

A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF SELECTED PRESIDENTIAL INAUGURAL SPEECHES FROM THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares ten presidential inaugural speeches, five from the United States and five from Nigeria, to see how language builds political power, legitimises ideology, and shapes national identity and unity. Using Ruth Wodak's Discourse Historical Approach and a qualitative design, the speeches were analysed for referential construction, predication, argumentation, perspectivisation, and intensification/mitigation strategies. The presidents in both countries rely on similar rhetorical tools: inclusive first-person plural pronouns, references to founding figures, narratives of crisis, appeals to religion, and calls for unity. What differs is the ideological ground beneath these tools. American presidents tend to root national identity in shared ideals and a democracy already achieved, casting government as the guardian of that achievement. Nigerian presidents root identity in ethnic and regional diversity that must be actively negotiated, and treat democracy as a project still in progress, shaped by memories of military rule and underdevelopment. The paper argues that inaugural addresses are not empty ceremony but acts through which political authority is built, and that the particular form this takes in each country reflects its own historical path. It closes by suggesting further comparative, longitudinal, and reception-focused research on the genre.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Discourse Historical Approach, presidential inaugural speeches, political legitimacy, national identity

Introduction

Language plays an essential part in almost everything human beings do in their interaction with each other. It transmits ideas, emotions, and cultural values, which successive generations pass on. On a basic level, language is a set of organized symbols, either verbal, written, or even signed, through which individuals give meaning in such a way that others can receive and understand it. According to Okeke (2024), language is not only a medium for transmitting messages but also a cognitive ability, which makes possible to create an unlimited number of sentences by using a limited number of rules. This point fits into universal grammar theory, which holds that human linguistic ability is not something learned out of nothing but rather an inherent human feature. Moreover, language has a social aspect in that it influences the way people interact with one another and contributes to identity formation.

On the other hand, language use involves the actual utilization of the linguistic structures and conventions in a specific communicative setting. Here, pragmatics, semantics, and syntax contribute to how meaning arises through language use in both spoken and written discourses. Language use is context-dependent, as is stated by Duro-Bello (2022). The implication is that there would be variations in the discourse because of the social, cultural, and institutional contexts of the communicative setting. In this regard, a functional perspective on language is implied where the meaning is not predetermined but is realized in the course of language use. Code switching, register variation, and other discourse strategies all fall under this perspective because they reveal what the speaker intends and what the audience expects. In formal settings, the speakers adhere to standardized grammatical conventions, whereas in informal settings, they show greater flexibility in language use. Since there are such significant differences in discourse, discourse analysts have found it beneficial to study language use in different fields including education, politics, and media.

Discourse analysis is a methodological approach that studies language beyond the level of grammatical structure, concentrating instead on how meaning gets built in different communicative contexts. It goes further than traditional linguistic analysis by taking seriously the socio political and ideological consequences of language use. Critical discourse analysis, conversation analysis and multimodal discourse analysis are some of the approaches that come within its purview. Discourse analysis brings into view the implicit bias, power relations and ideology that exist in everyday conversations. As a result of its ability to shed light on the uses of language in diverse social contexts, discourse analysis has gained wide acceptance in linguistic, sociological, communication and political sciences disciplines.

The main goal of discourse analysis is to find out how meaning construction is achieved using language across different communicative contexts. Suu'omany and Wada (2022) believe that the process entails revealing implicit and explicit meanings that are encoded in conversations or texts based on language choices. In this respect, researchers are free to study the role of language in maintaining social hierarchies, the nature of public discourse, and the way linguistic practices reproduce cultural norms.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary paradigm that aims at identifying the ways in which discourses influence power relations, ideologies and social inequalities. The theoretical background of Critical Discourse Analysis includes the works of such prominent theorists as Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk and Ruth Wodak, who believe that language is not a neutral means of communication but a powerful tool that can be used to shape the reality and people's perception of it. Therefore, CDA focuses on the relationship between the textual structure and the socio-political context in order to find out how certain linguistic features reinforce or resist dominant ideologies. Sveinson, Hoebler and Heffernan (2021) note that CDA affords an opportunity to expose the taken for granted notions attached to all forms of language and text. It is against this background that the present study undertakes a Critical Discourse Analysis of selected presidential inaugural speeches from the United States

of America and Nigeria. The American presidents covered are George Bush, Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden. From Nigeria the study takes Olusegun Obasanjo, Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, Goodluck Jonathan, Muhammadu Buhari and Bola Ahmed Tinubu. The speeches fall within the period 1997 to 2023.

Statement of the Problem

Presidential inaugural speeches are rhetorical events of considerable weight, the occasion on which a newly elected leader sets out a vision, states priorities and claims legitimacy before audiences at home and abroad. Such speeches carry ideological undertones, persuasive strategies and discursive patterns that register the political climate of the moment and the governance values of the nation. Scholars have examined inaugural speeches at length within individual national settings, yet comparative work across different geopolitical and cultural landscapes remains relatively thin. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, the studies available in comparative CDA and political discourse include Chilton and Schäffner (1997), Adegoju (2005), Opeibi (2009), Balarabe (2018), Adeosun and Salawu (2019), and Anigudo and Akachukwu (2024). Comparative Critical Discourse Analysis of selected presidential inaugural speeches from the United States of America and Nigeria is scanty at best and in some respects non-existent. Both countries occupy prominent positions on their respective continents and on the world stage, yet little scholarly attention has been paid to how the inaugural rhetoric of their leaders differs or converges in discourse structure, thematic content and ideological positioning.

A study of this kind becomes still more pressing once the colonial histories, systems of governance and public expectations of the two countries are taken into account, since each of these is likely to bear on how an inaugural address is composed and delivered. The absence of a focused, comparable Critical Discourse Analysis of inaugural speeches from the two nations leaves a gap that this study seeks to fill. Comparative enquiry of this sort is necessary if the interaction of language, power and political culture in diverse democracies is to be properly understood.

More specifically, the discourse practices and ideological constructs at work in the inaugural speeches of selected presidents from the United States of America and Nigeria, two democratically governed but structurally distinct nations, call for closer critical examination if the underlying power relations, national values and communicative intentions that place the two countries at such different levels of development are to be brought into view. To that end the study adopts Critical Discourse Analysis. CDA is valuable here because it shows how language is used to reinforce or to contest dominant ideologies in political communication. It is capable of revealing how presidents in the United States and Nigeria construct national identity, authority, unity and change while responding to contextual pressures such as instability, national security and public trust. The study accordingly sets out to investigate and compare the linguistic choices, discursive strategies and ideological representations found in selected presidential inaugural speeches from the United States of America and Nigeria.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to carry out a comparative Critical Discourse Analysis of selected presidential inaugural speeches from the United States of America and Nigeria. Its specific objectives are:

1. To examine how language is used to construct political power and authority in presidential inaugural speeches from the U.S. and Nigeria.
2. To identify and describe the ideology communicated and legitimised in the inaugural speeches of both countries.
3. To explore how presidents from the U.S. and Nigeria use discourse to shape national identity and unity.

Research Questions

The following questions guide the study:

1. How is language used to construct political power and authority in presidential inaugural speeches from the United States and Nigeria?
2. What ideologies were communicated and legitimised in the inaugural speeches of both countries?
3. How did the presidents from the U.S. and Nigeria use discourse to shape national identity and unity?

Theoretical Framework

The theory best suited to serve as the framework for this study is the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) to Critical Discourse Analysis. Ruth Wodak and her colleagues developed it during the 1990s, and its reputation was established with the publication of *Disorders of Discourse* in 1996. Of the various strands within CDA, the DHA is among the most systematic, and it lends itself particularly well to political texts read in their socio historical settings. Its central concern is with the way discourses are built up over time and in relation to particular social and political histories. Wodak assigns a considerable role to context, holding that meaning arises out of linguistic choice and socio political circumstance together. The approach rests on the conviction that language is not neutral but is used to maintain power relations and to contest them. Linguistic analysis is accordingly combined with an understanding of the historical, political and institutional conditions under which texts are produced (Wodak and Meyer, 2016).

Certain principles are central to the DHA. Texts are treated as interdiscursive, meaning that distinct discourses cross one another within a single text. Recontextualisation accounts for the way ideas and expressions are borrowed from one setting and transformed as they move into another. Triangulation of data and of method requires that several sources and analytical procedures be brought to bear on the same text. Alongside these stands the critique of domination, which asks how language perpetuates social inequality and ideological structure. Methodologically the DHA proceeds by identifying discursive strategies of a definite kind, namely nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivisation, and intensification or mitigation. For the present study the DHA is directly relevant, since it makes possible a comparative reading in which presidents from Nigeria and the United States can be seen using language to construct national identity, legitimise power and project ideology. Nomination strategies allow the analyst to trace how presidents refer to themselves, to the nation and to their political opponents. Argumentation strategies expose the rhetorical structures through which policies are justified and a vision of national unity and progress advanced. Applied to a comparative study of this kind, the Discourse Historical Approach recovers more than the surface linguistic detail of the speeches; it also brings to view the socio political ideologies working beneath them.

Methodology

The study adopted a purely qualitative research design in examining five purposively selected presidential inaugural speeches from Nigeria and five from the United States of America. Attention fell on textual analysis for thematic and interpretive content, and no statistical procedure or other means of quantification was employed. CDA was chosen for its effectiveness in uncovering the ideological underpinnings, power relations and social constructs embedded in political discourse. The research used the purposive sampling technique in order to identify ten samples of inaugural addresses, which consist of five speeches by Nigerian presidents and five speeches by American presidents. These American presidents are George Bush, Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden. The Nigerian presidents are Olusegun Obasanjo, Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, Goodluck Jonathan, Muhammadu Buhari and Bola Ahmed Tinubu. These speeches cover the period from 1997 to 2023, and they

were selected due to the fact that they are very important for the political history of both countries either through representing the process of democratic transition, consequences of military government or change of presidents, or due to ideological views of the president. The primary instrument for data collection was the texts of the selected inaugural speeches, sourced from official government websites, presidential archives and reputable online repositories. The data were analysed using the Critical Discourse Analysis method, especially the Discourse Historical Approach by Ruth Wodak, which is very appropriate for the analysis of political literature as it takes into account how discourses are created in context of social and political history, as well as the role played by linguistic choices and socio-political context and the connection between language, power, and ideology.

Results

This paper presents a discourse historical analysis of the inaugural addresses of ten presidents drawn in equal number from Nigeria and the United States of America. The American addresses examined are those of President Bill Clinton in 1993, President George W. Bush in 2001, President Barack Obama in 2009, President Donald Trump in 2017 and President Joe Biden in 2021. The Nigerian addresses examined are those of President Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999, President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua in 2007, President Goodluck Jonathan in 2011, President Muhammadu Buhari in 2015 and President Bola Ahmed Tinubu in 2023. The analysis is organised around the three research objectives set out above and proceeds through the five macro strategies that Wodak's Discourse Historical Approach identifies, namely referential or nomination strategies, predication strategies, argumentation strategies, perspectivisation and intensification or mitigation. Every extract reproduced in this section is cited by the line number at which it appears in the full texts of the ten addresses, so that each analytical claim advanced below can be traced directly to its source. An American president inherits a settled constitutional order and speaks in order to renew it; a Nigerian president inherits an order still under construction and speaks in order to establish it. That asymmetry is not incidental background to the language analysed here. It is the condition that produces the language.

How Language is Used to Construct Political Power and Authority in Presidential Inaugural Speeches from the United States and Nigeria

The establishment of political power and authority through an inaugural address is a demanding discursive undertaking, since the speaker must simultaneously establish the legitimacy of his own accession and construct an identity that he shares with the audience he proposes to govern. Read through the Discourse Historical Approach, the ten addresses show presidents from both countries drawing on a common repertoire of strategies to accomplish this task, although the intensity with which each strategy is deployed varies considerably with historical circumstance. Five strategies recur with sufficient regularity across the corpus to warrant separate treatment, namely the construction of a collective subject through inclusive pronouns, the anchoring of present authority in historical precedent, the articulation of a crisis that the speaker alone is positioned to resolve, the invocation of religious authority, and the management of internal division.

The Power of "We": Constructing Collective Identity and Shared Agency

Of the several rhetorical approaches employed across the ten addresses, the most widely distributed is the use of the first person plural pronoun in its various forms. Within the Discourse Historical Approach this constitutes a referential strategy through which the boundary between the governing and the governed is deliberately blurred, so that the leader appears less as an authority set above the people than as a distillation of the people themselves. President Bill Clinton opened his 1993 address by binding his own accession to the founding generation:

“When our founders boldly declared America’s independence to the world and our purposes to the Almighty, they knew that America, to endure, would have to change. ... Though we march to the music of our time, our mission is timeless. Each generation of Americans must define what it means to be an American.” (line 4)

Clinton assembles a continuous collective subject out of the phrases “our founders”, “our purposes”, “our mission” and “each generation of Americans”, so that the American people appear as a single actor persisting across two centuries. By writing himself into that lineage he presents his presidency as the rightful inheritance of an unfinished undertaking rather than as a departure from it. President Barack Obama put the same pronoun to a more openly performative use in 2009, declaring that “on this day, we gather because we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord” (line 7), an assertion that performs the act of choosing and commits the audience to a decision it is told it has already taken. The Nigerian addresses employ the same pronoun to markedly different effect. President Olusegun Obasanjo, speaking in 1999 as the first civilian head of state after sixteen years of military government, produced a collective subject defined by dependence rather than by confidence:

“Fellow Nigerians, the entire Nigerian scene is very bleak indeed. So bleak people ask me where do we begin? ... As I have said many times in my extensive travels in the country, I am not a miracle worker. It will be foolish to underrate the task ahead. Alone, I can do little.” (line 16)

The collective constructed here is characterised by humility rather than by triumph. In declaring that alone he can do little, Obasanjo strengthens rather than weakens his position, because the admission distinguishes him from the military rulers whose arrogance had discredited the office he was assuming. The admission is followed immediately by an exhortation that attempts to bring the very unity it names into being, namely “Fellow Nigerians, let us rise as one, to face the tasks ahead and turn this daunting scene into opportunities in a New Dawn” (line 15). The hortatory construction “let us” enacts the unity it describes, since Obasanjo does not assume that Nigerians already act as one but instructs them to begin doing so. President Donald Trump gave the same pronoun an entirely oppositional character in 2017, constructing a collective in which “the people” are defined against “the establishment”, “Washington” and “the politicians”, and redescribing the transfer of power itself as passing “from Washington, D.C. and giving it back to you, the American People” (line 6). Across the corpus as a whole the first person plural therefore performs three distinguishable functions, namely the assertion of continuity in Clinton and Obama, the summoning of an absent unity in Obasanjo and Biden, and the construction of an antagonistic in group in Trump.

Legitimising Power through Historical Anchoring

The second strategy through which presidents construct authority is intertextuality and recontextualisation, by which earlier figures, documents and events are invoked as precursors whose prestige is transferred to the present speaker. Presidents of both countries resort to this device with comparable frequency, but the historical materials available to them differ so sharply that the resulting arguments take different forms. President George W. Bush offered in 2001 the most sustained American example:

“We have a place, all of us, in a long story. A story we continue, but whose end we will not see. It is the story of a new world that became a friend and liberator of the old, a story of a slave-holding society that became a servant of freedom, the story of a power that went into the world to protect but not possess, to defend but not to conquer. It is the American story.” (line 5)

In describing a slave holding society that became a servant of freedom, Bush compresses the whole moral history of the republic into a single clause and presents his own administration as the continuation of that narrative. The argumentation rests on the topos of history as teacher, and the mitigation strategy is unusually visible, because the gravest defect in the national record

is acknowledged and immediately reframed as a stage in a movement towards something better. The Nigerian presidents draw on a shorter and more troubled record, and their historical anchoring is correspondingly more qualified. President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua legitimised his accession in 2007 by conceding its imperfection, acknowledging that "our elections had some shortcomings" and undertaking to set up a panel to examine the entire electoral process (line 2), so that the admission of defect is converted into a demonstration of good faith. President Muhammadu Buhari went further in 2015 by naming the founding generation directly:

"In recent times Nigerian leaders appear to have misread our mission. Our founding fathers, Mr Herbert Macauley, Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Alhaji Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto, Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Malam Aminu Kano ... worked to establish certain standards of governance. ... Some of their successors behaved like spoilt children breaking everything and bringing disorder to the house." (line 11)

Buhari's method is the construction of a golden past embodied in the founders and a degraded recent past embodied in their successors. By presenting himself as the restorer of standards that were once observed, he establishes his legitimacy as corrective rather than innovative, and the argumentation proceeds from the topos of restoration. President Bola Ahmed Tinubu employed a comparable device in 2023, recalling that "over six decades ago, our founding fathers gave bravely of themselves to place Nigeria on the map as an independent nation" (lines 26 to 27), thereby converting historical debt into present mandate. Across both national traditions, then, historical anchoring performs the same legitimating function, but the American presidents draw on a continuous record they may treat as a resource whereas the Nigerian presidents must reach past the recent past to a founding generation whose achievements were subsequently squandered.

Constructing Crisis and Promising Salvation

A third strategy for the construction of authority is the articulation of a crisis so severe that only the incoming president can resolve it. The Discourse Historical Approach identifies this as an argumentation strategy resting on the topos of threat or urgency, according to which extraordinary circumstances justify extraordinary measures and, by extension, extraordinary leadership. President Trump constructed a crisis of an altogether more apocalyptic character:

"Mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation; ... and the crime and gangs and drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential. This American carnage stops right here and stops right now." (lines 12 to 13)

The lexical choice of carnage is exceptionally violent for the inaugural genre, since it belongs properly to the description of battlefield casualties rather than to the description of policy disagreement. Trump's crisis is one of destruction rather than of drift, and in undertaking that the carnage stops immediately he assumes the posture of a combatant bringing a war to its end. The authority claimed is martial rather than managerial. The Nigerian addresses describe crises of a more fundamental order, since they concern the functioning of the state itself. President Obasanjo was uncompromising in 1999:

"Government and all its agencies became thoroughly corrupt and reckless. ... Our infrastructures - NEPA, NITEL, Roads, Railways, Education, Housing and other Social Services were allowed to decay and collapse. Our country has thus been through one of its darkest periods." (lines 12 to 14)

The diction is severe throughout, with corruption described as thorough and reckless, infrastructure as decayed and collapsed, and the period itself as among the darkest the country has known. Obasanjo makes no attempt to soften the diagnosis, and it is precisely this refusal that gives his subsequent call for a New Dawn (line 15) its rhetorical force. President Buhari

made a comparable assessment in 2015, naming insecurity, pervasive corruption and the seemingly impossible fuel and power shortages as the immediate concerns before asserting that “we can fix our problems” (line 10). In none of these cases is the articulation of crisis a neutral description of circumstance. It is in every case a strategy that determines what shall count as the problem, who shall count as its solution, and why the present speaker is uniquely fitted to the task.

Religious Invocation and Transcendental Authority

The fourth strategy is the invocation of religious authority, through which the president’s mandate is presented as resting on a warrant that political argument cannot reach. President Bush provided the most elaborate American instance, declaring that Americans are “guided by a power larger than ourselves who creates us equal in His image” and recontextualising a private letter of 1776 in order to affirm that “an angel still rides in the whirlwind and directs this storm” (lines 7 and 19), with the implication that American history has been not accidental but providentially directed. The Nigerian presidents invoke divine authority far more frequently and with considerably greater intensity, which reflects a society in which religious identity occupies a central place in public life. President Obasanjo opened his 1999 address with a maximalist claim:

“FELLOW Nigerians, we give praise and honour to God Almighty for this day specially appointed by God Himself. ... I believe that this is what God Almighty has ordained for me and for my beloved country Nigeria and its people.” (lines 1 to 3)

The office is described as ordained rather than merely won, which is the strongest form of divine sanction available to a political speaker. President Tinubu made the religious claim explicit in 2023, professing that his “faith in God Almighty” is “absolute” and that “His hand shall provide the needed moral strength and clarity of purpose” when human capacity reaches its limits (line 2). The lexical selection is carefully managed, since in a country divided along confessional lines Tinubu employs the inclusive designation God Almighty in preference to any term marked as specifically Muslim or Christian. In both national traditions religious invocation converts the president from an ordinary politician into a figure whose mandate exceeds ordinary political warrant, but the intensity is markedly greater in the Nigerian addresses, where divine legitimation supplies a foundation that weakly institutionalised secular authority cannot yet provide.

Unity in Division: Managing Difference through Language

The final strategy considered under this objective concerns the management of division. Presidents of both countries acknowledge that their nations are divided, but the divisions differ in kind. In the United States they are partisan and ideological, whereas in Nigeria they are ethno regional and religious, and the rhetorical task is correspondingly different. President Biden made unity the organising theme of his entire address:

“We must end this uncivil war that pits red against blue, rural versus urban, conservative versus liberal. We can do this if we open our souls instead of hardening our hearts, if we show a little tolerance and humility, and if we’re willing to stand in the other person’s shoes.” (line 22)

Biden’s collective is provisional, aspirational and moral in character. He acknowledges division in the strongest terms available to him, naming it an uncivil war, and then argues that unity remains attainable through empathy rather than through argument. The authority he claims is that of a healer rather than that of a victor. Nigerian presidents confront a more demanding task, since political parties are frequently organised along ethnic lines and the division between north and south has generated informal arrangements for the rotation of power. President Yar’Adua urged Nigerians to “discard the habit of low expectations of ourselves as well as of our leaders” and to stop justifying every shortcoming with the phrase “the Nigerian Factor” (lines 25 to 26), a repudiation directed at a widely circulated discourse

commonly deployed to excuse corruption and administrative failure. President Jonathan, a Christian from a minority ethnic group in the Niger Delta, made his own accession the evidence of national progress:

“A decade ago, it would have been a mere daydream to think that a citizen from a minority ethnic group could galvanize national support, on an unprecedented scale, to discard ancient prejudices, and win the people’s mandate as President of our beloved country.” (line 14)

Jonathan does not pass over ethnicity in silence but makes it the substance of his claim, since the elevation of a member of a minority group to the presidency is presented as demonstrating that the old prejudices have lost their force. The argumentation rests on the topos of progress, and the speaker’s own position constitutes the proof.

Synthesis: The Discursive Production of Presidential Authority

Taken together, the five strategies examined above establish that inaugural addresses are not ceremonial ornaments attached to the transfer of power but are themselves constitutive acts of political authority. The parallels indicate the existence of an international grammar of inaugural discourse comprising pronominal inclusion, historical allusion, the naming of crisis, the invocation of divine favour and the call for unity, and these are not culturally specific but arise from the structural requirements of leadership in democratic and democratising orders. The contrasts are equally instructive. American presidents may assume the stability of democratic institutions and address themselves to the task of persuading citizens to live up to ideals already established, whereas Nigerian presidents must assume institutional fragility and address themselves to the prior tasks of establishing trust, naming corruption and undertaking to deliver basic functionality. The analytical conclusion is therefore that the two traditions converge on strategy and diverge on function, since in the American corpus the five devices operate to conserve an authority already institutionally secured, while in the Nigerian corpus they operate to manufacture an authority that institutions cannot yet supply. This is the central finding of the first research objective, and it reframes the comparison the study set out to make, since the relevant difference between the two traditions is not one of rhetorical accomplishment but one of rhetorical burden.

The Ideology Communicated and Legitimised in the Inaugural Speeches of Both Countries

This section addresses the second research objective by examining the ideological content that the ten addresses communicate and legitimise. Ideology is understood here in the sense the Discourse Historical Approach gives it, namely as a system of beliefs about the social order that is produced and naturalised through discourse rather than reflected by it. Four ideological dimensions recur with sufficient consistency across the corpus to permit systematic comparison, namely the ideology of national identity and unity, the ideology of democracy and governance, the ideology of time in its treatment of past, present and future, and the ideology of citizenship and responsibility.

The Ideology of National Identity and Unity

Examination of the ten addresses discloses a consistent divergence, since the American presidents define national identity by reference to ideals and a shared creed whereas the Nigerian presidents define it by reference to survival and resilience in the face of ethnic and regional division. American presidents present national identity as a matter of ideological commitment rather than of descent, birthplace or territory, and President Bush offered the clearest articulation of this civic nationalism in 2001:

“America has never been united by blood or birth or soil. We are bound by ideals that move us beyond our backgrounds, lift us above our interests and teach us what it means to be citizens. ... Every citizen must uphold them; and every immigrant, by embracing these ideals, makes our country more, not less, American.” (line 8)

The passage exhibits a predication strategy that attributes to the nation the character of an idea rather than of a lineage. President Obama used the composition of the nation itself as the substance of his claim, describing a patchwork heritage that is “a strength, not a weakness” (line 23), a figure deliberately preferred to the more familiar image of the melting pot. In Nigeria the ideological construction of national identity proceeds under materially different conditions, since citizens frequently retain stronger attachments to ethnic group or region than to the central state. President Obasanjo did not assume unity but demanded it, calling on Nigerians to “rise as one” and to “make this the beginning of a genuine Renaissance” (line 15). President Buhari, whose previous tenure had been as a military head of state, adopted in 2015 a conciliatory position, declaring that “I belong to everybody and I belong to nobody” (line 6), a referential strategy of considerable economy in which the first clause repudiates partisanship and the second asserts independence from every faction. President Tinubu, whose 2023 election was widely disputed, acknowledged the contest while insisting on the continued national belonging of his opponents:

“It was a hard fought contest. And it was also fairly won. ... However, my victory does not render me any more Nigerian than my opponents. Nor does it render them any less patriotic. They shall forever be my fellow compatriots.” (lines 22 to 24)

The insistence that electoral defeat does not diminish national belonging carries particular ideological weight in a polity where electoral competition is frequently understood as a zero sum contest between ethnic blocs. Across both traditions, therefore, ideologies of national identity diverge according to historical circumstance, since American presidents speaking from within a settled order assume the existence of unifying ideals and exhort citizens to honour them, whereas Nigerian presidents speaking from within an unsettled one must construct the identity they invoke. American addresses celebrate an inherited identity; Nigerian addresses summon a future one.

The Ideology of Democracy and Governance

The second ideological dimension concerns the conception of democracy itself and the proper function of government. American presidents generally treat democracy as a mature system already perfected in principle and requiring only periodic renewal, whereas Nigerian presidents treat it as a recent and fragile acquisition requiring active protection. President Bush described the peaceful transfer of authority as “rare in history, yet common in our country” (line 2), a formulation that constructs an ideology of exceptionalism by explicit contrast with the wider world. President Biden, speaking after the events of January 2021, went considerably further, affirming that “we’ve learned again that democracy is precious, democracy is fragile and, at this hour my friends, democracy has prevailed” (line 3). The repetition of the key term three times within a single sentence, combined with the express acknowledgement of fragility, marks an ideology of resilience under threat rather than of settled achievement. In the Nigerian addresses democracy is presented as an achievement recently secured and not yet guaranteed. President Obasanjo declared in 1999:

“Today, we are taking a decisive step on the path of democracy. We will leave no stone unturned to ensure sustenance of democracy because it is good for us. It is good for Africa, and it is good for the world.” (line 55)

The figure of a decisive step upon a path implies that democracy is a journey rather than a destination and that Nigeria remains in transit, and the justification offered is consequentialist in a way that differs materially from the American emphasis on democracy as an intrinsic entitlement. President Yar’Adua legitimised his own accession in 2007 not by asserting the perfection of the process that produced him but by undertaking to reform it (line 2), so that democratic legitimacy is founded on a capacity for self correction rather than on procedural perfection. The contrast with the American material is exact, since the American ideology treats

democracy as the ground upon which political argument proceeds whereas the Nigerian ideology treats it as the object of that argument.

The Ideology of Past, Present and Future

The manner in which presidents narrate time discloses their ideology of progress, decline and national destiny, and the Discourse Historical Approach maintains that historical narratives are never neutral but are strategic constructions serving to legitimise a present arrangement and to project a preferred future. American presidents characteristically narrate a continuous progression in which the past furnishes inspiration and the future extends earlier achievement, whereas Nigerian presidents characteristically treat the recent past as a failure requiring correction. President Obama constructed an extended historical litany:

“For us, they packed up their few worldly possessions and traveled across oceans in search of a new life. For us, they toiled in sweatshops and settled the West; endured the lash of the whip and plowed the hard earth. For us, they fought and died, in places like Concord and Gettysburg; Normandy and Khe Sahn.” (lines 11 to 13)

The anaphoric repetition creates a structure of indebtedness, since the sacrifices enumerated were undertaken on behalf of the present generation, which is thereby placed under an obligation to reciprocate. The ideology is one of stewardship. President Trump departed from this progressive narrative, describing a present of American carnage (line 13) and a recent past of betrayal, so that the deeper past becomes the repository of a greatness that a corrupt governing class has since destroyed. In the Nigerian addresses the recent past is characteristically a problem to be overcome, and President Obasanjo was direct:

“Instead of progress and development, which we are entitled to expect from those who governed us, we experienced in the last decade and a half ... persistent deterioration in the quality of our governance, leading to instability and the weakening of all public institutions.” (line 11)

The ideology is one of rupture, since the recent past is presented as irrecoverable and must therefore be abandoned entire, and the figure of a New Dawn (line 15) acquires its force from the totality of the darkness it is said to succeed. The American ideology of time is therefore linear and progressive while the Nigerian ideology is ruptured and restorative, and the difference is a direct consequence of a history of dictatorship, civil war and contested democratisation.

The Ideology of Citizenship and Responsibility

The final ideological dimension concerns the role assigned to citizens. American presidents characteristically summon an active and participatory citizenry on the understanding that government cannot succeed without popular engagement, whereas Nigerian presidents characteristically request patience, sacrifice and trust in a government presented as the principal agent of change. President Clinton challenged “a new generation of young Americans to a season of service” (line 28). President Bush insisted that “what you do is as important as anything government does” and asked Americans to be “citizens, not spectators” (line 15). President Obama called for “a new era of responsibility” (line 28). In each case the citizen is constructed as a partner of government rather than as its beneficiary. President Obasanjo addressed the question in materially different terms:

“You have been asked many times in the past to make sacrifices and to be patient. I am also going to ask you to make sacrifices, and to exercise patience. The difference will be that in the past sacrifices were made and patience exercised with little or no results. This time, however, the results of your sacrifice and patience will be clear and manifest for all to see.” (line 17)

Obasanjo concedes that Nigerians are weary of sacrifice and nevertheless requests further sacrifice, offering results as the distinguishing feature of the present request, so that the citizen

is positioned as a trusting recipient of governmental action rather than as a co producer of it. The divergence is therefore consistent, since in the American ideology citizens are active partners in a shared undertaking while in the Nigerian ideology they are asked to trust, to endure and to support a government that is still establishing its claim to that trust.

Synthesis: Ideology as Historical Product

The four ideological dimensions examined above are not independent of one another but are jointly produced through particular linguistic selections made under particular historical constraints. American presidents, speaking from a position of relative institutional security, articulate national identity through idealism, democracy through maturity, historical time through progress and citizenship through active partnership, whereas Nigerian presidents, speaking from a position of institutional fragility and recent authoritarian experience, must construct national identity as a therapeutic project, treat democracy as a vulnerable acquisition, narrate historical time as rupture or restoration, and request patient sacrifice from a citizenry whose trust has been repeatedly disappointed. The comparison should not be read as a hierarchy of rhetorical accomplishment, since both sets of addresses are competent responses to the conditions in which they were delivered, and the appropriate conclusion is that ideology in the inaugural genre is not freely selected by the speaker but is substantially determined by the state of the political order the speaker inherits.

How Presidents Use Discourse to Shape National Identity and Unity

This section addresses the third research objective by examining the discursive means through which presidents shape national identity and promote unity. The Discourse Historical Approach treats national identity as a discursive accomplishment rather than as a pre existing condition awaiting description, which entails that the identity a president invokes is in substantial part produced by the act of invoking it. Three strategies recur across the corpus with sufficient regularity to structure the analysis, namely the construction of a shared past, the definition of common challenges and enemies, and the projection of a collective future. The rhetorical burden these strategies carry differs greatly between the two countries, since the United States possesses a long constitutional continuity and a founding text articulating universal principles whereas Nigeria attained independence in 1960, endured civil war between 1967 and 1970, was governed by the military for most of the following three decades and restored civilian rule only in 1999.

Building a Shared Past: The Discursive Construction of Historical Continuity

Presidents use history to establish common ground, narrating a story in which every citizen may claim a share irrespective of party, region or origin. In the terms of the Discourse Historical Approach this constitutes an argumentation strategy resting on the topos of history as teacher or as source of legitimacy, according to which the struggles of earlier generations impose obligations on the present one and the incumbent president is the rightful steward of that inheritance. In the United States the national story is organised around an idealised founding, and President Obama employed historical anchoring to particular effect in 2009:

“Forty-four Americans have now taken the presidential oath. ... At these moments, America has carried on not simply because of the skill or vision of those in high office, but because We the People have remained faithful to the ideals of our forbearers, and true to our founding documents.” (line 3)

The enumeration of forty four oath takers establishes an intertextual link to the entire presidential lineage, into which Obama inserts himself, but the credit is immediately transferred from officeholders to citizens through a direct quotation of the opening words of the Constitution, so that legitimate authority is presented as flowing upward from the people rather than downward from the office. In Nigeria the historical materials available are markedly different, since the founding generation is associated with an independence struggle of the 1960s that was followed almost immediately by military coups and the Biafran war, and the

shared past is accordingly not a narrative of steady progress but one of interrupted promise, military rule, corruption and eventual democratic recovery. President Yar'Adua adopted a distinctive approach in 2007, crediting his predecessor with having begun the recovery:

“Many of us may find it hard to believe now, but before you assumed the presidency eight years ago, the national conversation was about whether Nigeria deserved to remain one country at all. Today we are talking about Nigeria’s potential, to become one of the 20 largest economies in the world by the year 2020.” (line 7)

Yar'Adua reminds his audience that the survival of the country had been in doubt only eight years earlier, and the admission serves a strategic purpose, since recalling how close the federation came to disintegration causes the present imperfect stability to appear as a considerable achievement. The shared past invoked is one of near dissolution and the shared identity constructed is that of a people who have survived an existential threat. Across all five Nigerian addresses, therefore, the history that binds is not a distant and mythologised founding but the recent and shared experience of the struggle for civilian rule.

Defining Challenges and Enemies: The Discursive Construction of Collective Threat

The second strategy through which presidents shape identity is the naming of challenges and adversaries. Within the Discourse Historical Approach this constitutes a referential strategy establishing a distinction between an in group and an out group, since the identification of a common threat generates shared purpose and a warrant for collective action. The threats named differ substantially between the two national traditions, since American presidents characteristically name abstract dangers such as division and cynicism whereas Nigerian presidents characteristically name tangible ones such as corruption, insurgency and infrastructural collapse. President Clinton identified a national disposition of drift as the adversary, declaring that the nation had drifted and that the drifting had eroded its resources, fractured its economy and shaken its confidence (line 12). President Bush named internal division:

“While many of our citizens prosper, others doubt the promise, even the justice, of our own country. The ambitions of some Americans are limited by failing schools and hidden prejudice and the circumstances of their birth; and sometimes our differences run so deep, it seems we share a continent, but not a country.” (line 7)

The adversary in Bush’s account is the prejudice and cynicism that prevent some citizens from believing in the national promise, and his remedy is the reaffirmation of shared ideals rather than the assignment of blame to any group. President Biden similarly named division itself, supplementing this with a list of abstract adversaries comprising “anger, resentment and hatred. Extremism, lawlessness, violence, disease, joblessness, and hopelessness” (line 9). In Nigeria the challenges named are concrete and are directly experienced by citizens irrespective of region or ethnicity, and President Obasanjo named corruption as the principal adversary:

“Corruption, the greatest single bane of our society today, will be tackled head-on at all levels. ... The beneficiaries of corruption in all forms will fight back with all the foul means at their disposal. We shall be firm with them. There will be no sacred cows.” (lines 20 to 21)

The register is militant throughout, with corruption to be tackled head on, its beneficiaries expected to fight back and no exemption to be granted to any person, and the argumentation rests on the topos of the common enemy, according to which a harm suffered universally requires a response undertaken universally. President Yar'Adua named the Niger Delta crisis as a matter of strategic importance requiring urgent attention (line 13). President Buhari named an armed adversary directly, declaring that “the most immediate is Boko Haram’s insurgency” and that the country could not claim to have defeated the insurgents “without rescuing the Chibok girls and all other innocent persons held hostage” (line 18), a reference that personalises the adversary and supplies an emotionally powerful focus for national unity, since their

recovery becomes a shared undertaking that transcends ethnic and confessional boundaries. Across the five Nigerian addresses, therefore, the adversaries named are concrete, measurable and directly experienced.

Envisioning a Unified Future: The Discursive Construction of Collective Destiny

The third strategy is the projection of a shared future, an argumentation resting on the topos of hope, according to which collective effort under the leadership of the present speaker will produce a desirable outcome. American presidents characteristically project abstract or idealistic futures involving global leadership, democratic fulfilment or the recovery of past greatness, whereas Nigerian presidents characteristically project concrete futures involving electricity, infrastructure, employment and food security. President Clinton's projected future consisted not in the construction of anything new but in the reactivation of existing strengths, since his claim that "there is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America" (line 16) implies that the essential soundness of the nation remains intact and requires only release. President Biden projected a moral rather than a material future:

"Together we will write an American story of hope, not fear. Of unity not division, of light not darkness. A story of decency and dignity, love and healing, greatness and goodness." (line 35)

Biden promises neither roads nor employment but a different national narrative, and the future he envisages is accordingly one of reconciliation and restored national character. In the Nigerian addresses the projected future is considerably more concrete. President Obasanjo enumerated an extensive list of priorities including education, the debt burden, corruption, infrastructure comprising water supply, energy, telecommunications, ports, airways and railways, the resuscitation of manufacturing, job creation, poverty alleviation, housing and health services (lines 27 to 41), and further undertook to work out measures for implementation within the first six months (line 18), thereby generating both urgency and a standard against which performance might be assessed. President Yar'Adua projected a methodical future organised around a seven point agenda (line 9). President Jonathan projected a developmental future:

"We must grow the economy, create jobs, and generate enduring happiness for our people. ... Over the next four years, attention will be focused on rebuilding our infrastructure. We will create greater access to quality education and improved health care delivery. We will pay special attention to the agricultural sector, to enable it play its role of ensuring food security and massive job creation for our people." (lines 20 and 27)

The expression concerning enduring happiness is notable, since it implies that material prosperity is instrumental to human flourishing rather than identical with it. President Tinubu projected the most detailed programme in the corpus, setting out principles of governance, security reforms, economic targets in growth and unemployment, a commitment to "one million new jobs in the digital economy" (line 50) and the creation of agricultural hubs throughout the nation (line 53). He also connected the future of national unity to material interdependence, insisting that "the South must not only seek good for itself but must understand that its interests are served when good comes to the North" and that citizens of every region "are all my people" (lines 36 to 37). The unity projected here is not idealistic but interested, since the argument advanced is that each region's prosperity depends materially upon the prosperity of the others.

Synthesis: The Discourse Historical Framework in Comparative Perspective

Drawing the three strategies together, the analysis establishes that presidents of both countries employ closely comparable linguistic instruments to shape national identity, but that the content, intensity and function of those instruments diverge according to historical circumstance and developmental position. American presidents, addressing a polity with more

than two centuries of constitutional continuity, may assume both a shared identity and stable institutions, and their task is accordingly to inspire citizens to honour ideals already established, to moderate internal division and to project national values abroad. Nigerian presidents, addressing a polity that returned to civilian rule only in 1999, may assume neither a shared identity nor stable institutions, and their task is accordingly to construct both. Their language is characteristically concrete, urgent and corrective; they invoke a recent and painful history; their adversaries are tangible; and their futures are framed in terms of infrastructure, employment, security and democratic consolidation. The comparative conclusion is that inaugural addresses are not ceremonial performances but strategic acts of nation building, in which language is used to construct a shared past, to name common challenges and to project a collective future, and whether the resulting narrative succeeds depends not only upon the rhetorical skill of the speaker but upon its correspondence with the historical experience of those who hear it.

Discussion of Findings

This section discusses the findings in the light of the Discourse Historical Approach and of related studies, taking the research questions in sequence.

The finding concerning the construction of power and authority may be read directly through the framework's account of referential strategy. Presidents in both corpora build authority by constituting a collective subject that includes speaker and audience, but the American presidents characteristically presume that the collective already exists. President Obama accordingly attributed national endurance not to the qualities of officeholders but to the citizenry, observing that the nation has carried on "not simply because of the skill or vision of those in high office, but because We the People have remained faithful to the ideals of our forbearers" (line 3), a formulation that builds authority by distributing it and thereby renders the audience both powerful and responsible. This finding is consistent with the observation of Onuoha (2021) that political leaders manipulate pronominal reference in order to move between solidarity and command. Nigerian presidents, by contrast, construct authority by naming a disorder and offering themselves as its remedy. President Obasanjo described a state in which "Government and all its agencies became thoroughly corrupt and reckless" (line 12) before proposing a New Dawn (line 15), so that his authority derives from his position as the agent of rescue. The strategy of constructing a crisis in order to occupy the position of its solution was noted by Suu'omany and Wada (2022) in their analysis of campaign rhetoric, and the present findings extend that observation from campaign discourse to inaugural discourse. A second component of authority in both corpora is historical anchoring. President Bush invoked "an unfolding American promise" (line 5), which supplies his administration with a legitimacy drawn from continuity. President Buhari, by contrast, used history negatively, observing that "some of their successors behaved like spoilt children breaking everything and bringing disorder to the house" (line 11), which supplies his administration with a legitimacy drawn from contrast. The use of a discredited predecessor as the warrant for a new administration is a recognised discursive operation within the frameworks discussed by Chilton and Schäffner (1997).

The finding concerning ideology may be read through the framework's account of predication and argumentation. The dominant ideology of the American corpus is a belief in a polity constituted by shared principle, in which democracy figures as a settled achievement. President Biden, addressing a Capitol that had been stormed weeks earlier, nevertheless affirmed that "democracy has prevailed" (line 3), an ideology of resilience holding that the system is stronger than any assault upon it, and reflecting the exceptionalist assumptions that Chilton and Schäffner (1997) identify as underlying much American political discourse. The dominant ideology of the Nigerian corpus is that of a polity still under construction, in which democracy figures as precious but vulnerable and in which candour about failure is itself

ideologically productive. President Yar'Adua acknowledged that “our elections had some shortcomings” (line 2), and the admission functions not as a concession of weakness but as a claim to trustworthiness. The requirement that a functioning state be actively legitimised rather than presumed is a recurrent theme in emerging democracies, a finding supported by Adeosun and Salawu (2019) in their study of Nigerian political discourse. The sharpest ideological divergence concerns corruption, which President Obasanjo described as “the greatest single bane of our society” (line 20) and which is named in every Nigerian address, whereas the American addresses scarcely employ the term and direct attention instead to abstractions such as division and fear.

The finding concerning national identity may be read through the framework's account of perspectivisation. American presidents narrate a heroic founding, and President Clinton accordingly reported that the founders knew the nation “would have to change” in order to endure (line 4), which converts change itself into an inherited value. Nigerian presidents narrate a difficult recent past, and President Obasanjo accordingly described “persistent deterioration” in the quality of governance (line 11), which renders the democratic present a comparative achievement. The construction of a shared past, whether celebratory or admonitory, is a foundational operation in the building of national identity, a strategy examined by Adegoju (2005) in his analysis of Obasanjo's rhetoric. Identity is further shaped through the naming of adversaries. President Trump located the adversary within the domestic political order, describing how “a small group in our nation's Capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost” (line 7), so that his collective subject was the people set against the establishment. President Buhari located it in material conditions, enumerating “insecurity, pervasive corruption, the hitherto unending and seemingly impossible fuel and power shortages” (line 10), which are conditions every citizen may agree to oppose. The construction of an oppositional dynamic in order to consolidate group cohesion is a classic discursive strategy identified in the work of van Dijk as reviewed by Nnamdi-Eruchalu (2018). Projected futures likewise shape identity, since American projections tend towards the abstract, as in Trump's undertaking that “we will make America great again” (line 50), while Nigerian projections tend towards the specific, as in Tinubu's commitment to “one million new jobs in the digital economy” (line 50) and to the creation of agricultural hubs throughout the nation (line 53).

Conclusion

Read through Ruth Wodak's Discourse Historical Approach, this study establishes that presidential inaugural addresses are neither empty ritual nor plain communication but are acts of political power in which language is used to construct authority, to articulate ideology and to shape identity while responding to concrete historical circumstance. Analysis of ten addresses drawn from the United States and Nigeria confirms that, notwithstanding a shared set of generic requirements, the content, intensity and function of the language employed depend upon the specific historical and political situation of each nation. American presidents speak from within a consolidated democracy and a position of international influence, and their rhetoric is correspondingly confident, aspirational and at times abstract, since their task is to maintain, renew and reinterpret an order that has been developing for more than two centuries. Nigerian presidents speak on behalf of a democracy whose institutions remain weak and whose authoritarian period is recent, and their rhetoric is correspondingly urgent and direct, naming failures explicitly and insisting upon visible and measurable improvement. The differences identified are accordingly not attributable to individual rhetorical skill or to cultural temperament but to divergent historical experience, and the recognition that political language is always situated within historical circumstance constitutes the principal theoretical finding of this study. An inaugural address cannot be adequately assessed against a universal standard of eloquence, since what appears as abstraction in one context may be the appropriate response to

institutional security and what appears as bluntness in another may be the appropriate response to institutional collapse. The proper question to ask of such a text is not whether it is well made but what task it was made to perform, and the analysis presented in this study has attempted throughout to answer that question rather than the other.

Suggestions for Further Study

The present study opens several avenues for subsequent research, and the following are offered as the most promising.

1. Future researchers should extend the comparison to inaugural addresses delivered in other emerging democracies, since a wider corpus would establish whether the divergences identified here are properly attributable to the distinction between consolidated and emerging democratic orders or whether they reflect factors specific to Nigeria and the United States.
2. A longitudinal study of Nigerian presidential discourse from 1999 onwards would trace the evolution of democratic language across the Fourth Republic and would permit assessment of whether the vocabulary of rupture and rescue documented in this study has diminished as civilian rule has become established.
3. Future studies should examine the reception of presidential addresses among ordinary citizens, since the present study analysed production rather than reception and cannot therefore establish whether the identities and futures constructed in these texts were accepted, contested or ignored by those to whom they were addressed.
4. The contribution of speechwriters to the formation of discursive strategy merits investigation, since the attribution of rhetorical choices to presidents themselves is a convention of analysis rather than a demonstrated fact, and research into the drafting process would clarify the relative contributions of principal and team.
5. A multimodal analysis incorporating visual, gestural and performative elements would extend the findings considerably, since the Discourse Historical Approach is applicable to modes beyond the verbal and the inaugural address is performed as well as a written text.

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