Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.7 No.4 December, 2024; p.g. 269 – 277; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

PEELING BACK THE LAYERS: A MORPHO-SYNTACTIC STUDY OF THE LANGUAGE OF NWABUEZE'S *A PARLIAMENT OF VULTURES AS* A REFLECTION OF THE NIGERIA'S STATE

ONUEGWUNWOKE, CYNTHIA ADAEZE, PhD
Department of English Language and Literature
Faculty of Arts, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education,
Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria
cynthia.onuegwunwoke@alvanikoku.edu.ng

&

AMADI, GLORIA UKAMAKA, PhD
Department of English and Literature
Faculty of Arts, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education,
Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria
ukezeukwu@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explored a morpho-syntactic analysis of the language of Emeka Nwabueze's A Parliament of Vultures as a reflection of the state of Nigeria, today. This was done by examining the use of morpho-syntactic transformations, like passive voice, nominalisation, future tense, to obscure political actions, deflect responsibility, and manipulate public perception. The study contrasted this linguistic strategy with the more direct and confrontational language used in protest movements, which employs active voice and imperatives to challenge power structures and demand accountability. In the Nigerian context, political speeches and media narratives often employ vague and abstract language to mask issues such as corruption, insecurity, nepotism, and political theft. Through morpho-syntactic analysis, it becomes evident that these syntactic tools serve to depersonalise responsibility, present a distorted reality, and foster a sense of control and legitimacy among politicians. The theoretical framework that guided the study is anchored on Chomsky's Generative Grammar which was formally, introduced in his book Syntactic Structures (Chomsky, 1957). By applying Chomsky's framework, the study highlighted how language shapes political ideologies and power dynamics, emphasising the role of syntactic structures in constructing and maintaining social hierarchies. The study concluded with recommendations for improving political communication in Nigeria, including promoting transparency, educating the public on linguistic manipulation, and encouraging activists to use empowering language to challenge the status quo. Thus, this research offers valuable insights into the intersection of language, politics, and power, contributing to a deeper understanding of how linguistic choices reflect and influence governance and social change in Nigeria.

Keywords: Morphology, Syntax, Political speeches, Transformation, Linguistic choices.

Introduction

Nigeria is one of Africa's most populous country and she is endowed with abundant resources, yet it grapples with systemic socio-political challenges that significantly, hinder its

development. It is commonly known that issues such as corruption, insecurity, poor governance, nepotism, tribalism, religious conflicts, and political theft permeate its public life, undermining stability and progress, even as it is stated by Nwabueze's character in the play known as Otobo; "…. They don't even care about brain drain. Look at our universities. What is the quality of intellectual there? In this dungeon we call a nation, intellectual is a curse. If I were you, I'll check out of this den…", (Nwabueze, p. 77). These issues, which form the core of Nigeria's national discourse, are reflected in both literary and real-world political narratives. Emeka Nwabueze's *A Parliament of Vultures* is a key work that uses allegory and satire to critique these societal flaws. This of course, is seen through the metaphor of "vultures", the play exposes the predatory nature of governance, where leaders prey on the nation's resources at the expense of the people. The play presents a vivid allegorical representation of a nation ruled by self-serving leaders, symbolised as vultures, whose greed and mismanagement devastate the populace.

Incidentally, by dissecting themes such as corruption, exploitation, and division, *A Parliament of Vultures* mirrors the realities of governance in Nigeria, making it a compelling text for comparative analysis with real-world events. It is appalling that even the looters are aware of what they are doing like we see in the character named, Mr. Brown jokingly noted, "Yeah. Prof. Prof. He was a factory worker in London. We asked him to take that title in order to make our party look intellectual. You see, our people are obsessed with titles. He doesn't have a certificate…. I'm a political juggernaut", (Nwabueze, p. 11)

Comparatively, while exploring the morpho-syntactic features, the study examines the parallels between the fictional world of Nwabueze's play and the socio-political context of Nigeria. It explores how the play's themes, characters, and narratives align with the realities of poor governance, systemic corruption, insecurity, and social injustice in the country. By drawing connections between the play and Nigeria's historical and contemporary realities, this analysis underscores the relevance of literature as a tool for societal critique and a call to action. As such, through this comparative analysis, the study aims to not only highlight the enduring relevance of Nwabueze's *A Parliament of Vultures* but also to emphasise the urgent need for systemic reform and accountability in Nigeria. Literature and real-world narratives converge here to illuminate the pathways for societal transformation, challenging both leaders and citizens to envision a future free from the vices that currently define governance and public life in the country.

According to Onuegwunwoke & Amadi (2024), "We all know that language is a dynamic tool for communication….", p. 73. In the same vein, Chomsky explains that syntax is not just a tool for communication but a reflection of human cognition and ideology. In political language, the transformations of deep structures (underlying intentions) into surface structures (public discourse) play a critical role in shaping public understanding and manipulating political narratives. For example, by examining the passive voice, we can understand how politicians in Nigeria avoid direct responsibility for issues like corruption or electoral fraud. Through nominalisation and modality, politicians are able to present abstract ideals without committing to specific, actionable steps. This is evident in Nigerian political speeches that use phrases like, *steps are being taken* or *measures are being put in place*, which obscure concrete action and reduce the pressure on the government to deliver tangible results. On the other hand, protest discourse employs active voice, imperatives, and direct-action verbs, pushing for

immediate and transparent change. In addition, Onuegwunwoke & Amadi (2024) stress that, "Pathetically, greed and corruption remain critical challenges in Nigeria, undermining socio-economic development and public trust", p.8. This syntactic difference highlights the ongoing battle for accountability and justice in Nigerian society, where the language of governance seeks to obscure while the language of protest seeks to expose and demand.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that is guiding this study is anchored on Chomsky's theory of Generative Grammar which was formally introduced in his book *Syntactic Structures* (Chomsky, 1957), where he moved away from the behaviourist perspective that dominated the study of language at the time. Prior to Chomsky, linguistic studies were largely grounded in structuralism, particularly, the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, which focused on the relationship between signs and their meanings. Chomsky's theory challenged these ideas by positing that language is not simply a set of learned behaviours but is instead, rooted in the cognitive structures of the human brain.

Generative grammar laid the foundation for Chomsky's later developments in linguistics, including the Government and Binding Theory (1981) and the Minimalist Programme (1995), both of which further explored the structure of language and its universal aspects. In Syntactic Structures (1957), Chomsky explains the role of transformations in generating sentences from a deep structure. He claims that; "The essential notion of grammar… is that it is a system of rules which generates a particular set of sentences, the sentences of a language", (Chomsky, 1957, p. 13). This transformation process allows us to understand how different sentence structures emerge from a common underlying form.

Dedicatedly, in his later work, Chomsky further developed the concept of Universal Grammar. He argues that "The theory of UG… aims to describe the common properties of the human language faculty", (Chomsky, 1986, p. 4). This view posits that all humans share an innate linguistic capacity that allows them to produce and understand any language, regardless of cultural background or linguistic exposure. He further elaborates the distinction between competence and performance in Reflections on Language (1975), stating that, "Linguistic performance is the actual use of language, which can be affected by various external factors such as memory limitations, while competence is the idealised, unconscious knowledge that one has of their language", (Chomsky, 1975, p. 4). This distinction is critical for understanding how generative grammar focuses on abstract linguistic rules rather than the external conditions of language use.

Incidentally, Chomsky's generative grammar focuses on the syntax of a language, how words and phrases are combined to form sentences. He introduced the idea that languages have an underlying, abstract structure, known as the deep structure, which is transformed into a surface structure through a set of grammatical rules or transformations. For instance, the sentence, *The cat chased the mouse* has a deep structure that can be transformed into different surface structures through rules that alter word order, for example, *The mouse was chased by the cat* or *Was the cat chased by the mouse?*

In addition, the phrase structure rule asserts that sentences are made up of hierarchically structured components, where different types of phrases (noun phrases, verb phrases, etc.)

combine to form larger structures. Chomsky's famous phrase structure rules (PSRs) describe how these elements fit together. For example, a basic PSR might state that a sentence (S) consists of a noun phrase (NP) followed by a verb phrase (VP), S NP + VP. Thus; Chomsky introduced transformational grammar as a way to explain how sentences with different surface structures can be derived from the same underlying deep structure. The transformations can involve the addition or removal of elements or rearranging the order of words. For instance, a declarative sentence can be transformed into an interrogative form.

Declarative: You are going to the market.
Interrogative: Are you going to the market?

One of the central components of Chomsky's theory is the idea of Universal Grammar (UG) which a set of principles shared by all human languages. Chomsky argues that every child is born with an innate knowledge of these principles, which allow them to rapidly, acquire the specific language(s) they are exposed to from birth. This universal set of grammatical principles is thought to be hard-wired into the brain. He distinguished between linguistic competence (the innate knowledge of language) and linguistic performance (the actual use of language in real-world situations). Generative grammar focuses primarily on competence. that is, the ideal speaker-hearer's ability to produce and understand grammatical sentences, as opposed to performance, which can be influenced by external factors like memory or social context.

Linguistic Analysis of Politics in Nigerian Contexts

Ideally, to study the morpho-syntactic analysis of political language, particularly, within the Nigerian context, we have to examine how specific syntactic structures and word forms (morphology) are used in political discourse to influence, manipulate, and conceal political realities. This analysis, underpinned by Chomsky's Generative Grammar, focuses on understanding the deep structure of political statements and how they are transformed into surface structures that align with particular political goals. In essence, this type of analysis uncovers how syntactic patterns reflect and shape power dynamics, governance, and the relationship between politicians and the public. Political speech often relies on certain syntactic transformations to create ambiguity, shield the speaker from accountability, and project authority. By analysing the syntactic structures, we can understand how politicians manipulate sentence construction to convey specific ideologies and messages while avoiding direct confrontation or responsibility. In the Nigerian context, syntactic structures used by politicians often include the following;

1) The Use of Passive Voice: Politicians frequently use passive constructions to obscure responsibility and shift blame. E.g., *Steps are being taken to address the issues of corruption.* The use of the passive voice here depersonalises the action and removes the responsibility from the government or specific actors, making the message less direct and avoiding accountability. The right syntactic structure that should be used in this setting should be, *The government (or relevant authority) is taking steps to address the issues of corruption.* In this structure, S ⟶ NP (AUX) VP, where NP = The government, and VP = is taking steps to address the issues of corruption. Let's represent the sentence into phrase structure below;

The government is taking steps to address the issues of corruption.

NP = Det (The) + N (government)

VP = AUX (is) + V (taking) + NP (steps) +PP (to address the issues of corruption)
PP = P (to) + VP (address the issues of corruption)
VP = V (address) + NP (the issues of corruption)
NP = Det (the) + N (issues) + PP (of corruption)
PP = P (of) + N (corruption)

(2) The Constant Use of Nominalisation: Nominalisation means turning verbs or adjectives into nouns, which often abstracts actions and reduces their emotional impact. E.g., *The administration is focused on ensuring justice and fairness*. Here, the verbs *ensure* and *focus* are nominalised into *ensuring* and *justice*, which abstract the action and remove urgency, presenting a more generalised and less concrete view of governance.

(3) The Use of Vague Quantifiers like, *all Nigerians*, *everyone*, or *most citizens* are used to generalise actions and outcomes, which are difficult to assess or measure. Example in a structure; *We will ensure that all Nigerians have access to quality healthcare.* While the intent seems noble, such generalisations do not specify the exact measures, timeline, or the practical implementation of the promise.

(4) The transformation from deep to surface structure in political speech is not just a linguistic phenomenon but a strategic tool used to manipulate meaning. Generative Grammar suggests that underlying syntactic structures can be transformed into different surface structures that reflect particular ideologies. This is significant in Nigerian political speech, where the way politicians phrase promises and explanations can reveal a lot about their intentions and the power dynamics at play. For instance, an active to passive transformation is often used to obscure the agent responsible for actions. Check the transformations below;

Active: The government will provide security.
Passive: Security will be provided.

Analysing the two structures above under Generative Grammar, the passive construction removes the direct reference to the government and focuses on the outcome, thereby reducing the pressure for specific government actions or timelines.

(5) In Nigerian political speeches, the syntax of governance especially when addressing issues like corruption, insecurity, or national policies often serves to reinforce power structures. Politicians use particular syntactic devices to frame issues in ways that minimise criticism or deflect blame. The use of modality (expressing necessity, possibility, or obligation) is also a key syntactic feature that helps shape perceptions of governance. For example, phrases like these ones below;

It is important that we address the issue of insecurity.
We must ensure that the economy improves.

Here, the modality creates a sense of inevitability or urgency, without specifying the means or accountability for achieving the goals. The syntactic use of modality helps to direct attention away from the difficulties of governance and onto idealised goals, which may or may not be achievable.

(6) In contrast to the strategic vagueness of political discourse, protest language in Nigeria often adopts a direct, active voice. Protesters tend to use imperatives and concrete action verbs to hold politicians accountable and demand immediate action. This form of discourse is aimed at challenging the power structures that politicians maintain through their linguistic manipulation. For example, a typical protest slogan might be; *End corruption now*! *End SARS!* The above sentence structures use imperative mood, demanding an immediate response from those in power. The use of direct language, with specific action verbs like, *end*, contrasts sharply with the more abstract and passive language of politicians. Protest discourse often breaks from the syntactic patterns seen in political language, opting for confrontational and transparent speech. By doing so, protestors directly challenge the status quo, highlighting the gap between political promises and lived realities. This use of active voice and simple structures exposes the limitations of the political class and forces a reckoning with societal issues.

Syntactic Analysis of Emeka Nwabueze's *A Parliament of Vultures*

(a) There is constant use of malapropism by the character known as Madam. Example; "Who do you call bo-fool"? (p. 46). This is used to expose the level of corruption in the play that education has no place and meaning for the ruling class. Unfortunately, we find this playing out in the Nigerian context where education has no place with the ruling class.

(b) Complex sentences in *A Parliament of Vultures* are often employed by characters in positions of power to obfuscate their true intentions, mirroring the verbose language of Nigerian politicians. For instance, Madam: "… we're not going to reduce the budget because some people who are allergic to enjoyment have opted out". (p. 73). Imagine the level of reasoning of a parliamentarian in the play and of course, this is the true state of our political context.

(c) The use of rhetorical structures that depict rottenness, e.g., Jossy: "What is wrong with building abroad"? (p. 75). For instance, in the play, a parliamentarian justifies corruption. Example: Madam: "When a child is bitten by a snake, he fears the earth worm. I've had my own share of poverty in the past. Now that God has buttered my bread, I'll never allow myself to be poor again. Not in this world, or even in the world to come. I'll make enough money to last me two lifetimes". (p. 101). Similarly, real-life political speeches in Nigeria often employ convoluted syntax to mask inefficiency or corruption, such as statements during budget presentations that obscure misappropriations.

(d) In the play, leaders coin terms to justify their actions. Example is seen in Madam's speech: "What have I achieved? Because I now live in my own fifty-hectre estate, completed three buildings in Commercial Avenue, and set up an import, and export business for my husband to manage, …. So far, I have been able to purchase only three different models of Mercedes, one model of BMW, and a Lexus, and sent my children to study in America". (p. 103).

Peeling the Back Layer through Comparison

The morpho-syntactic analysis of *The Parliament of Vultures* and real-world Nigerian narratives reveals how language shapes perceptions, justifies actions, and controls narratives. The play's allegorical representation of societal issues mirrors Nigeria's socio-political realities, making it a compelling text for exploring the intersection of literature, linguistics, and governance. By

analyzing the morphology and syntax of these narratives, this study underscores the power of language in perpetuating or challenging societal flaws, offering insights into the urgent need for linguistic and systemic reform in Nigeria.

In *A Parliament of Vultures*, the syntactic choices made by the characters in positions of power serve to obscure their true intentions. For instance, Brown, a character delivers a statement that exemplifies the authoritative and manipulative language often used by corrupt leaders; Mr. brown: "That's mere chicken feed. What is eight million? And remember that I spent a good part of it paying our hotel bills, purchasing flight tickets to London, New York, and Amsterdam, and buying presents for you…", (p. 104). The mixed nature of this sentence imposes a sense of inevitability, making dissent seem not only unwarranted but also dangerous. This type of syntax, which demands compliance, is a reflection of the authoritarian tendencies in both fictional and real-world political structures. Nigerian politicians often use similar syntactic structures to assert control. For example, in a 2015 speech by former President Goodluck Jonathan, he declared: "The will of the people is paramount, but it must also be guided by those who are entrusted with the power to lead" (Jonathan, 2015). This statement, though seemingly democratic, uses syntax to imply that leaders hold an unquestionable right to direct the nation, reinforcing a paternalistic and authoritarian view of governance.

The language of protests in Nigeria, such as during the #EndSARS movement, similarly uses straightforward syntax to rally support. One of the key slogans from the protests was: "End Police Brutality! End SARS!" This use of simple, direct sentences aimed to unify protesters around a clear cause. The contrast between the directness of protest language and the obfuscation used by leaders is central to both the play and real-world narratives. Corruption remains a defining issue in Nigerian governance.

Conclusion

This study reveals how linguistic structures are used to shape perceptions, conceal truths, and maintain power dynamics through the lens of Chomsky's Generative Grammar, we can better understand how politicians, activists, and the media use syntactic structures to control discourse, influence public opinion, and reinforce or challenge social hierarchies. In the case of *A Parliament of Vultures* by Emeka Nwabueze, the manipulation of language through syntactic structures such as passive constructions, nominalisation, and vague transformations mirrors real-world political discourse in Nigeria. Politicians often rely on these syntactic tools to obscure their responsibilities, shift blame, or manipulate public sentiment, especially in matters of governance, corruption, and national security. This linguistic strategy helps protect political power by deflecting scrutiny and presenting abstract, idealised versions of reality, while masking the true nature of policies and governance.

Recommendations

- The study of morpho-syntactic structures in political language should be integrated into civic education to foster a more critical and informed electorate. Nigerians should be encouraged to engage critically, with political speeches and media representations, identifying manipulative language tactics such as the use of passive voice, nominalisation, and other syntactic transformations that obscure accountability.

- Nigerian politicians and public officials should prioritise transparency in their communication by using clear, direct, and unambiguous language. Moving away from the use of passive constructions and abstract language will allow citizens to understand political actions, policies, and their potential consequences. This shift toward plain language can help combat corruption and improve public trust in government.

- There should be a concerted effort to raise public awareness about the ways in which language can be used to manipulate perceptions of power. Workshops, seminars, and media campaigns could focus on helping Nigerians recognise the syntactic tools used in political language to obscure truths or distract from pressing issues. Educating citizens on these linguistic tactics will empower them to hold politicians accountable for their actions.

- Activists and civil society organisations should continue to use direct and empowering language in their discourse to challenge political corruption, insecurity, and other social injustices. By employing active voice, concrete action verbs, and specific demands, protest rhetoric can remain grounded in the lived experiences of ordinary citizens, demanding immediate change. Continued advocacy for reform should focus on pushing for a shift from vague political promises to specific, actionable commitments.

- There is a need for further study into the relationship between syntax and political ideologies in Nigerian discourse. By applying generative grammar and other linguistic frameworks to political speech, protest slogans, and media reports, scholars can gain deeper insights into how language shapes political engagement and societal change. This study should also explore the impact of linguistic manipulation on the public's ability to critically engage with political issues and hold government officials accountable.

References

Adebayo, O. (2021). "Youth Protests in Nigeria: An Analysis of the #EndSARS Movement". *Journal of African Affairs*, 43(1), 25-36.

Chomsky, N. (1957). *Syntactic Structures*. The Hague: Mouton.

Chomsky, N. (1975). *Reflections on Language*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Chomsky, N. (1986). *Knowledge of Language*: Its Nature, Origin, and Use. New York: Praeger.

Chomsky, N. (1995). *The Minimalist Program*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Chomsky, N. (2002). *Syntactic Structures*. Mouton de Gruyter.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. Arnold.

Jonathan, G. (2015). Speech on National Unity and Leadership. Retrieved from [Nigerian Government Official Website].

Oluwole, O. (2020). *Corruption in Nigeria: A History of Political Theft*. Lagos: Academic Press.

Punch. (2015). Dasukigate: The $2.1 billion scandal. Retrieved from [www.punchng.com].

Ogunbiyi, A. (2017). *Ethnic Politics in Nigerian Governance: A Critical Review*. Abuja: University Press.

Ndubuisi, E. (2020). The Role of Social Media in Amplifying Nigerian Protests. Communication Studies Review, 12(3), 18-30.

Nwabueze, E. (2011). *A Parliament of Vultures*. Enugu: ABIC Books & Equip. Ltd.

Okon, J. (2019). Protest and Public Opinion in Nigeria. *West African Journal of Political Science*, 17(2), 89-102.

Onuegwunwoke, C. & Amadi, G. (2024). "Linguistic analysis of the variety of English spoken by educated individuals in Southeast through the lens of literary writers from Southeast". In IgboScholars International Journal of Igbo Scholars Forum, Nigeria. Vol. 17, No 3, December. Pp. 72-84 https://www.scholarsgoogle.com

Onegwunwoke, C. & Amadi, G (2024). "Greed and corruption in Nigeria: A morpho-syntactic analysis through the lens of Volpone by Ben Jonson". In Existentia: Concrescence Journal of Arts and Hummanities, Vol.2, Issue 1, Pp. 7-17. www.journals.casjournals.com/Index.php/ECOJAH