

Language and Class Resistance in Nigeria: A Foucauldian Perspective

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Abstract

Twentieth century philosopher—Michel Foucault was known to have introduced the concept of discourse theory, in a bid to offer contextual analyses on how people think and talk about a subject which influenced how they acted in relation to that subject. The basic premise of discourse theory is that, through the manipulation of words, discourses had the power to inculcate specific forms of behavior through regulated communication and power processes. In this paper, we draw from discourse theory in analyzing how class resistance, through the use of subversive language(s), manifests within the Nigerian socio-political landscape. Through an inferential reading and contextual analysis of the literature on discourse theory, we discover a nexus between the use of Nigerian Pidgin English (and slang language) among the dominated class and a circumvention of social norms. Further, the work recommends that, beyond the overt forms of protest (rallies and revolts), more deserving of attention is the subtle and pacifist forms of protest within Nigerian civil society; the essence that discourse theory persuasively captures.

Keywords/concepts: Foucault, discourse theory, subversion, class resistance, Nigerian Pidgin English, slang language

Introduction

Quite often, when the phenomena of protest or resistance is explored, it is within the context of armed struggle, non-violent protests, sit-outs, marches and demonstrations. Only rarely is protest or resistance studied within the context of how speech, language, and words are in themselves acts of resistance, or how certain forms of communication take on subversive dimensions, thereby transforming power-relations within a society. Yet in everyday life, individuals and groups through various euphemisms, slangs, voice and even silences indulge in acts of resistance to an intolerable order of things. These processes of meaning making through regulated communication has been recognised in Feminist studies (Gal 1991; 1995; Keenan 1974; Irvine 1979) but has seldom been studied in the broader context of resistance from a class perspective where the underprivileged attempt to usurp through language the social realities constructed by elites. This study therefore attempts to explore how Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) as a language and communication medium is used by the less privileged in Nigerian society as forms of resistance to the inequalities that exists within society with regards to what is considered criminal. More importantly, the study intends to buttress how understanding Foucault's discourse theory is important in the understanding of discourse-induced power transformation process.

This work is divided into three parts. The first part explores the theoretical underpinnings of Foucault's discourse theory, and the knowledge-power dynamic which is occasioned through the manipulation of words or regulated communication. Secondly, the paper discusses Nigerian Pidgin English and its centrality in the way the Nigerian masses manipulate words, and wean them of their legal significance, hence transforming power-relations within the society through these new forms of communication and use of subversive terminologies. In the third part, three of these subversive words are introduced: *Settlement*, as a deodorized word for bribery, *runs girl*—a euphemism for subverting the significance of the term prostitute, and *Yahoo boy* as a watered-down version of fraudster. These words and their emergence as new forms of knowledge are explored here in the context of Foucault's discourse theory, and how through the use of NPE to invent and accentuate them within the society, they assume a commonsensical, if not culturally normative position. The paper also argues that while these subversive words are generally perceived as innocent or taken for granted, they are potent acts of protest and resistance, and in fact, they reorder power balances between the dominant and dominated classes of society.

An Overview of Foucault's Discourse Theory

The discourse theory is premised on the assumption that, through the manipulation of words, discourses had the power to inculcate specific forms of behaviour through regulated communication and power processes (Deacon 2006; Pitsoe and Letseka 2013; Limberman 1997). In other words, power as it manifests within a society is teetered to a field of knowledge (Foucault 1977).

Foucault considered that a knowledge-power dynamic exists in the society, and that this reality is predicated on the use of labels, words, languages and narratives, to imagine, create and acculturate in public life certain social conditions that follows with it specific forms of behaviour. As Kalberg (2005) succinctly described, the ways we think and talk about a subject has a direct influence in the ways we reflect and act in relation to that subject. In effect, discourses formed the bedrock of how social realities are constituted and altered (Miller 1982).

In *Orders of Discourse*, Foucault noted that "...there is barely a society without its major narratives told, retold, and varied; formulae, texts, ritualised texts to be spoken in well-defined circumstances; things said once, and conserved because people suspect some hidden secret or wealth lies buried within." (Foucault 1971: 12).

Words therefore represents memory and meaning, that can come to have far-reaching ramifications, beyond those who articulated it, uniting, as it were, all those whom the reality of those words speak to (Ploger 2008). Along the discourse continuum therefore lays a certain number of new verbal acts which are reiterated, discussed, transformed, assume commonsensical status and becomes normative (Foucault, 1971). These verbal acts can emanate from the state or from the civil society, each side hauling into the discourse continuum their verbal acts; and along that continuum—discourse and counter discourses remains infinitely contested.

Discourse is also implicated in class struggles and power hierarchies within a society. The power hierarchies that exists between political elites and ordinary citizens and how state laws apply to each is a function of discourse, in the sense that there is a shared conception from either divide of the social strata of what constitutes right or wrong. Yet it is the elites who frame the discourse of what citizens must do and what they must avoid. As Yates and Hiles (2010) reckoned, discourses institutes certain social norms, conditioning individual perception of things, and provide support for institutions that reproduce power relations.

The discourse emanating from the dominated class are products of their discontent, angst, and frustration towards the existing norms produced by the dominant class. And as Foucault suggested, human beings are a confessional animal—and tied to this nature they have a characteristic way of producing discourse through the revelations of their desires and transgressions (Love 1989). By uttering therefore, specific words that speak of our desires and transgressions we haul to the society a reality to be evaluated, and for its acceptability or intolerability to be ascertained.

Implicit in the production of discourse is what Foucault termed—*the rules of exclusion*. The rules of exclusion is the prime determinant of what discourses becomes acceptable and what becomes prohibited (Graham et al. 1991; Pentzold and Seidenglanz 2006). Therefore in this politics of verbal communication, people take to cognizance what can be discussed, to whom, in what circumstances, and in what environment can this discussion be had or can a specific language be used.

In effect, languages that serve to subvert state-centric discourses are used among the dominated class, between themselves, and among all who share similar realities. These discourses are not predicated on directly challenging the state institutions but to tacitly supplant them in public consciousness. As a result it circumvents an old order (albeit in a pacifist way) and enforces a new one through the gradual spread of the new discourse.

The rules of exclusion is motivated by *logophobia*—a sort of mute terror of spoken things that could possibly be violent and querulous, leaving the discourse to be tamed and disarmed (Foucault 1971; Flynn 1981). In some cases therefore, the response to this fear of certain words is not silence, rather counter-narratives, or the introduction of a deodorized version of the feared word or expression to render them more socially acceptable. When such feared words have legal consequences or form the basis for which wrongdoers can be arrested, fined or jailed, the replacement of such words by other expressions that strip them of their legal essence, outrage factor or any criminal implications could be seen as resistance through discourse. This is possible because the capability to shape discourse is not an exclusive privilege of the dominant class, rather can be exercised through and by the dominated as well (Daudi 1983). In essence, state-centric and public-emanated discourses can be seen as a form of contestation for what narrative prevails in the society.

Nigerian Pidgin English, Slang Language and the Configuration of Resistance Through Discourse

Nigerian Pidgin English, also known as Anglo-Nigerian Pidgin or Broken English, is the language structure within which the dominated class register their protest and resistance through subversive discourse. The language itself provides for an interethnic communication avenue that collapses the often palpable ethnic cleavages that divides the country. NPE originated in 17th century following contact between the local people and Portuguese traders, and given Nigeria's linguistic heterogeneity, it has since assumed the place of a lingua franca (Babalola and Taiwo 2009). It is by far more widely spoken than English (the officially recognised lingua franca) and enjoys more sociostratal depth as members of the lower social strata consider it their preferred means of communication (Maan 1993). The point has been made by a number of scholars (Opeibi 2007; Gunn 2008; Odedeji 2013) that it is the language's idiomatic nature that draws people from all cultural barriers to identify with it. Further to this, it occupies an indispensable place as the favourite lingua franca due to perception of it as socially, politically and ethnically detached (Mensah 2011).

Importantly, Osoba (2015) noted that since Nigerians of the lower class appropriated the NPE as an exclusive medium of expression, Nigerian elites came to deride it as an open or formal means of interaction. This also speaks directly as to why it has served as a veritable tool to challenge state-centric discourse of what constitutes good or bad within the society.

In line with Marshall McLuhan's famous statement that 'the medium is the message', NPE fosters a unique bond for speakers of this language, creating a sense of shared humanity as victims of poor leadership as well as a shared derision for their political leaders (Guun 2008; Terna-Abah 2010).

The NPE is the preferred language of Nigerian youths (who make up the bulk of the country's population) as they conceptualise their identity, enhance solidarity as well as reinforce anti-establishment discourse through subversive words and euphemisms (Mensah 2011). Even within the Nigerian music sector, a globally acclaimed industry built on the determination of this forgotten class, the primary language of expression is the NPE. This allows for a targeted discourse to gain widespread dissemination, because the lyrical contents often speak of two main realities—the joys of succeeding at life or the pains of surviving in a country that destroys the future of its citizens.

These anti-establishment discourses permeate virtually all public spaces in the society—marketplace, university campuses, religious gatherings, social events etc. where their protestations at the state of events in the country is communicated, and along this continuum—old words take on new forms, meanings are then transformed and new social realities are conditioned. It is within this discourse process that the normalisation of wrongdoing is constructed, and through their repeated public use, specific words are able to supplant previously-held norms, albeit ones that were eventually considered strangulating or perpetuate a status-quo of inequality. In the next section, the paper therefore looks at the three important words that have served to supplant such state-centric narrative of crime namely: *settlement*, *runs girl* and *Yahoo boy*.

Bribery and the Discourse of 'Settlement'

The term 'settlement' is a euphemised word for bribery, an illegal act which is enshrined in the ICPC (Independent Corrupt Practices Commission) Act¹ and for which offenders are summarily sanctioned. In the country's civil service, healthcare establishments, tertiary institutions and in most other public institutions, bribes are offered to quicken or fast-track certain activities or force the hands of those in charge to carry out specific favours.

The word settlement in a literary sense connotes the idea of bringing to an amicable end an intractable situation. It is a word that denotes the restoration of order and peace, yet the uttering of the word in the Nigerian context involves the offering of bribe which corrupts and destroys social order. For example, in educational institutions, students offer 'settlement' (also referred to as *sorting*) to course instructors to be able to pass a course/module despite their performances warranting a fail. For many youths in the university, this has become a permissible way of doing things, and their justifications drawn from the idea that the educational infrastructures are dilapidated and this is caused by the greed and corruption of the dominant class.

Settlement has over the years become a cultural norm due to the framing of it as a normal way of getting things done. As Adegoju (2003) noted, the widespread involvement in this act of ‘settlement’ has created an impression of it being generally acceptable, and that one could and should ‘settle’ their way out of any legal or bureaucratic obstacles they come across. It is worth noting especially that the logophobia of uttering the word ‘bribe’ gave rise to the refurbishing of the expression to strip it first of any legal consequences, and importantly to render it incapable of eliciting outrage of any kind. Given that corruption rules unabated in elite and political circles, the dominated class feel under no obligation to be law-abiding themselves, necessitating thus the subversive discourse.

Prostitution and the Discourse of *Runs Girl*

Prostitution—the bartering of one’s body for sexual purposes in exchange for money, has been codified as illegal according to Nigeria’s Criminal Code.² It has been normal therefore for state security agencies to arrest those found hanging on street corners or their merchants, as well as closing down brothels. Over the years however, the idea of a female offering sexual pleasures for money became reformed through the articulation of the euphemised term—*runs girl*, which then served to supplant the more blunt and worrying term—prostitute.

The difference between runs girl and prostitute was not one of essence but of process. In other words, instead of hanging on street corners, girls were linked up with men by their merchants (Pimps) through phone call meetings or face to face invitations. In effect, while it was the same offence of bartering sex for money, it was no longer referred to as prostitution. The runs girl phenomena had gone on to become a thing of pride for many girls who derive abundant monetary compensation for such indulgence. It no longer denoted immorality or illegitimate trade, rather it denoted financial independence from indulgers.

The logophobia towards the word—prostitute was triggered by the illegal conception of it, and the shame which indulgers endured. The runs girl narrative had to be invented as a form of resistance against both the shame and legal encumbrances surrounding prostitution. As Foucault and Deleuze (1977) noted, the mere act of ‘speaking out’ can serve as a potent means of collapsing existing power structures by those whom those structures have rendered powerless. For a number of Nigerian young females, especially tertiary institution students or recently graduated ones, being a runs girl is perceived as the quickest means to financial stability or in fact economic survival. Put simply, to be one is to be considered smart, and fiery independent.

In a country where graft, unending looting by the political class has restricted significantly, the integration of youth into economic life, these youth have therefore found it untenable to allow the same state elites (state law-makers or legislative apparatus) to define what constitutes crime, nor have a say on what they chose to do with their bodies. In other words, to circumvent the legal significance of the law, they had to redefine what they do.

Prostitution is then spoken of as *runs*, and a prostitute is therefore a *runs girl*. As the discourse of *runs girl* becomes accentuated within the society, so does the permissibility of it, which then weakens the resolve of the state to enforce sanctions for the vice. In this way, power balances between the dominant and dominated class is redrawn through discourse.

Advance-Fee Fraud and the Discourse of *Yahoo Boy*

The discourse theory explains the transformation of words and codes used to denote the criminal act of cybercrimes, most notably—Advance fee fraud, and how indulgers have carefully played down the outrageousness of their crimes by renaming the criminal act. Given how rampant this offence has become among youth in most urban areas in Nigeria, this class of actors found it exigent to strip the act of its criminal connotations, and as such prevent people from responding to such acts with opprobrium.

Advance-Fee Fraud is a notorious internet scam for which Nigeria has been considered its global epicentre. In orchestrating this crime, email messages are sent to multitude of email addresses notifying them of the sender being the sole inheritor of vast wealth left behind by a dead relative, but some advance fee is needed to clear certain outstanding legal or family obstacles. Other samples of such scam emails allude to the sender being in possession of oil wells to sell at a give-away price in Nigeria, or some alluding to being relations of a dead African leader who bequeathed on them in a will his entire wealth. Acts like these are codified in the Nigerian Criminal Code in Section 419³ and can attract lengthy prison term if the suspect is convicted.

However, young and older adults, university students, and sometimes secondary school students constantly indulge in this criminal act, albeit riding on the back of a euphemised pseudonym—*Yahoo boy*. No longer do they consider themselves as fraudsters but rather as *Yahoo boys*. This deodorized version of a criminal racket ensures that the crime loses its force of law and that it becomes rather a normal order of things. While the police or law enforcement agencies are still likely to pick up those suspected to indulge in these acts, the narrative of it as permissible ensures that perpetrators never face admonishment from other people within the civil society.

With youth unemployment in Nigeria estimated to be about 70%, young people in Nigeria—especially from the educated but low income families feel no remorse for indulging in this crime, since there is scarcely hope of employment after university training. The reframing of this discourse also stems from the acknowledgement that the political class who had marked down advance-fee fraud as criminal have no right to do so because they are themselves embezzlers of public funds. Interestingly, not only is the phenomena of *Yahoo boy* an expression that resists the state-centric label of ‘fraudster’, it has since become in a sense—a badge of honour, expressed among urban youth to reinforce an identity of citizens fending for themselves.

It no longer signified criminality but financial independence. It was also popularised in Nigerian pop music by a number of artists, especially Olu Maintain in his 2009 song ‘Yahoozee’ and Kelly Handsome in his song in the same year titled ‘Maga don pay’ (which in context means: the scammed client has paid the fee). In this way, the discourse of advance-fee fraud which is itself criminal was transformed to something acceptable, and rendered ‘cool’ through pop music, and in today’s Nigeria, young people are proud to announce their occupation as ‘Yahoo boys’. In this vein, the power balance has shifted, whereby the elite narrative faced the discursive resistance of the dominated class.

Recommendations

In public and academic discourse, the subject of protest is often discussed within the framework of rallies, sit-ins, civil unrests, rebellion, and even armed struggle. Ali Mazrui who wrote on protest theories divided movements of protest into four broad categories, which are: protest of conservation, restoration, transformation and corrective censure (Mazrui, 1970). Interestingly, given how transformative the politics of language can be in a society, there is a temptation to consider Foucault’s discourse theory a component part of Mazrui’s transformation protest framework. Mazrui (1970) defined protest of transformation as manifestation of profound disaffection with an existing system of values. Hence, those who seek to transform any given socio-political status quo are pitted against those who are obstinately upholding it. Incidentally, Mazrui framed this theory in the context of overt protests or rebellion, which makes a relationship between protest of transformation and the discourse theory (protest derived from discourse and spoken words) at best tenuous, and at worse, non-existent. In Foucault’s discourse theory, the process is most likely covert, while the power balance is naturally subtle.

Scholars of African civil society must therefore begin to pay attention to the dilutions, reframing, and inventions of subversive words within an existing language, and how they connote protest, albeit in a pacifist way. The dispossessed or dominated class would naturally deploy different methods of making their discontent at the existing socio-political order known; sometimes through violent uprisings, pro-democracy rallies, civil disobedience, to mention a few. However, in political environments where these sorts of activities involve a lot of risk, people become more naturally inclined to show disaffection through the discourse they employ to deodorize their own illicit acts just like political authorities do. In Nigeria, these verbal acts, it must be noted, has not caused the political elites to desist from their various acts of corruption (and other political excesses) nor is it necessarily predicated on achieving that. Instead, these verbal acts in some way democratise the space for impunity; making it possible for the dominated class (just like the dominant class) to get away with breaking the law. This is the crux of class resistance through discourse. The dominated clearly are resisting the status quo which reserves punishment for breaking state laws exclusively for them. The discourse theory reveals that even though people may not carry placards to occupy the streets; they are also capable of resisting the status quo in some other way; and in this case through discourse.

Again, African scholars will be greatly served in considering how the discourse theory opens up new possibilities of socio-political enquiry, and in fact, how pacifism can be a potent medium of transforming state-society relations.

Conclusion

This paper analysed class resistance in Nigeria through subversive and regulated communication. It drew from Foucault's discourse theory in analysing how the knowledge-power dynamic is embedded in spoken words and how specific forms of communication regulate power balances within a society. By drawing from Foucault, one is not only able to understand the language of politics, but more importantly—the politics of language. It is by unpacking this politics of language that we are able to understand why certain words are euphemised or deodorised to take on a different meaning, and through widespread usage in public parlance, they become commonsensical and usurp previous, albeit uncomfortable expressions of the same phenomenon.

Nigerian Pidgin English, giving its argot and slangy nature, provides a veritable tool with which the discourse of the dominated class are imagined, articulated and acculturated within the society. While on the surface, these expressions (*settlement, runs girl, Yahoo boy*) are likely to be passed off as innocent vocabularies, they are in fact expressions loaded with protest and resistance and have double-pronged consequences. First, these expressions are predicated on weaning off the criminal significance of each of these social vices, and secondly, they serve as an affront to the dominant class—as the dominated class consciously wade their way out of criminal responsibilities by reframing the language of their offence(s), making it possible for them, just like the corrupt elites, to circumvent social norms of their own.

Endnotes

1. The ICPC Act provides offences and punishments such as Acceptance or attempt to receive or request for gratification by an official directly or indirectly will be punishable for imprisonment of seven years (Independent Corrupt Practices Commission).
2. Section 225 of the Nigerian Criminal Code, states that ‘Every male person who knowingly lives wholly or in part on the earnings of prostitution; or in any public place persistently solicits or importunes for immoral purposes, shall be liable to imprisonment for two years’ (Nigerian Criminal Code).

3. It provides that any person who by any false pretence, and with intent to defraud, obtains from any other person, anything capable of being stolen, or induces any other person to deliver to any person anything capable of being stolen, or induces any other person to deliver to any person anything capable of being stolen, is guilty of a felony, and is liable to imprisonment for three years (Okogbule and Nkpolu 2006).

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