

LANGUAGE, POWER AND POLITICAL PERSUASION: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE 2023 DELTA STATE GUBERNATORIAL CAMPAIGN SPEECHES

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Abstract

Political campaign speeches remain among the most powerful instruments through which politicians negotiate authority, shape ideological consciousness, and persuade electorates in democratic societies. This study critically examines the discourse strategies employed by gubernatorial candidates during the 2023 Delta State gubernatorial election in Nigeria. Anchored on Critical Discourse Theory as advanced by Norman Fairclough and Teun A. van Dijk, the study investigates how language was strategically deployed to construct political identities, legitimize authority, frame opponents, and reflect broader socio-political realities within Delta State. The study adopts a qualitative research design and purposely selects campaign speeches from candidates of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), All Progressives Congress (APC), and Labour Party (LP). Data were sourced from televised broadcasts, YouTube campaign videos, and official political media platforms and analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Findings reveal that the candidates employed rhetorical devices such as repetition, slogans, rhetorical questions, emotional appeals, and strategic lexical choices to shape voter perception and reinforce ideological positioning. The analysis further reveals that campaign discourse reflected competing narratives surrounding governance, accountability, continuity, economic revitalization, inclusive, and political legitimacy. The study concludes that political language functions not merely as communication but as a mechanism for constructing authority, negotiating power, and shaping ideological consciousness within democratic politics.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, political discourse, campaign speeches, rhetoric, ideology, political communication, Delta State election

Introduction

Language remains one of the most influential instruments in political communication because it enables political actors to persuade electorates, negotiate authority, and shape ideological perception within society. Political campaign speeches are never ordinary conversations. They are carefully structured performances through which politicians construct identities, legitimize ambitions, criticize opponents, and mobilize public support. Political discourse, therefore, functions as a strategic site for the negotiation of power and ideological dominance.

The 2023 Delta State gubernatorial election witnessed intense political campaigns among candidates of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), All Progressives Congress (APC), and Labour Party (LP). Throughout the campaign process, candidates deployed slogans, rhetorical repetitions, emotional appeals, lexical manipulation, and ideological framing to attract support across ethnic, economic, and social divides. Their speeches reflected broader concerns about governance, insecurity, infrastructure development, unemployment, accountability, and economic revitalization in Delta State.

Political discourse scholars have consistently argued that language within political contexts is deeply ideological. Norman Fairclough (1992) explains that discourse operates as a social practice closely tied to power relations and ideological reproduction, while Teun A. van Dijk (1998) maintains that political discourse shapes public consciousness and influences how citizens interpret political realities. Political actors, therefore, manipulate language strategically to sustain legitimacy, shape perception, and negotiate political relevance.

Within Nigeria, studies on political communication have focused predominantly on presidential elections and national political rhetoric. State-level campaign discourse, particularly gubernatorial campaign communication in Delta State, has received relatively limited scholarly attention despite its profound influence on voter behavior and regional political identity.

Delta State presents a unique socio-political terrain characterized by complex multi-ethnic configurations (Urhobo, Anioma, Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Isoko), vast oil wealth juxtaposed with sub-regional underdevelopment, and a long-standing history of single-party dominance by the PDP since 1999. This gap creates the need for a focused analysis of how Delta State gubernatorial candidates utilized language during the 2023 election campaigns to challenge or preserve existing power structures.

This study critically examines the campaign speeches of Ovie Omo-Agege (APC), Sheriff Oborevwori (PDP), and Kennedy Pela (LP) using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The study investigates how discourse was employed to construct political identities, negotiate authority, frame opponents, and reflect ideological struggles within Delta State's political environment.

Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to:

1. Examine how gubernatorial candidates in the 2023 Delta State election used language to construct political identities.
2. Identify the rhetorical and persuasive strategies employed in their campaign speeches.
3. Analyze how candidates utilized discourse to assert authority and frame political opponents.
4. Investigate how language reflected ideological struggles and socio-political realities within Delta State's electoral environment.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following questions:

1. How do gubernatorial candidates in the 2023 Delta State election use language to construct political identities?
2. What rhetorical and persuasive strategies are employed in their campaign speeches?
3. How do candidates utilize discourse to assert authority and frame opponents?
4. In what ways does language reflect ideological struggles and socio-political realities within Delta State's 2023 gubernatorial election?

Literature Review

Political discourse refers to the strategic use of language within political contexts for persuasion, governance, ideological representation, and power negotiation. According to Paul Chilton (2004), political language functions as an instrument of persuasion capable of shaping social realities and legitimizing authority. Campaign speeches, therefore, operate not merely as communicative events but as ideological tools through which politicians negotiate public trust and political legitimacy.

Studies on political rhetoric reveal that politicians consistently employ rhetorical devices such as repetition, slogans, emotional appeals, metaphors, rhetorical questions, and symbolic expressions to influence voter perception and sustain persuasive impact. Bello (2013) argues that political speeches in Nigeria frequently encode ideological meanings through lexical choices and pronoun usage. Political actors strategically manipulate language to establish solidarity, project authority, and construct inclusion.

Similarly, Opeibi (2009) observes that Nigerian political discourse reflects broader struggles surrounding legitimacy, governance, and public trust. Political speeches, therefore, become sites where ideological battles are negotiated publicly. Politicians frame governance failures, economic crises, insecurity, and development concerns in ways that strategically position themselves as credible alternatives.

Research further demonstrates that campaign rhetoric plays a major role in political identity construction. Loughrey and Ewald (2013) maintain that rhetorical strategies significantly influence voter interpretation during electoral campaigns. Their study identifies repetition, contrastive framing, emotional language, and pronoun usage as important persuasive tools within political communication.

Another significant feature of political discourse is legitimization. Politicians constantly attempt to justify their suitability for office through performance narratives, ideological positioning, and symbolic language. Such discourse often involves the construction of "self" as credible and "others" as ineffective, corrupt, or disconnected from public realities.

Within the Nigerian context, several studies have examined discourse practices in presidential campaigns and media political communication. Ayoola (2005), for instance, analyzed Nigerian political rhetoric and observed that politicians frequently rely on emotional appeals and ideological framing to mobilize support. Ojekwe (2016) also found that campaign communication significantly shapes political perception and voter orientation during elections.

Despite these contributions, limited scholarly attention has been given to gubernatorial campaign discourse at the state level, particularly within Delta State's electoral environment. This study, therefore contributes to existing scholarship by examining how political actors strategically employed discourse during the 2023 Delta State gubernatorial election.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Critical Discourse Theory (CDT) as advanced by Norman Fairclough (1992) and Teun A. van Dijk (1998). Critical Discourse Theory examines the relationship between language, ideology, and power within society. The theory assumes that discourse is socially conditioned and ideologically structured rather than neutral.

Fairclough’s (2010) three-dimensional framework forms the analytical foundation of this study:

1. **Textual Analysis** – focuses on micro-level linguistic features such as lexical choices, rhetorical devices, and syntactic structures.
2. **Discursive Practice** – examines the production, distribution, and consumption of text within specific socio-political contexts.
3. **Socio-Cultural Practice** – explores macro-level social structures, institutional power matrices, and historical realities shaping discourse.

Van Dijk’s socio-cognitive (1998) perspective complements this framework by explaining how political discourse shapes cognition, public interpretation, and systems of dominance. It introduces the concept of the *ideological square*, whereby speakers emphasize positive aspects of the “In-group” while magnifying negative aspects of the “Out-group.”

The relevance of CDT to this study lies in its ability to uncover hidden ideological meanings embedded within campaign speeches and explain how language functions as a mechanism for negotiating political authority amidst sub-national power shifts.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design because qualitative analysis allows for detailed interpretation of linguistic structures, rhetorical patterns, ideological positioning, and contextual meanings within political discourse.

The data for the study consist of campaign speeches delivered during the 2023 Delta State gubernatorial election by candidates of the APC, PDP, and LP, namely Ovie Omo-Agege, Sheriff Oborevwori, and Kennedy Pela.

Data were sourced from televised broadcasts, YouTube campaign videos, official political media platforms, and news coverage of campaign activities. Six campaign speeches were purposively selected—two speeches from each candidate. The purposive sampling technique was adopted because it allowed the researcher to select speeches with strong rhetorical content, broad audience engagement, and clear ideological positioning.

The speeches were transcribed verbatim to preserve linguistic accuracy, rhetorical structures, and contextual meaning. Particular attention was given to Nigerian Pidgin expressions, indigenous language elements, tone, repetition, pauses, and audience interaction because these features contribute significantly to political persuasion within Nigerian political communication.

The study employed Critical Discourse Analysis using Fairclough’s (1998) three-dimensional framework. Analysis focused on lexical choices, slogans, rhetorical questions, emotional appeals, repetition, ideological positioning, legitimization strategies, identity construction, power negotiation, and opponent framing.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Overview of Data

The study analyzed six campaign speeches delivered during the 2023 Delta State gubernatorial election. The speeches were selected from televised campaign broadcasts, YouTube campaign uploads, and official political media platforms.

Table 1: Empirical Overview of Selected Campaign Speeches

Candidate	Political Party	Campaign Context	Primary Source / Access Coordinates
Ovie Omo-Agege	APC	Campaign Rally	TVC News YouTube Broadcast (March 2023)
Ovie Omo-Agege	APC	Public Campaign Speech	Official APC Campaign Media Release (February 2023)

Kennedy Pela	LP	Town Hall Event	Labour Party Media YouTube Upload (February 2023)
Kennedy Pela	LP	Public Media Interaction	Official LP Media Directorate Archives (March 2023)
Sheriff Oborewori	PDP	Campaign Rally	Official PDP Campaign Platform Broadcast (January 2023)
Sheriff Oborewori	PDP	Community Mobilization	TVC News Broadcast Segment / YouTube (March 2023)

Political Identity Construction and Self-Representation

The campaign speeches reveal deliberate attempts by the candidates to construct political identities capable of appealing to different voter demographics across Delta State. Through lexical choices, slogans, ethnic references, and self-representation strategies, the candidates projected competing ideological personalities designed to establish legitimacy and political relevance.

Table 2: Political Identity Construction and Self-Representation

Candidate	Lexical Choices/Slogans	Identity Construction	Self-Representation
Ovie Omo-Agege (APC)	“I be talk and do,” “I no go gree that one,” “Una go get”	Grassroots populist and proven performer	Performance-driven leader with practical achievements
Kennedy Pela (LP)	“Fiscal autonomy,” “righteousness,” “production vision”	Reformist technocrat and moral challenger	Private-sector reform advocate and anti-corruption candidate
Sheriff Oborewori (PDP)	“MORE agenda,” “door to door,” “ward to ward”	Continuity candidate and unifier	Accessible grassroots mobilizer focused on stability

The data reveal a clear tripartite structure of political identity within the campaign discourse: the populist outsider, the reformist challenger, and the continuity insider. These identities are strategically constructed through linguistic choices that align with broader ideological positions and voter expectations. This finding supports Norman Fairclough’s (2010) assertion that discourse functions as a social practice through which political actors negotiate and reproduce power relations.

Ovie Omo-Agege’s discourse reflects a populist political style grounded in grassroots accessibility and performance legitimacy. His repeated use of Nigerian Pidgin expressions such as:

“I no go allow make pregnant women dey spend 3 hours dey go Sapele.” and *“I be talk and do.”*

functions as a deliberate linguistic strategy aimed at reducing the symbolic distance between political elites and ordinary citizens. The use of Nigerian Pidgin creates social proximity and frames the candidate as relatable, practical, and deeply connected to everyday realities within Delta State. His discourse also constructs legitimacy through evidence-based self-representation. The rhetorical statement:

“...if I do all these ones as senator, una fit imagine wetin I go do as governor?” links his senatorial achievements directly to his governorship ambition. The statement frames his candidacy as a continuation of proven competence rather than political experimentation.

Omo-Agege further constructs ethnic inclusivity through explicit references to Delta State’s major ethnic groups:

“Una go get the same privileges, like every Urhobo man, like every Itsekiri man, like every Isoko man.”

This strategy reflects the socio-political realities of Delta State where ethnic balancing remains central to electoral politics. By naming different ethnic communities directly, he positions himself as a unifying figure capable of equitable governance.

Kennedy Pela constructs a different political identity. His discourse is dominated by formal policy-oriented expressions such as “fiscal autonomy,” “righteousness,” and “production vision.” Unlike Omo-Agege’s populist rhetoric, Pela adopts the language of institutional reform and economic restructuring. His discourse reflects a technocratic identity rooted in policy expertise and systemic change. Pela also projects himself as a confrontational reformer through expressions such as:

“I dare them to publish their debate.” and “I dare them to arrest me.”

The repeated use of the verb “dare” constructs an image of political fearlessness and moral resistance. Through this strategy, Pela positions himself as a challenger confronting corruption, intimidation, and political opacity.

His self-representation further reflects a market-oriented governance ideology:

“There are other ways driven by the private sector.” and “All I need is provide the right laws and private sector people would come.”

These expressions frame governance as a function of economic efficiency, investment attraction, and decentralization. Pela therefore presents himself as a reform-minded technocrat capable of restructuring Delta State’s economy.

Sheriff Oborevwoori’s discourse is structured around continuity, familiarity, and political reassurance. His repeated deployment of the “MORE agenda” functions both as campaign branding and ideological messaging. The slogan suggests continuity, expansion, and administrative progression within the existing political structure. His statement:

“My promise to Deltans is that I will listen to you people MORE, I will achieve MORE and do MORE.”

illustrates how repetition is strategically used to reinforce campaign identity and strengthen memorability. The slogan evolves from a campaign phrase into an ideological representation of continuity and developmental expansion. Oborevwoori also relies heavily on familiarity-based legitimacy:

“You know me very well.”

This statement assumes preexisting public trust and transforms familiarity into political credibility. Rather than presenting himself as a radical alternative, he positions himself as a stable and predictable political figure. Similarly, his repeated expressions:

“door to door”, “ward to ward”

construct an image of physical accessibility and grassroots engagement. The parallel structure reinforces campaign visibility while projecting closeness to local communities.

Overall, the findings reveal that political identity construction within the 2023 Delta State gubernatorial campaign was deeply connected to ethnicity, governance expectations, ideological positioning, and voter psychology. Omo-Agege seeks legitimacy through populist performance, Pela through reformist confrontation, and Oborevwoori through continuity and political familiarity.

Rhetorical and Persuasive Strategies

The campaign speeches reveal extensive use of rhetorical and persuasive devices aimed at influencing voter perception, strengthening ideological narratives, and mobilizing electoral support. Repetition, rhetorical questions, emotional appeals, parallelism, strategic ambiguity, and legitimization strategies emerged consistently across the candidates’ discourse.

Table 3: Rhetorical and Persuasive Strategies

Candidate	Dominant Rhetorical Devices	Persuasive Function
Ovie Omo-Agege	Repetition, rhetorical questions, emotional appeals	Audience participation and populist solidarity
Kennedy Pela	Contrastive framing, confrontational rhetoric, religious invocation	Reform urgency and moral credibility
Sheriff Oborevwoori	Parallelism, slogan repetition, reassurance discourse	Continuity, stability, and voter reassurance

Repetition emerged as one of the dominant persuasive strategies across the campaign speeches. Omo-Agege repeatedly employs expressions such as:

“Make una come out, make una come vote.” and “una go get.”

These repetitive structures create audience participation and reinforce communal political identity. His rhetorical question:

“no be so?”

functions as a subtle mechanism for securing audience agreement. Rather than forcing acceptance, the rhetorical structure pressures listeners into viewing his political position as common sense. Omo-Agege also relies heavily on emotional appeals grounded in infrastructural suffering and governance neglect. His references to pregnant women spending several hours traveling for medical care personalize governance failure and transform abstract policy discussions into emotionally relatable experiences.

Kennedy Pela’s rhetorical strategy is more confrontational and ideologically aggressive. His statement:

“Delta has been sliding for the last 24 years... We have gone from good, bad to worse, and there’s a danger that it will get worse, worser.”

uses dramatic contrast and linguistic intensification to construct urgency and dissatisfaction. The deliberate use of the nonstandard intensifier *“worser”* amplifies emotional frustration and dramatizes the perceived decline of governance within the state. Pela also combines political rhetoric with religious sentiment:

“I no go fall una hand... God help me.”

This expression constructs sincerity, humility, and moral accountability. Within Nigeria’s highly religious socio-political environment, religious invocation functions as a persuasive mechanism for establishing public trust and ethical credibility.

Sheriff Oborevwoori’s rhetorical strategy relies primarily on reassurance, continuity, and institutional stability. His repeated use of:

“MORE”

transforms the slogan into a symbolic representation of continuity and administrative expansion. The repetition increases memorability while reinforcing voter familiarity with the PDP’s political identity in Delta State. Similarly, his repeated phrases:

“door to door”, “ward to ward”

demonstrate deliberate parallelism designed to strengthen rhythmic memorability and project political accessibility. Oborevwoori also employs positive institutional language through expressions such as:

“open responsive government.”

Unlike Pela’s confrontational rhetoric or Omo-Agege’s populist emotional appeals, Oborevwoori frames governance as stable, accessible, and reassuring. His discourse therefore functions less as revolutionary political communication and more as a promise of predictable continuity.

The findings reveal that the candidates’ rhetorical choices reflect broader ideological struggles within Delta State’s political environment. Omo-Agege mobilizes through populist solidarity, Pela through reformist urgency, and Oborevwoori through continuity and reassurance.

Authority Assertion, Opponent Framing, and Voter Appeal

The candidates also utilized discourse to assert authority, frame political opponents, and appeal to specific voter demographics across Delta State. Through strategic language choices, they negotiated legitimacy while simultaneously presenting competing narratives about governance, competence, and political stability.

Table 4: Authority Assertion and Opponent Framing

Candidate	Authority Assertion	Opponent Framing	Voter Appeal Strategy
Ovie Omo-Agege	Governance competence and infrastructural delivery	Opponents as ineffective	Grassroots and ethnic inclusivity
Kennedy Pela	Transparency and anti-corruption reform	Political intimidation and systemic failure	Youths and reform-minded voters
Sheriff Oborevwoori	Stability and continuity	Opposition as disruption risk	Peace, continuity, and social harmony

Omo-Agege asserts authority primarily through governance performance and infrastructural promises. His repeated slogan:

“I be talk and do.”

functions as a performance-based legitimization strategy. The slogan implicitly frames his opponents as politicians who make promises without delivering tangible results. His discourse also appeals strongly to grassroots voters through references to local suffering, economic neglect, and infrastructural underdevelopment. By emphasizing

practical governance concerns, he constructs himself as a candidate capable of solving everyday problems affecting ordinary citizens.

Pela’s discourse asserts authority through transparency and confrontational resistance against political intimidation. His statement:

“if you cannot arrest me, e mean say na lie.”

reframes allegations against him as politically motivated falsehoods. The expression positions him as fearless, transparent, and resistant to institutional oppression.

His discourse also appeals to reform-minded voters, particularly younger electorates dissatisfied with traditional political structures. Through anti-corruption rhetoric and decentralization language, Pela presents himself as a candidate capable of challenging entrenched political systems.

Oborevori asserts authority through continuity, peace, and political reassurance. His emphasis on:

“enhanced peace and security.”

frames his candidacy as a protective force capable of preserving social stability within Delta State. In a politically diverse environment where ethnic competition and political tension remain significant concerns, such rhetoric appeals strongly to voters prioritizing stability over radical change. His discourse positions continuity as safer and more reliable than political experimentation.

The findings reveal that the candidates strategically utilized discourse not merely to communicate policies but to negotiate political legitimacy, shape voter perception, and construct competing narratives about governance and leadership within Delta State.

Ideological Struggles and Socio-Political Realities

The campaign speeches reflect broader ideological tensions and socio-political realities within Delta State’s electoral environment. Beyond persuasion and political branding, the candidates’ discourse reveals competing visions of governance, development, accountability, and power distribution.

Table 5: Ideological Positioning and Socio-Political Realities

Candidate	Ideological Positioning	Socio-Political Focus	Power Negotiation Strategy
Ovie Omo-Agege	Economic restoration and populism	Infrastructure and economic revival	Shared economic recovery
Kennedy Pela	Institutional reform and decentralization	Accountability and anti-corruption	Redistribution of governance power
Sheriff Oborevori	Stability and continuity	Inclusivity and peace	Preservation of social balance

Omo-Agege’s discourse reflects a politics of economic restoration. His repeated promise:

“we go reopen am.”

in reference to the Warri Port symbolizes collective frustration surrounding economic decline, unemployment, and infrastructural neglect within Delta State. By employing the collective pronoun “we,” Omo-Agege frames governance as a shared responsibility between leadership and the people. His discourse therefore negotiates power through promises of economic recovery and infrastructural revitalization.

Kennedy Pela’s discourse reflects a strong reformist ideology centered on decentralization and institutional restructuring. His repeated use of expressions such as:

“fiscal autonomy” and *“eliminate waste and corruption.”*

reveals dissatisfaction with centralized governance and existing political systems. Pela attempts to renegotiate political authority by promising structural transformation rather than administrative continuity. His discourse reflects broader reformist sentiments that characterized aspects of the 2023 Nigerian electoral climate.

Oborevori’s discourse, however, emphasizes continuity, inclusivity, and political stability. His repeated references to:

“enhanced peace and security” and *“listen to you people MORE.”*

position governance as a process of maintaining social harmony and institutional balance. In a multi-ethnic state like Delta, such rhetoric reflects the socio-political importance of stability and peaceful coexistence. Oborevori therefore negotiates power by presenting himself as a unifying figure capable of preserving existing political equilibrium.

The findings support Teun A. van Dijk’s (1998) argument that political discourse plays a significant role in shaping ideological consciousness and public interpretation of social realities. The campaign speeches do not

merely communicate political intentions; they reflect broader anxieties surrounding governance, economic decline, corruption, ethnic inclusion, unemployment, and political legitimacy within Delta State.

Ultimately, the 2023 Delta State gubernatorial campaign represented a contest between three competing ideological visions of governance. Omo-Agege sought power to restore through populist performance and economic revival. Pela sought power to redistribute through institutional reform and anti-corruption discourse. Oborevwoori sought power to stabilize through continuity, inclusivity, and political reassurance.

Discussion of Findings through Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Lens

1. Textual Layer (Description)

At the textual level, the campaign was characterized by distinct linguistic variations. Omo-Agege utilized conversational Nigerian Pidgin and populist rhetorical questions, Pela utilized technocratic English mixed with deliberate non-standard intensifiers, while Oborevwoori deployed rhythmic slogans and parallel structures.

2. Discursive Practice Layer (Interpretation)

The discursive practices reflected the evolving digital landscape of Nigerian politics. Speeches were designed not only for physical campaign rallies but also for circulation on YouTube, TikTok, and televised broadcasts.

3. Socio-Cultural Practice Layer (Explanation)

At the macro-level, the discourse reflected Delta State's socio-economic contradictions: vast oil wealth alongside youth unemployment and infrastructural deficits.

Omo-Agege and Pela exploited these tensions to construct discourses of liberation and structural rupture, while Oborevwoori's discourse of continuity relied on the long-standing institutional dominance of the PDP in Delta State.

Thus, political language functioned as a calculated ideological mechanism used to construct authority, preserve dominance, and shape democratic consciousness.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the campaign speeches of the 2023 Delta State gubernatorial election were deeply embedded in the strategic manipulation of language for power negotiation and identity construction.

Through Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, the paper demonstrated how Ovie Omo-Agege, Kennedy Pela, and Sheriff Oborevwoori deployed unique linguistic profiles ranging from populist Nigerian Pidgin to institutional slogans and technocratic reform framing to advance their ideological agendas.

Ultimately, the election discourse was not simply about electoral promises. It became a contested site where socio-economic anxieties, ethnic-political dynamics, and historical power alignments within Delta State were publicly negotiated.

Future research should integrate Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis to examine how visual imagery, body language, and non-verbal communication further reinforce ideological structures within Nigerian sub-national political communication.

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