

The third speech act, which is credited to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), also violates the context and background knowledge factors. Considered from the perspective of context of social situation, the declaratory
illocutionary act of INEC seen as arbitrary, tyrannical, and autocratic runs foul of the basic tenets of constitutional democracy, which emphasize, inter alia, basic human rights, free and fair elections, equality before the law, due process of law. Also, existing background knowledge (specifically, constitutional provisions and the 2006 Electoral Act) does not provide a suitable legal template for justifying INEC’s speech act, which disqualifies Atiku from participating in the April presidential poll. In disqualifying Atiku, INEC misinterpreted Section 137 (1) of the 1999 Constitution, which outlines the conditions of disqualification for the office of the president. This provision stipulates that “a person shall ab initio not be qualified for election to the office of the president if he has been indicted for embezzlement or fraud by a judicial Commission of Inquiry, or a Tribunal set up under the Tribunal of Inquiry Act, a Tribunal of Inquired Law or any other law by the Federal or State Government respectively”. INEC’s misinterpretation of the Electoral Act and Constitutional provisions in this regard came to light when on 9 March 2007, a Federal High Court presided over by Justice Kuewumi had ruled that INEC has no power to disqualify any validly sponsored candidate. Specifically, the Court ruled that “the power to disqualify any candidate sponsored by any political party, including the 1st Plaintiff (Action Congress) from contesting an election is vested in the Courts as provided for in Section 32(5) of the Electoral Act 2006 and in any other legislation that is validly enacted in that behalf.”

Before Justice Kuewumi’s judgment, a Lagos High Court had quashed the charges of embezzlement against Atiku on the basis of which INEC disqualified him. The Court presided over by Justice Akande declared the EFCC report on the probe of management of the PTDF finances null and void. It also set aside the report of the Bayo Ojo Administrative Panel, which acted on the EFCC report and described the Federal Government Gazette on the PTDF probes as having no legal foundation. The legal implication of Justice Akande’s ruling was that the purported indictment of Atiku never existed, therefore the provisions of Section 137(ii) of the 1999 Constitution would not be applied as a constitutional ground for the disqualification or preclusion of Atiku from the presidential election. To further substantiate these judgments, an Abuja Federal High Court, had on 3 April 2007, ruled that the INEC had no authority or right to disqualify any candidate; that the authority to disqualify a candidate vests in the court and not in the INEC. The Supreme Court in its judgment delivered on 16 April 2007 also upheld this ruling, thus dismissing INEC’s disqualification of Atiku as another case of counterfactive presupposition. This ultimate judgment delivered by the nation’s apex court compelled INEC to rescind its decision to disqualify Atiku on the basis of his indictment by the Bayo Ojo Administrative Panel of Inquiry and include his name on the list of candidates vying for the post of president in the 21 April 2007 poll.

From the foregoing, it seems reasonable to aver that the three speech acts, which had been identified as declaratory illocutionary acts, are unsuitable within the context of constitutional democracy as a system of government. This is because they do not meet the pragmatic presuppositions required for any given speech act to be considered suitable for the context in which it was uttered. In essence, the assumptions and beliefs about the context do not support such speech acts. By implication, declaratory illocutionary acts
carry illocutionary force, which is inherently antithetical to the conceptual and practical underpinnings of democracy.

4. **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have tried to examine three selected speech acts, using the factors of context and background knowledge as a basis for determining their suitability in the socio-political context of contemporary Nigeria. The picture, which emerges from the foregoing analysis, suggests that the politicians’ choice of words performing speech acts quite often predisposes them to declaratory illocutionary acts, whose illocutionary force generates certain perlocutionary effects, that impact negatively on the nation’s democratic governance. According to Kempson (1975: 51), “…a speaker utters sentences with a particular meaning (locutionary act) and with a particular force (illocutionary act) in order to achieve a certain effect (perlocutionary act) on the hearer.” Allan (1986: 181) reverses the order by noting that the perlocutionary act presupposes an illocutionary act, which presupposes a denotational act which presupposes a locutionary which presupposes an utterance act. In essence, perlocutionary act results from a language user’s utterance and a product of the hearer’s interpretation. So far, the politicians’ unbridled penchant for declaratory illocutionary acts has tended to generate ripple effects striking at the roots of the nation’s fledging democracy. Of particular relevance in this regard is former President Obasanjo’s infamous ‘do-or-die affair’ declaration. The many cases of violence and destruction of lives and property that have characterized political campaigns and the April elections could rightly be interpreted as the intended or unintended consequences of reactions (perlocutionary acts) to the do-or-die political ideology of Chief Obasanjo. Sanyaolu (2007) underscores this point in his observation that “the politicians all over the country are conducting themselves in a do-or-die manner, unleashing terror and mayhem on law-abiding citizens.” Ironically, the same President Obasanjo, who advocated a ‘do-or-die’ politics, turned round to express surprise at the massive rigging and violence that characterized the 2007 gubernatorial and presidential polls. According to Ola (2007: 8), Mr. President was quoted as saying, “I am disappointed in the conduct of the political parties and their candidates that have employed thugs and violent means to secure what they consider electoral victory.” Also, the purported sweeping of polls during the 14 and 21 April elections by the ruling People’s Democratic Party as decreed by Nigeria’s electoral umpire, provides further attestation to the compelling need on the part of PDP to adhere strictly to the exigencies of do-or-die politics. Of course, there is no gainsaying the fact that the emerging scenario portends very grave danger of cataclysmic proportions for democracy in Nigeria. This is in the light of the fact that the strident calls by the coalition of opposition parties and independent election observer groups for outright annulment of the entire April elections and immediate restructuring of the electoral process may do little or nothing to sway the all-conquering PDP commandoes away from the reprehensible path of sacrificing the noble ideals of democracy on the altar of ego-trip and combative triumphalism. Unless and until caution, reason, restraint, and discretion take the reins in this titanic struggle between the rampaging forces of PDP shenanigans and those of the whimpering opposition, Nigerians, the international community, and indeed all lovers of democracy
may well prepare to bid farewell to democracy in the world’s most populous black nation. What is to be done to pull the chain and stop the train of democracy on the precarious edge of the precipice from tripping over and cascading down the abyss of failed democracies? Okpara (2007: 55) in his informed opinion opts for dialogue and tolerance, which means, “…choosing a new way of life, a new way of reaching agreement, with no bloodshed, no loss of life, no violence, no wars.” The success of any democracy, in his view, is dependent on a leadership favourably disposed to promoting sense of discipline by example; promoting political behaviour devoid of rancour and acrimony but vested with the spirit of competition, dialogue and consensus, encouraging a belief in the unity and indivisibility of the Nigerian nation fostered by a sense of equality, justice and fair play. The current political situation in Nigeria requires a true democratic leader who, in the opinion of Okpara, “must be able to rise above emotional vindictiveness of others, to accept responsibility for the unforeseeable, be able to pitch headlong into the swirling threatening currents of change. A leader cast in this mould must be “able to react with grace under pressure; must not engage in petty name-calling and finger pointing in moments of crisis; needs to absorb the pressure with good grace and use the experience as a guidepost for the future,” Okpara avers. How ready and willing are our political leaders to fit into this altruistic democratic frame, which Okpara’s dialectics proposes? Of course, there is no viable alternative if democracy must succeed in Nigeria. One sure step in this direction is recognizing the importance of temperate language, devoid of autocratic and tyrannical tendencies in a typical constitutional democracy. It is to this temperance in the use of language that this paper not only appeals but also recommends to our political leaders entrusted with the challenging task of nurturing and entrenching democratic governance in Nigeria.

References


