

A RHETORIC STYLISTIC STUDY OF SOME OLUSEGUN OBASANJO'S SELECTED POLITICAL SPEECHES AND THE INFLUENCE ON THE ELECTORATES

Omisakin, Adeyemi Matthew¹, Yahya, Hussain Oyewole¹

¹Department of Language and Humanities, Directorate of General Studies, Osun State Polytechnic, Iree, Nigeria

<p>Corresponding Author Omisakin, Adeyemi Matthew</p> <p>Department of Language and Humanities, Directorate of General Studies, Osun State Polytechnic, Iree, Nigeria</p> <p>Article History</p> <p>Received: 06/ 04/2025 Accepted: 23/ 04/ 2025 Published: 26 / 04 /2025</p>	<p>Abstract: The study identifies the rhetorical devices in some selected political speeches of President Olusegun Obasanjo, a popular Nigerian politician and an African leader with a motif to determine the strength of persuasiveness of rhetorical devices in his speeches. The study analyses some identified rhetorical devices and also examine their contextual implications within the socio-economic and political realities in Nigeria. This study explores how rhetorical devices in political speeches persuade electorates, focusing on Obasanjo's two-term administration. Using primary data from twelve extracts of his inaugural speech, it applies Geoffrey Leech's (2008) Linguistic and Figure of Rhetoric theory, alongside Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, to analyze rhetorical patterns. The research calculates the frequency of rhetorical features to assess their persuasive impact and examines their rhetorical implicatures. A questionnaire evaluates rhetoric's influence on voters' decisions. Findings reveal that political speeches employ rich rhetorical devices, often relying on specific lexical, syntactic, and tropic patterns to sway public opinion. Politicians strategically use language to shape support, employing rhetorical devices to depict socio-economic issues and project ideologies. The study finds they deliberately craft linguistic styles to influence public perception toward their goals. For instance, Obasanjo effectively persuaded Nigerians to back his two-term presidency through such tactics. It further concludes that the linguistic modes of Geoffrey Leech Theory of Linguistics and Figure of Rhetoric with insight from MAK. Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar are suitably appropriate for the analysis of rhetoric in speeches.</p> <p>Keywords: Rhetorical Devices, Persuasiveness, Contextual Implications, Rhetorical Implicatures, Inaugural Speeches.</p>
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Introduction

Politics is integral to society, and political decisions must be carefully scrutinized as they determine societal sustainability. Political mobilization relies on persuasive language, making it a crucial tool for politicians. This study examines the stylistic and rhetorical devices in selected inaugural speeches of Olusegun Obasanjo, analyzing their contextual implications within Nigeria's socio-economic, ethnic, and political realities. The study focuses on linguistic features such as lexical repetition, antonyms, syntactic parallelism, conditional clauses, personification, and antithesis. These devices enhance rhetorical impact, emphasizing arguments and creating vivid imagery. For instance, **antithesis** contrasts opposing ideas to balance perspectives, while **antonyms** highlight national success or failure. Repetition and parallelism reinforce key messages, and **personification** adds figurative depth. The paper explores how Obasanjo strategically constructs language to inspire change—combating corruption, complacency, and abuse of power—while addressing Nigeria's socio-political challenges.

Politics in Nigeria & Obasanjo's Role

Nigerian politics is shaped by ethnic, religious, and regional diversity, operating under a federal system with partial separation of powers. After decades of military rule, Nigeria transitioned to democracy in 1999, with Olusegun Obasanjo—a former military leader—becoming a civilian president for two terms. Contemporary Nigerian politics faces challenges like electoral rigging, ethnic bias, economic decline, foreign interference, security threats, and secessionist agitations. Obasanjo's speeches reflect these complexities, offering insights into his governance philosophy.

As a key political figure, Obasanjo implemented reforms like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and engaged in regional diplomacy. Despite criticisms of corruption and human rights abuses, his influence remains significant. This study analyzes his speeches to understand his rhetorical strategies and political vision.

Language and Style in Political Discourse

Stylistics examines how language achieves persuasive and aesthetic effects. Scholars define it as:

Rahman & Weda (2019): A tool for attention and literary effect; Astawa (2022): Variations in language for specific impacts and Müller (2008): The "soul of words," conveying authorial intent. Stylistics applies to both literary and political texts, analyzing rhetorical devices that shape public perception.

Rhetorical Motifs in Inaugural Speeches

Inaugural speeches symbolize leadership transition, blending promises with ideological undertones. Lucas (2015) notes their role in reassuring citizens and outlining governance visions. Politicians use rhetoric to address societal issues, gain political advantage and convey ideologies.

Fairclough (1989) emphasizes how rhetoric molds national political thought. Obasanjo's speeches exemplify this, employing stylistic contrasts to persuade and mobilize.

Language and Politics

Politics fundamentally shapes societies through power relations and resource allocation (Halmari, 2011; Easton, 1953). Political speeches serve as crucial tools for influencing public opinion and mobilizing support (Omozuwa & Ezejideaku, 2007). The intersection of language and politics reveals how discourse functions as an instrument of power, enabling persuasion without coercion (Edelman, 1977). Wareing & Thomas (1999) distinguish between *instrumental power* (authority-based) and *influential power* (persuasion-based), with political rhetoric primarily employing the latter. Politicians strategically deploy linguistic devices to shape perceptions, sometimes leading audiences to accept questionable claims (Joseph, 2006). This necessitates critical analysis of political language to uncover its persuasive mechanisms.

Rhetorical Stylistics: Theory and Application

Rhetorical stylistics examines how linguistic choices enhance persuasive communication (Adams, 2023). Unlike literary stylistics, it prioritizes transactional goals (Simpson, 2004) and the artistry of persuasion (Fahnestock, 1999). Lanham (2006) emphasizes style's role in effective communication, while Ricoeur (2003) highlights metaphor's rhetorical power. Reboul (2016) expands this to include ethical and political dimensions, analyzing how language reflects power structures and ideologies. This interdisciplinary approach proves particularly relevant to political discourse analysis.

Theoretical Framework: Leech and Halliday

The study adopts Leech's (2008) *Figures of Rhetoric*, categorized as:

- **Tropes** (e.g., antithesis, personification) – semantic deviations.
- **Schemes** (e.g., parallelism, conditional clauses) – syntactic patterns.
- **Figures of Thought** (e.g., repetition, antonymy) – cognitive influences.

Complemented by Halliday's (2004) *Systemic Functional Grammar*, this framework reveals how linguistic choices achieve persuasive effects in Obasanjo's inaugural speeches. The

combination allows for both micro-level rhetorical analysis and macro-level sociopolitical interpretation.

This study however, analyses the rhetorical strategies in Obasanjo's political speeches, demonstrating how lexical, syntactic, and tropic devices create persuasive effects and aesthetic appeal in political discourse. It provides a framework for uncovering hidden meanings in political rhetoric while examining how language manipulates audience perception. The study understudied persuasive ideologies in Nigerian presidential speeches, offering insights that could inform electoral decisions and inspire further stylistic analyses of political rhetoric. Focusing specifically on Obasanjo's inaugural and Independence Day addresses, the investigation highlights the strategic use of linguistic features to reflect socio-political realities and induce public cooperation, while assessing their impact on electoral responses. The study builds on Aluko's (2012) and Burke's (1969) perspectives on how linguistic organization achieves persuasive goals in political communication.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of the study is to conduct the rhetorical stylistic study of some Olusegun Obasanjo's political speeches. The specific objectives are to:

- Identify and analyse the prominent rhetorical stylistic features in the selected texts,
- Evaluate the aforementioned features,
- Examine how the features motivate supports for his administrations, and
- Discuss the persuasive power of the selected features on his audience and,
- To evaluate the results of these styles on the electorates

Methodology

This study employs both primary and secondary data sources, analyzing one printed inaugural speech (*The New Dawn*, 1999) and one independence day address (2005) from President Olusegun Obasanjo's tenure, sourced from *The Nation* newspaper. The speeches were selected for their strategic significance: the inaugural speech reflects campaign promises and governance priorities, while the Independence Day address evaluates administrative performance and national commitment. Data analysis follows a structured approach, categorizing rhetorical devices into lexical (antonyms, lexical repetition), syntactic (parallelism, conditional clauses), and tropic (antithesis, personification) features. Two extracts per device are analyzed across three linguistic levels, totaling 24 interpretations. The study adopts an eclectic analytical framework, combining quantitative frequency analysis with qualitative evaluation of stylistic patterns, illocutionary force, and socio-political relevance. Procedures include sentence numbering, stylistic annotation, rhetorical implicature analysis, and tabulated frequency distributions (in percentages) to identify prominent devices. Additionally, a questionnaire assesses voter responsiveness to political rhetoric, incorporating variables like gender, social class, and education. This dual-method approach ensures comprehensive scrutiny of how linguistic choices shape persuasive political communication.

Analysis and Interpretations

1. Lexical Features in the Speech

(a) Antonyms

Antonyms are semantically employed to reveal the writer's philosophical contradictions of the political ideals and the realities in Nigerian situations.

Extract (1)

- *Sentence (39): The difference will be that in the past, sacrifices were made and patience exercised with little or no results.*
- *Sentence (40): This time, however, the results of your sacrifice and patience will be clear and manifest for all to see.*

The extract uses antonymic phrases ("this time...clear and manifest" vs. "in the past... with little or no results"), emphasizing Nigeria's decline despite public sacrifices. This rhetorical device aligns with Leech's model, vividly portraying previous governance failures while establishing contrast. The strategic repetition serves dual purposes: critiquing past administrations and positioning the new leadership as transformative. Ultimately, these linguistic framing functions to persuade Nigerians to support the current government's promised reforms.

(b) Lexical Repetitions

Extract (2):

- *Sentence(46): in an orderly, reasonable and predictable way.*

The extract shows deliberate repetition of "corruption" across sentences 46-49, creating lexical cohesion and emphasizing its societal harm. This rhetorical *Implicatures* align with persuasive techniques, highlighting the speaker's strong stance against corruption. The repetition serves to connect with public sentiment and present the leader as resolute in combating this issue. Ultimately, this linguistic strategy aims to build trust and rally support for the administration's anti-corruption agenda.

2. Syntactic Parallelism Features in the Speech

(a) Parallelism

Parallelism employs repeated structures in adjacent clauses to emphasize arguments and create memorable mental images (Zhao, 2012). This rhetorical device enhances persuasion through balanced repetition that reinforces key ideas while improving audience retention (Levin, 1992).

Extract (3)

- *Sentence (25): Government officials became progressively indifferent to propriety of conduct and showed little commitment to promoting the general welfare of the people and public good.*
- *Sentence (26): Government and all its agencies became thoroughly corrupt and reckless.*
- *Sentence (27): Members of the public had to bribe their ways through in ministries and parastatal to get attention and one government agency had to bribe another government agency to obtain the release of their statutory allocation of funds.*

The author uses parallel structure across three consecutive sentences (25-27) to emphasize past administrative failures through repetitive phrasing. This deliberate syntactic parallelism serves as both a cohesive device and rhetorical strategy, reinforcing negative perceptions of previous governments. The technique aligns with inaugural speech conventions while strategically highlighting corruption to build support for the new administration. By

repeatedly exposing past misconducts, the speaker positions himself as a reformer committed to combating systemic corruption.

(b) If-Conditional Clause

If-conditional statements link a condition (protasis) with its consequence (apodosis), creating a cause-effect relationship that foregrounds key ideas. This structure, as Givon (1990) notes, strategically guides readers' interpretation by emphasizing the dependency between clauses for persuasive impact.

Extract (4)

Sentence (50): No society can achieve anything near its full potential if it allows corruption to become the full-blown cancer it has become in Nigeria.

The speaker employs an unconventional if-conditional structure, using negation and metaphor ("cancerous corruption") to emphasize society's impossible potential without reform. This stylistically marked construction focuses attention on corruption's destructive impact through a rank-shifted warning clause. The rhetorical strategy demonstrates the leader's grasp of national issues while positioning him as the solution. By framing corruption as an existential threat requiring collective action, the statement persuasively mobilizes public support for the administration's anti-graft agenda.

3. Trope Features in the Speech

(a) Antithesis as Rhetorical Device

Antithesis is a rhetorical device that juxtaposes opposing ideas through parallel grammatical structures, creating sharp contrasts. Its persuasive power stems from balanced contradictions that highlight differences through rhythmic, logical arrangements.

Extract: (5)

- *Sentence (22): Good men were shunned and kept away from government while those who should be kept away drawn near.*

Antithesis in Extract (5) above

The author employs antithesis in compound-complex structures to contrast past governance failures with ideal administration, exposing systemic decay through opposing ideas. This rhetorical strategy deliberately highlights previous wrongdoings while dissuading such practices, framing them as antithetical to proper governance. The implicature reveals a calculated effort to demonstrate awareness of past corruption while positioning himself as a reformer. By structurally condemning prior misrule, the speaker aligns with public sentiment to build legitimacy and rally support for his administration's agenda.

(b) Personification as Rhetorical Device

This is a figure of speech that gives human attributes to a non-human to intensify emotional engagement and vivid imagery. This rhetorical tool enhances relatability and persuasive impact by evoking pathos through animated descriptions.

Extract (6):

- *Sentence (86): I intend to reconcile all those who feel alienated by past political events and I will endeavor to heal divisions, and to restore the harmony we used to know in this country.*

The phrase "heal divisions" personifies national disunity as a curable illness, transforming an abstract concept into visceral imagery through rhetorical artistry. This stylistic choice aligns with Leech's theory by framing unity as restorative medicine, strategically evoking emotional urgency for reconciliation. The

implicature positions the speaker as a unifying healer, leveraging pathos to garner support for his administration's harmony agenda. By diagnosing division as a national malady, he prescribes his leadership as the remedy, persuasively equating political backing with collective recovery.

Stylistic Analysis

Table 1: Occurrence of antonyms used

Features of Antonyms	Frequency of Occurrences	Percentages of Occurrences
Gradable	06	43%
Complimentary or Non gradable	03	16%
Relational Antonym	02	14%
Semantic Antonym	02	14%
Collocation Antonym	01	7%
Total Number of Antonyms	14	100%

Gradable antonyms dominate (43%), strategically contrasting Nigeria's past governance failures with promised improvements to emphasize transformative potential. The speaker's selective use of collocation antonyms (7%) deliberately minimizes associations with previous administrations' shortcomings while positioning himself favorably. This antonymic patterning serves dual rhetorical purposes: critiquing predecessors through stark contrasts while projecting his leadership as the corrective opposite. The frequency distribution thus functionally persuades audiences

to perceive him as both diagnostician of national decline and architect of renewal.

Syntactic Features Analysis

Croft (2001) classifies syntactic parallelism into eight types, including simple, compound, and complex structures. His framework also covers specialized forms like anaphora, epistrophe, Echolalia, Syntactic and polysyndeton parallelism for rhetorical analysis.

Table 2: Syntactic parallelism used

Features of Selected Parallelism	Frequency of Occurrences	Percentages of Occurrences
Compound Syntactic Parallelism	06	42%
Polysyndeton Syntactic Parallelism	04	28%
Simple Syntactic Parallelism	03	21%
Anaphora Syntactic Parallelism	02	14%
Chiasmus Syntactic Parallelism	01	7%
Total number of occurrence	14	100%

Compound syntactic parallelism appears most frequently (42.8%), reflecting Nigeria's complex challenges and positioning the speaker as capable of solving them. Chiasmus occurs least (7.1%), avoiding backward-looking structures that might link him to past failures. The distribution strategically emphasizes forward-thinking solutions while distancing from previous governance. This syntactic patterning aligns with Leech's rhetorical principles to persuasively build support for reform.

Trope Features Analysis

Typology of Feature of Antithesis

Harris, (2003) identifies some typologies of Antithesis which include: Simple, Compound, Complex, Synthetical, Antithetical Parallelism, Oxymoronic, Antithesis, Epanothesis, Hypotaxis and Juxtaposition Antithesis.

Table 3: Antithetical expression used

Features of Antithesis Used	Frequency of Occurrences	Percentage of Occurrences
Complex Antithesis	07	70%
Compound Antithesis	02	20%
Simple Antithesis	01	10%
Total Number of Occurrences	10	100%

The speaker primarily employs complex antithesis (70% frequency) to contrast Nigeria's governance failures with ideal outcomes, demonstrating both his analytical grasp of systemic

issues and his reformist vision. This sophisticated rhetorical choice aligns with Leech's principle of prominence, positioning him as a capable leader while subtly soliciting public support to address

these multilayered challenges. Conversely, simple antithesis appears sparingly (20%), serving to sharply condemn past malpractices without oversimplifying the nation's complex predicament. This strategic imbalance reinforces his narrative: while problems are deeply entrenched (requiring complex

framing), their root causes remain clearly identifiable (via selective simplicity) – a duality meant to inspire both urgency and collective action.

Analysis of Effect of Political Rhetorics on the Electorates

Table 4: Effect of Political Rhetorics on the Electorates

Section	Question	Response Options	Frequency (n=45)	Percentage (%)
1. Demographic Information	What is your age?	18–45 years	32	71%
	What is your occupation?	Not gainfully employed	35	77%
	What is your highest level of education?	Graduates	41	91%
2. Exposure to Speeches	How often do you listen to/watch/read political speeches?	Daily	13	28%
		Weekly	25	55%
		Monthly	5	11%
		Rarely	2	4%
	Which sources do you use?	Television	5	11%
		Radio	11	24%
		Social media	14	31%
		Online news websites	17	38%
	Do you agree political speeches are rhetorically inclined?	Strongly Agree	31	69%
		Partially Agree	10	22%
Not Agree		4	9%	
3. Perception of Rhetoric	How important is rhetoric to political speeches?	Very important	32	71%
		Somewhat important	8	18%
		Not very important	5	11%
	Which rhetorical devices are most effective?	Metaphor	13	29%
		Contrasting	12	27%
4. Impact on Decision-Making	How often does rhetoric influence your opinions?	Always	30	67%
		Often	10	22%
		Sometimes	5	11%
		Never	0	0%
	Have you changed your opinion after a persuasive speech?	Yes	34	76%
		No	3	7%
5. Additional Comments	Any comments on rhetoric's role in political speeches?	Unsure	8	18%
		Open-ended responses (no quantitative data provided)	—	—

Findings: The data reveals a politically engaged but economically disadvantaged youth demographic (71% aged 18-45, 77% unemployed), highly educated (91% graduates) yet vulnerable to rhetorical persuasion. Weekly exposure to speeches (55%) through digital platforms (38% online news, 31% social media) correlates with strong belief in rhetoric's importance (71%) and influence (67% report "always" affected). Repetition (33%) and

metaphor (29%) emerge as most effective devices, with 76% admitting changed views post-speech – underscoring rhetoric's tangible electoral impact despite respondents' education levels.

Conclusion

The study reveals that political speeches employ rich rhetorical devices—particularly lexical repetition, antonyms,

syntactic parallelism, antithesis, personification, and conditional clauses—to craft persuasive messages aligned with societal values. These stylistic features create cognitive and emotional effects, reinforcing contrasts between past failures and promised reforms while leveraging national realities to inspire action. Findings confirm that Obasanjo strategically combined these devices to foreground key themes, demonstrating rhetoric's significant influence on electoral decisions, as evidenced by both textual analysis and survey responses (76% of respondents admitted altered views post-speech). The research underscores rhetoric's centrality in political persuasion, with Obasanjo's speeches exemplifying how linguistic artistry amplifies governance narratives. By intertwining stylistic repetition and contrast with socio-political contexts, his rhetoric effectively mobilized support—validating Keith & Lundberg's (2008) linkage between linguistic style and persuasion. The study affirms that foregrounding techniques, through deviation or repetition (Miall & Kuiken 1994), redirect audience attention from content to form, enhancing persuasive impact. Ultimately, rhetorical proficiency emerges as a critical tool for political legitimacy and public consensus-building.

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