
Mental Spaces and Perceptual Experience in Inciting Speeches by Nigerian Military cum Political Leaders

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ABSTRACT

This study examined selected inciting comments of two Nigerian political leaders; General Muhammadu Buhari (Rtd.) and General T.Y. Danjuma (Rtd.) whose speeches at particular occasions caused disaffections amongst Nigerians. The research adopted an eclectic theoretical framework; mental spaces from cognitive linguistics and perceptual experience – an aspect of cognitive psychology to examine how human experiences affect perception and conceptualization of issues. The methodology used was a purposive selection of statements made by these two personalities who enjoy reverence from their supporters. The result of our findings indicates that, given their fame in the society and amongst their supporters, the speakers' utterances understudy and the

context, in which they occurred, produced two varied perceptions. The first was from the immediate audience, who are members of the speakers' in-group. To this group of people, the speaker's utterances were meant to lure them to action against other groups perceived as 'enemies'. The second perception was realized in the audience who are members of the speaker's out-group - who view the speaker's utterances as inciting statements meant to cause disaffection amongst the larger society. In both cases, the audiences arrived at their respective conclusions using their mental spaces that conjured to them negative assumptions against the others.

Keywords: Cognitive Linguistics, Perceptual Experience, Mental Spaces, Inciting Utterances

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Structured practitioners note

Perception and conceptions are notions that deal with mental space and within the purview of psycholinguistics, which deals with the relationship between language and the mind. This study thus explores how language uses by political leaders impinge on the mental space(s) of the followership to incite and evoke varied perception and actions. The study found that two opposing views: the first are the immediate audience, who are members of the speakers' in-group; these see the speaker's utterances as a call to act against other groups perceived as 'enemies'. The second perception is from the audience, who are members of the speaker's out-group; these view the speaker's utterances as inciting statements meant to cause disaffection amongst the larger society. In both cases, the audiences arrived at their respective conclusions using their mental spaces that conjured to them negative assumptions against the others.

1.1 Introduction

Speeches are normally an expression of one's views on certain issues. Whether these views instigate or incite the audience into a show of excitement depends, to an extent, on the personality of the speaker. If the speaker is a respectable member of the in-group, then whatever he utters becomes sacrosanct and likely to produce the intended effects. But if the speaker is

either a hostile or neutral person to the audience, then the most important factor in the speech situation is the interpretation of the speech by the audience, relying also on the contextual factors such as cultural, social, ethnic, political, racial and religious differences of the speaker and the audience. This also depends on the audience's psychological frame of mind at the time of utterance (Usman 2020).

Inciting speeches, therefore, usually occur when the speaker is a respectable member of his audience (in-group) and uses his vantage position to make utterances that will incite them into some course of action. In this case, their individual opinions about whatever is uttered is not relevant because the words uttered are sacrosanct and likely to produce communal response (Hilary Putnam 249). Inciting speeches, thus, are the most worrisome utterances that can easily cause ethnic, religious or other forms of social uprisings. Sometimes, the purveyors of inciting speeches are always charismatic and oratorical who know how to use rhetoric to persuade their followers into believing whatever they say. They always perfect their ways of raining "insults and profile others by



appropriating to themselves the role of ethnic and religious champions” (Adibe 2). These kinds of inciting speeches are common phenomenon in the politics played in Nigeria; politics devoid of ideologies but smacked by ethnic, religious and other colorations.

The aim of this research, therefore, is to explore the use of language in such situations, where unguarded utterances by some Nigerian leaders have contributed in inflaming the ethno-religious suspicions among Nigerians. The objective is primarily to determine how the use of such inciting comments by these revered leaders, vis-à-vis the perceptual experiences of both the audience within and audience without, and their mental (cognitive) processing result to their perception of such utterances as incitement for violent reactions.

1.2 Literature Review -Conceptual / Theoretical perceptions

1.2.1 Inciting Speeches in Nigeria

It is important to reiterate that inciting utterances by ethno-religious or political leaders are a reflection of ethno-religious/regional intolerance that has existed since pre-independence days

through the First Republic. The hurtful exchange of words over the years has continued to lead to unwholesome events in Nigeria. For instance, such unguarded utterances were said to, arguably, result to the first military coup of 1966 and by extension, the unfortunate Civil War of 1967-1970 that witnessed a bloodbath of hundreds of thousands of Nigerians. According to Kasfet (qtd. in Yola), ethno-religious hate speeches that linger today dates back to 1950s with the emergence of constitutional regionalism and regionally-based political parties. “Since then, ethnic, religious and regional loyalties have been decisive and formative elements in Nigerian politics” (Yola 30). Dickson (qtd. in Yola) again, also remarks that the current inciting comments cannot be divorced from the ethno-religious politics that was the blueprint in Nigerian political space. He contends that “this obstacle to a peaceful democratization, peaceful coexistence, military misrule, to the 13 years of PDP brand of democracy, the conflict spiral generated by ethnicity can be seen as all critical phases of Nigeria's development; its democracy, the party system, electoral process, and resources allocation” (Yola 31).

1.2.2 Mental Spaces

The Mental Spaces Theory is one of the sub-branches of cognitive linguistics referred to as cognitive semantics which explains construction of meaning through knowledge representation, conceptual organization and the structure of language (Evans 2). It was conceived by Gilles Fauconnier (1985) in his *Mental Spaces: Aspects of Meaning Construction in Natural Languages*, as a correspondence to the fact that all aspects of human mental life such as our perceptions, thoughts, memories and language understanding depend on the function of our brain. In other words, the term mental spaces, also refers to as mental function or cognitive function. It is designed to determine how human perception, thinking, imagination, ideation, emotion, reasoning and beliefs are used to account for language in use.

According to Barbara Oakley, "Mental Spaces Theory explains how the addressee might encode information at the referential level by dividing it into concepts relevant to different aspects of the scenario (Oakley 3). What this implies is that, in encoding the information and taking the speaker's intention into account,

the addressee considers certain factors, including his relationship with the speaker, the context in which the information was passed and their shared assumptions. This is what Fauconnier (1997) (qtd. in Evans and Green 2014) means when he classifies Mental spaces into two categories; the first one he terms Base Space and the second is Space Builders. The Base space, according to Fauconnier, is the interlocutors' shared knowledge of the world while the Space Builders are those assumptions or non-linguistic elements of the sentence which the addressee creates beyond his shared knowledge with the speaker. This implies that the assumptions which the addressee creates outside his shared knowledge with the speaker only holds truth to him, according to his perception and conceptualization of the speaker's utterance, but may not hold the same truth in reality. These are memories that trigger his conceptualization and, indeed, his interpretation of the speaker's utterance and or intention. For instance, the utterance, "Northerners are parasites; they produce nothing" could be assumed to have been made by a native from the Southern region of Nigeria where the

crude oil, the major foreign earner, is excavated. We can also assume that the addressee is from Northern Nigeria and that the statement is part of a conversation the interlocutors were engaged in. In this scenario, the addressee divides the statement into two spaces. The first is the Base space; the actual utterance "Northerners are parasites; they produce nothing". This statement is a fact because it is a presupposed information shared by both the speaker and the addressee; that Nigeria's major foreign earner is derived from the export of the crude oil in the southern region and that the northern region has no such deposit, or at least, not being excavated.

The second are a group of Space Builders – the non- linguistic elements such as his [the addressee's] perceptual experience that southerners have continued to use the crude oil to malign the northern populace, classifying them as non-productive. This and other related memories forms his [the addressee's] conceptualization of the speaker's utterance as being scornful and meant to instigate an impolite or aggressive reaction. These space builders, while they hold truth to the addressee as processed by

his brain – mental capacity, that may or may not be true in reality. That is, his assumptions may not be the true reflection of the speaker's intention.

Conversely, if the addressees are members of the speaker's socio-cultural group; from the same Niger Delta, then the utterance "Northerners are parasites; they produce nothing" will generate space builders that are in consonance with the speaker's utterance. In this case, the utterance, depending on the context, will become an incitement to the addressee to react in a negative way to the referent (i.e. the North). If the context of utterance is, say, during a debate for resource control which argument overheated the polity and generated hurtful exchange of words between the North and the South, then the utterance "Northerners are parasites; they produce nothing" by a southerner to his in-group will generate emotive space builders in the addressee; what Laura Janda (15) said will trigger the motor transmitters in his brain to release emotional hormones, thus, causing his reaction to be emotive or affective.

1.2.3 Perceptual Experience

Perceptual experience is a term borrowed from Cognitive Psychology which simply implies how an individual's daily experience influences his perception of issues. The word 'perceptual' is derived from the noun 'perception' which refers to the way an individual thinks, leading to his understanding of something. Perception is the organization, identification and interpretation of sensory information which are manipulated by the nervous system. According to Sperling George (1963) in his "Model for Visual Memory Tasks", perception is not a passive receipt of information but how the information is connected with one's memory, expectation and attention. These three factors are very cardinal to the study of cognitive environment. Memory, for instance, he said, is integral to perception because it stores information gathered over a period of time which gradually forms one's beliefs and perceptions. The information is then retrieved and becomes an idea which the perceiver conceptualizes.

The second important aspect of perception is expectation. This is a very strong social norm that, according to Richard Lazarus (2), it directs human

perception towards individuals or events. Richard argues that expectation can make people to be accustomed to either positive or negative life experience which form their perception. If the experience is positive, there is always a good perception as it implies that the expectation has yielded a positive result. In this wise, there is always a near-total loyalty to the system/leadership. But if the experience is negative, then the perception on the system or leadership of the system will be unwholesome, leading to pessimism. And, where there are political interests, then sentiments will set in. This is when human brain will begin to build mental spaces with negative assumptions whenever a familiar utterance is made.

The third important aspect of human perception is 'attention'. It denotes concentration on a particular subject or, in this context, information which the perceiver considers most important. This enables him to quickly remember it when familiar occurrence takes place. William James (403 – 404) puts it that "...attention is taking possession by the mind of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought". What this means is that human mind tends

to always concentrate on a particular component of information that concerns it most, out of several other information that share the same property. This goes to buttress the notion that human minds or senses mostly remember critical experiences which touch their lives either in a positive or negative way. It also means that any experience that does not add value to our lives, we usually ignore whenever we see a reoccurrence of such.

In their view, Alan Saks and Gary Johns (11) stated that perception has three components:

- (a) The perceiver: he is influenced by factors such as experience, motivational and emotional states. They argue that "In different motivational or emotional states, the perceiver will react to or perceive something in different ways". In this way, he employs different "perceptual defence" to react to different issues as they align with his "perceptual experience".
- (b) The target: this, according to the duo "is the person who is being perceived or judged. Here, the perceiver, if not well-informed about the target, may end up judging him wrongly. And this is one of the factors

that contribute in individuals making utterances or passing judgments without adequate knowledge or understanding of the person or event (the target). In this situation, the perceiver has a wrong perceptual experience of his target which might be influenced either by his instincts or the socio-cultural or religious group he belongs to.

- © The situation: this is the context that influences the perceiver's perception on individuals or events (the target). It also affects the perception of the perceiver if he fails to use different "perceptual defence" to react to different situations. This is because different situations produce different contexts that require additional information about the target. Failure of the perceiver to apply different "perceptual defence" as required, results to wrong interpretation of the action, whether verbal or non-verbal, of the target. This will, thus, develop wrong assumptions in the mind of the perceiver such that he believes whatever negative information purveyed about the target. He does not need to verify it because he has already

developed negative assumptions about him.

From the foregoing, it is to be argued that human perceptual experience plays a significant role in how an individual conceptualizes an issue, attitudes or behaviours of others. Shan Guo-wen puts it that, "formation of conceptual structure is based on the embodied experience of human being" (7). In other words, our perceptual experience of socio-physical happenings around us builds in us the kind of mental spaces that will form our conceptualization about individuals, issues or events in which we have a stake. This is what Janda (5) implies when he asserts that "Mental Spaces are constructed from human perceptual experience and are extended through imaginative mapping process". These happenings develop to form human perception and conceptualization through individual's imaginative thinking.

As explained earlier, when an individual is reacting to an utterance that connects to his perceptual experience, there are usually two possible reactions. If the utterance is made by a respected

member of his in-group whose actions, whether verbal or non-verbal, are sacrosanct, he is most likely to react in allegiance to the speaker. So, if the utterance is an incitement, he will react according to the motive of the utterance. If, however, the utterance is made by an individual from his out-group and in which his perception is in variance with his beliefs and perceptual experience, there is a high tendency that his response will not only be in negation of the utterance but emotional outburst which maybe scornful and derogatory and, sometimes, even physical violent. That is why Janda argues that, in this scenario, his brain (sensory motor), which sends messages to his nervous system, will trigger the motor transmitters to release emotional hormones, thus, causing his reaction to be emotive or affective. This is what he, Janda, calls "neurological disorder".

For instance, audience who are members of the speaker's in-group will presume the utterance "Northerners are parasites; they produce nothing", as an incitement to negative reaction against the status quo. This was arrived at in view of their perceptual experience, rightly or



wrongly, that the south-south sub-region, which the speakers comes from, is the cash cow that feeds the whole nation while they, the indigenous people of the sub-region, have been impoverished over the years. This belief was instilled in the minds of the audience within by another fact that the continual leadership experience in Nigeria has shown that citizens' allegiance is rather to ethno-religious or regional creeds than patriotism to the country or its leadership. So, if a political leader who is their own says "Northerners are parasites; they produce nothing", it resonates with the audience as it triggers their memories which their brains stored; of the background knowledge or information that formed their perception. This background knowledge - their experience with the referent (the North), is that of negative expectation built over the years; that because "Northerners are parasites. . ." nothing good will come out of their leadership or, simply put, hey will use their leadership position to continue to impoverish the South. His space builders will, thus, readily construct or conceptualize a notion that judges the referent (or leadership of the North) as a chauvinistic, hence, the need for resource

control or a revolt.

1.3 Research Methodology

The primary source for this research was a collection of statements / utterances by notable political leaders in Nigeria. They are statements from: Muhammadu Buhari and T.Y. Danjuma made two different occasions that triggered sentimental reactions from Nigerians. The researchers are not unaware of other inciting comments by other prominent leaders in Nigeria. In fact, there was a statement by the former president of Nigeria, General Olusegun Obasanjo who declared, in February, 2007, that the general elections in two months to come will be "do or die". This statement raised uproar in the country for what it was; inciting utterance. There was also an equally vitriolic comment by former Vice President of Nigeria, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar in December, 2010, where he says that "those who make peaceful change possible make violent change inevitable". This, again, heightened the tension during the electioneering period of 2011.

The study, however, opted for the duo of Muhammadu Buhari and T.Y.

Danjuma for strategic reason that is not unconnected with the ethno-religious reverence they enjoyed amongst Nigerians. This is also in relation to the contexts chosen to make such divisive utterances. The thematic trust, thus, centres on ethno-religious politics.

i. General Muhammadu Buhari's Politico-religious Utterances

In January, 2002, General Muhammadu Buhari, while as a presidential candidate of NPP, spoke at the 16th Qur'anic Recitation Competition in Gusau, Zamfara State where he called on Muslim Faithful to vote only candidates that can defend their religion in the coming general elections of 2003. His comment "Vote only candidates who can defend your religion" was what sparked religious controversy throughout the electioneering period of that time. Source: This Day Newspaper, 21st January, 2002.

ii. General T.Y. Danjuma's Ethno-political Comment

Speaking at the maiden convocation and 10th anniversary of Taraba State University, on the 24th March, 2018, General T.Y. Danjuma, former Chief of Defence Staff, called on his people to defend themselves. The

statement was made on a backdrop of the recurrent clashes between Herdsmen and farmers. The statement also alleged that the Nigerian Armed Forces were conspiring with herdsmen to kill farmers. "Defend yourselves or you will die". he warns. Source: Vanguard, March, 24th 2018.

The data to be engaged with in this study are:

- (a) Vote only candidates who can defend your religion – Buhari, 2002;
- (b) Defend yourselves or you will die – Danjuma, 2018.

The secondary sources were literature materials on mental spaces and perceptual experience derived from cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology. The theoretical framework is, therefore, eclectic, which was chosen to analyze how the speaker's utterance is interpreted by the audience using their shared assumptions. In this connection, the analysis will look at how the addressees' perceptual experience influences their cognition in form of mental spaces to bring out the effects of the utterances. The theory of mental



spaces is, thus, used to account for the perception and interpretation of the utterances by the addressees. The research design is descriptive as it explores the choice of words by these personalities that triggered ethno-religious sentiments.

1.4 Data Presentation and Analysis

The statement "Vote only candidates who can defend your religion" made by General Buhari in 2002 provides the Base Space (of the Mental Spaces Theory) as the actual utterance in relation to the context of communication. As it were, the context of communication here could, again, be subdivided into two. The first was that it was the period leading to the general elections of 2003 which every Nigerian knew was polarized along ethno-religious lines. In fact, unlike the elections of 1999 in which the major candidates – Olusegun Obasanjo and Olu Falae - were both Yoruba Christians from the South-West, this one featured Olusegun Obasanjo (a Christian from the South-West) and Muhammadu Buhari (a Muslim from the North-West). This was the assumption, or background knowledge all Nigerians shared, including the speaker. What they also shared in this regard was that religion had begun to resurface in

Nigerian politics.

Second, the context was that of a religious gathering; an occasion of Qur'an recitation competition where all the congregants were Muslims. This was another assumption shared by the speaker and the audience both within and without. In addition, it was a common knowledge that General Buhari has a cult-like followership, majority of who are Hausa, Muslims and from the North. All this becomes the Base Space - background information shared by the interlocutors. The Space Builders, which are "the non-linguistic elements of related but distinct scenario from the actual utterance" according to Fauconnier (1997), are created by the addressee beyond the shared knowledge of the speaker. In the utterance "Vote only candidates who can defend your religion" will have strings of imagination arising from the audience's perceptual experiences. To the audience within, i.e. the speaker's in-group, the statement was timely because, in their perception, the policy direction of the incumbent seemed to marginalize Muslims or that, given the applause Sharia Law had received from Muslims across the North, particularly in the North-West,

they, the audience within, bought into a notion that if every Muslim will vote a Muslim, then Muslim candidates would win elections outright because Muslim population is in the majority in Northern Nigeria. And, if all Muslims were elected into positions of authority, it will become a recipe for instituting Sharia Law which they all craved for. This was their perception of “candidates who can defend your religion”.

The audience without (i.e. the speaker's out-group) who are presumably Christians, cashed on this inciting utterance to build their different Space Builders. The first in this category were Christians in the North. They felt that the utterance was wrong in many ways. First, it was during a religious gathering, in which occasion, the adherents consider every statement made by anybody on the pulpit as sacrosanct. Secondly, given the respect the presidential aspirant enjoyed among Muslims across the North, every word of Buhari ought to be obeyed. To the audience without, for Buhari to choose such occasion to make such a divisive statement, it implied that he and other Muslim leaders in the North did not have regard for the Christians in the region.

This perception was built in their brain in relation to their perceptual experience that, over the years, the Northern Christians were being used by Muslim politicians to add to the numerical strength the Northern region claims to have which always gave them an edge over any political opponent from the Southern region of the country. And, by inciting Muslims to vote only fellow Muslims, Buhari was planning a religious agenda which if it comes to fruition, they, the Christians in the North, will be worst hit. This triggered their revolt against this collective might, making them seek for alliance with their Christian brethren in the South.

The second category of the audience without, were majorly Christians in the South. Their political leaders, especially, cashed on this division and began to popularize and inflame the utterance “Vote only candidates who can defend your religion” by Buhari to Muslims as a demonstration of bigotry. This became an opportunity to de-market him. One of such de-marketing strategies was that they sold to their followers that Buhari was a religious bigot. And, if voted as president, he will Islamize Nigeria. This, thus, began

to build spaces in their brain that instigated hatred against not only Buhari but the Muslims in Northern Nigeria. The utterance and, of course, its exacerbation by the Southern political leaders, re-evoked their perception against Islam as a non-tolerant religion – a notion sold to them by their politico-religious leaders which also formed part of their perceptual experience. This memory continued to linger in their minds, so much so that it continued to dent the political image of Buhari until towards the 2015 general elections when the same political opponents converged to market him and tried to wash him clean of allegations on religious bigotry.

The second example of an inciting statement was made by General T.Y. Danjuma in 2018 in a convocation ceremony of Taraba State University. He said to the mammoth gathering “Defend yourselves or you will die”. Like General Buhari, General T.Y. Danjuma is revered, first as a Civil War veteran. Secondly, he is respected for his philanthropist activities and, lastly, Christians in Taraba, in particular and in the entire Northern Nigeria, in general, hold him in high esteem. Because of this fact, any statement

he makes carries a heavy weight. So, the statement; “Defend yourselves or you will die” was instigated by the recurring crises between herdsman and farmers in Taraba and other parts of the country. This becomes the Base Space – a shared assumption between the speaker and the audience, both within and without. There, seemed to be a consensus that the incessant crises between farmers and herdsman in Taraba, in particular and in Nigeria, in general, was becoming unbearable.

The Space Builders here are constructed differently by the different audiences. The audience within, i.e. the speaker's in-group, built spaces that connect the utterance with their perceptual experience; that the so called herdsman who have been raiding peoples' farms with their flocks and destroying crops, maiming and killing farmers that protested, are Fulani. They also built spaces, beyond their shared assumptions with the audience without (i.e. out-group) that the herders were waxing this strong because their kinsman was the president of Nigeria and that the president looked the other way while they carried out their nefarious activities because they were his

kinsmen. Another space they built was that the Nigeria Army, who were sent to quell the crises, were partisan because the Commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces who is a Fulani was nonchalant, making his kinsmen to be bolder and enjoy their spoils of destruction of crops and killing of innocent citizens. No surprise, therefore, when General Danjuma said he did not have confidence in the Nigeria Army. So, if the audience within, who revere the speaker, took up arms against not only the Fulani (whether or not they are herdsmen) but against the Armed forces, they did so in compliance with the statement "Defend yourselves or you will die", which was actually an inciting statement that could lead to anarchy.

The second category of the Space Builders, were constructed by the audience without (i.e. out-group). These are Fulani (never mind whether they were herdsmen or not) and the state actors. To the Fulani and herdsmen, they connect the statement with their perceptual experience that they were being unfairly treated and maligned. They felt that the media was always biased in reporting the crises. This is because they, like the farmers, suffer massive casualties and were always on the

defensive. The media, in their report of such crises, deliberately refuse to report that Fulani settlements were always being raided and burned by the natives (farmers) and their cattle rustled away. And that what the media was good at reporting was their retaliation of the casualties they record which make them look demonic. The second category of the audience without, are the state actors. The space built in their brain, in connection with their perceptual experience, was that the speaker made the statement "Defend yourselves or you will die" not necessarily because he was perturbed that the age-long herders versus farmers' crises which refused to end, but because he had some personal grudges with the Commander-in-chief who was a Fulani man. And, the statement was meant to incite his followers and apologists, to react violently as a move to discredit the government of this Fulani man. The statement, corroborating it with General Danjuma's claim of lack of confidence in the Nigeria Army, an organization he once held as their chief of Staff (during Obasanjo's military regime) and Minister of Defence (in Obasanjo's second coming) smacks of mischief. This was also connected to the

audience's perceptual experience that the speaker made the utterance during the electioneering period where his friend-turned-foe was contesting for a second term.

1.5 Conclusion

It should be stated that both utterances made by these two revered veteran Nigerian soldiers and leaders were wrong in many respects. First, the statements portray them as religious and ethnic war lords, thereby tampering with the extolled reputations they built for themselves over the years. Secondly, the occasions chosen for such divisive utterances were wrong because they were for a selected group of audience who naturally revere the speakers as heroes in their midst. As such, they received the statements as commandments that must be obeyed.

On the other hand, the out-group felt offended that the speakers were inciting their followers against them for ulterior motives. This results to the production of mental spaces or mental functions which emit emotional hormones from their brain that instigate unwholesome reactions. Worst still, it will

create a perception (resulting from their perceptual experience) that the speakers are ethnic and religious jingoists. It is pertinent, therefore, to reiterate that the speakers, given their pedigree, are seen as leaders of thought whose utterances are considered gospel truths. It is expedient that they choose their words advisably because their words could either calm straining nerves or explode like dynamites, thereby causing chaos in the society.

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