

Dysphemisms and language change in ZANU-PF and MDC political discourse

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore dysphemisms that are used by the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front, (ZANU-PF) and the Movement For Democratic Change (MDC) politicians in six Zimbabwean newspapers before and after the signing of the SADC mediated Global Political Agreement (GPA) that ended the political deadlock between the parties in 2008. In this study, I argue that after the signing of the GPA, political discourse between the parties does not only change considerably, but it also becomes progressively and markedly more dysphemistic and more combative in nature than was the case before the GPA was signed. I hold the view that linguistic analysis of this genre of political discourse might shed light on the psychology of those who use it.

Keywords: dysphemism, political discourse, ZANU-PF, MDC

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore how politicians from the main political parties in Zimbabwe, e.g. the Zimbabwean African National Union, Patriotic Front (ZANU –PF) and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) use the English Language to portray each other unfavorably through the use of dysphemisms that are manifested in six Zimbabwean newspapers. Specifically, I would like to explore dysphemisms that are used by ZANU-PF and the MDC politicians before and after the signing of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) mediated Global Political Agreement (GPA) that ended the political deadlock between the parties in 2008. This will enable us to determine the extent to which the signing of this agreement triggers some linguistic changes in the genre under investigation.

In this study, I argue that ZANU-PF and MDC political discourse progressively becomes more and more dysphemistic as politicians from both parties get more and more involved in the actual implementation of the GPA. The data clearly indicates that dysphemisms that are used before the GPA is signed are mild and lukewarm, whilst those that are used after the signing of the GPA are markedly more combative in nature. There are very few studies that have been done in Zimbabwe that focus on the linguistic analysis of newspaper political discourse and virtually nothing has been done on dysphemisms and change. The study of dysphemisms in political discourse is invaluable because it gives us some rare insights into the psychology of those use them. As Meinhof (1996:39) has aptly pointed out, linguistic research has long shown that our linguistic behavior reveals information about our attitude towards others.

Dysphemisms

According to Crystal (1992:112) as well as Allan and Burrige (1991) dysphemisms, which are antonyms of euphemisms, are disparaging expressions which speakers use instead of using those linguistic features that are neutral and pleasant. Yusuf (2003:104) argues that dysphemisms are verbal caricatures which are characterized by exaggerations where sometimes speakers take a partial account of available facts. The results, according to Enright (1985:2), are that sometimes issues are made to sound worse than they actually are. Furthermore, Penelope (1989) suggests that dysphemisms may comprise of single lexical items, a sentence, or even whole texts. Yusuf (2003:104) citing Allan and Burrige (1991:234) argues that dysphemisms are often used as a weapon against those things that frustrate us or against those people whose actions we disapprove of, despise or even dislike. Dysphemisms originate from various linguistic sources e.g. contrasts, repetitions, puns, proverbs, anaphoric and cataphoric references, rhetorical questions, metaphors and slang. And according to Yusuf (2003:4) citing Jowet and O'Donnel (1986:16) dysphemisms are used in order to manipulate cognitions and shape people's perceptions. They are also used to portray certain targeted individuals negatively.

The use of dysphemisms to portray certain individuals negatively has been described by some scholars e.g. Van Dijk (1997) as *negative other presentation*, while Adegbija (1995) as well as Chilton and Schaffner (1997) have described the practice as *discrediting acts* and *delegitimization* respectively. Different scholars have used different terms, many of which will take centre stage in this study to refer to these dysphemistic techniques, acts and practices. For example, Nilsen (1978:21) refers to dysphemistic practices as *card stacking* whereby certain facts that support the opinion of the accuser are emphasized while leaving out those that do not. Other terms that are used to refer to dysphemistic practices, acts and techniques are *down playing*, *qualitative* and *quantitative dissimulation* as well as *intensifying*. To *downplay* is to present the victim's argument in such a way that he does not look good. This is done by emphasizing unimportant issues about his/her case as well as by using ambiguities that are made deliberately faulty. Chilton and Schaffner (1997:212) suggest that *down playing* can involve quantitative and qualitative *dissimulation*. In *quantitative dissimulation*, the speaker deliberately gives the listener inadequate information whilst in qualitative dissimulation, the speaker engages in verbal evasions or even lies. And, *intensifying* involves the use of many linguistic elements to portray the victim negatively such name *calling*, *over generalizations*, unqualified assertions, diachronic and synchronic repetition and even insults.

Global Political Agreement

The Global Political Agreement (GPA) which was signed on September 15, 2008, was necessitated by the failure of the March 2008 presidential elections in Zimbabwe to produce an outright winner although Tsvangirai of the MDC won 47% of the vote while Mugabe of ZANU-PF won 43% of the vote. In order therefore to resolve the political deadlock that had paralyzed the country, the ruling ZANU-PF party led by President Mugabe and the two antagonistic MDC opposition parties led by Tsvangirai and Mutambara respectively, came into a SADC mediated power sharing political agreement which would

create a transitional government. The transitional government allows for the sharing of power among the three principals, President Mugabe of ZANU-PF, who chairs cabinet, Prime Minister Tsvangirai of MDC who chairs the Council Ministers, and Mutambara, of the smaller MDC party (MDC-M). And to ensure that the agreement was properly implemented, a joint Monitoring and Implementation Committee (JOMIC) was formed which comprises four members from ZANU-PF, and four each from the two MDC parties.

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by theoretical frameworks for the linguistic analysis of newspaper discourse that have been proposed by some researchers e.g. Chris Kennedy (1996), Develotte and Rechniewski (2001) as well Taiwo (2007). Before we analyze the data, it would be useful to give a brief description of these theoretical frameworks so that we can see how this study is located within the context of these studies.

Firstly, the study by Develotte and Rechniewski (2001) focuses on the description of theoretical and methodological issues that are involved in the linguistic analysis of newspaper headlines. The issues that researchers focus on are based on how the French and Australian press responded to the Franco-Australian crisis of 1995 when President Chirac of France decided to recommence nuclear testing in the South Pacific. The researchers examine representations made by the two countries before, during and after the crisis. They then outline some of the commonest linguistic features that characterize the discourse of newspapers. They suggest that many newspaper discourses make extensive use of puns, alliteration, emotive vocabulary, allusions, presupposition and metaphors. They also suggest that anaphora is a common linguistic feature in newspaper discourse where references relate to previous events and situations. They further argue that one of the commonest linguistic features in newspaper discourse is repetition through diachronicity (overtime) and repetition through synchronicity (repetition that occurs within one issue of the newspaper).

Another study which has provided us with a framework for the linguistic study newspaper discourse is one that was carried out by Taiwo (2007). Taiwo's study was a Critical Discourse Analysis of 300 Nigerian newspaper headlines taken from six newspapers. (CDA) is a method of linguistic analysis that shows how discourse is used to determine what Taiwo (2007:219) citing van Dijk (1988) refers to as the source of power, abuse and dominance within specific socio-political and historical contexts. According to Wodak (1989) this approach is also often referred to as critical linguistics. Taiwo's objective was to use CDA to examine the peculiarity of the lexical items and rhetorical devices used in newspapers in order to 'identify the ideologies that lie behind the constructions' (Taiwo 2007:219).

Taiwo (2007:219) elaborates on some of the linguistic features that he used in his study and which editors also use in order to portray politicians negatively. These features include the use of emotive vocabulary, rhetorical devices and *paraphrasing*. Editors also select lexical items that are blunt and confrontational in nature. Lastly, Taiwo stresses that the most dominant linguistic feature which is used consistently to arouse negative feelings towards politicians is sensationalization.

The third study that provides us with a framework for the linguistic study of newspaper discourse is one that was carried out by Chris Kennedy (1996). Chris Kennedy focuses on whether or not there was any considerable linguistic change in the language of advertisements that was used by employers in the special employment section called La Crème de la crème of the *Times* newspaper after the passing of the Sexual discrimination Act of 1975. The act outlawed sexual discrimination in employment and among other things, specifically forbade the use of discriminatory advertisements or even the use of recruitment descriptions with a sexual connotation such as "salesgirl", "attractive" "charming" and "postman". Kennedy's hypothesis was that most linguistic features that expressed sexual discrimination in relation to employment or in relation to the recruitment process would gradually disappear from the newspaper as advertisers tried to avoid prosecution.

Same 600 recruitment advertisements containing 48,000 words were selected between 1974 and 1976, i.e. before and after the passing of the act. The data was typed into the computer and concordanced using the mini-concordance and the micro-concord. The results showed that by December 1975 after the Sexual Discrimination Act had received both the parliamentary Approval as well as the Royal Assent, there was a sharp decrease in the use of terminology that expressed sexual discrimination in relation to employment. There was a clear indication that the act had had an impact on the language that was used in advertisements. And by October 1976, there was clear evidence that the language of advertisement in this particular genre, had changed.

Data

Data for this study was collected from six government and private owned Zimbabwean newspapers, namely Herald, Sunday Mail, Sunday News, Chronicle, Daily News and Manica Post. I decided that I would explore dysphemisms as they are used in specific sections of the newspapers like the Editorial, Analysis, Opinion and View Point sections of the newspapers because this was where dysphemistic political discourse was most likely to occur. My hypothesis was that the signing of the GPA would trigger linguistic changes in the genre under investigation since both ZANU-PF and MDC had been coerced into the formation of coalition a government. I hypothesized that political discourse between them would be more dysphemistic after the signing of the GPA than it was before the GPA was signed. In all, a total of 300 newspapers that were published in 2007 and 2008 (Before the signing of the GPA) and those that were published after 2008 (After the signing of the GPA) were randomly selected. Dysphemisms were identified and then analyzed using the frameworks for linguistic analysis that have been proposed by several scholars notably Chris Kennedy (1996), Develotte and Rechienisk (2001) Yusuf (2003) as well as Taiwo (2007). All the names that are used in the discussion are pseudonyms except those of scholars that are cited.

Discussion

As we shall see in this analysis the dysphemisms that were used before the signing of the GPA are few, “mild” and “lukewarm” in nature compared to those that were used after the signing of the GPA. And many of them are characterized by sarcasm in many instances even humor. However, after the signing of the GPA, political discourse between ZANU-PF and MDC politicians becomes not just more dysphemistic but also markedly more combative in nature. More on this later. Excerpts that contain dysphemisms that are deemed to be a representative sample of those that were used before the signing of the GPA are presented below:

Dysphemisms used before the signing of the GPA

Excerpt 1: Herald January 8, 2007

Thomas dishonest denial:

Excerpt 2: Herald January 10, 2007

Mayor is hopelessly drunk with lust for power. This boy from the village. He is a globalization fundamentalist.

Excerpt 3: Herald April 18, 2008

The MDC lies and lies ...hypocritical. Takesure is hypocritical

Excerpt 4: Sunday News April 20, 2008

They expected comrade Dima to be a puppet like them

Excerpt 5: Chronicle June 11, 2008

The MDC is a creation of the outsiders

Excerpt 6: Herald, June 23, 2008

Thomas is shameless. Thomas' looks are passable with potholed cheeks filled with doses of makeup

Excerpt 7: Standard January 13, 2008

These people are failures

One of the main targets of dysphemistic discourse before and after the signing of the GPA is Thomas, the MDC leader. As we can see at Excerpt 1, In the Herald of January 8,2007,Thomas is dysphemistically merely characterized as dishonest. And in the same issue of the Herald, he is also sarcastically addressed as the “party leader”. The terms *party leader* are in quotes to suggest that his credentials as party leader are probably questionable. Furthermore, in the Herald of January 17, 2007, two senior MDC officials are sarcastically addressed as “ Mr.”. And as will be made clear in this analysis, designations that denote politeness and respect such as “Mr” to refer to political adversaries are almost non-existent in the data. The term *Mr* is used in the same spirit as the term *party leader* which is referred to above. It is also however, important to emphasize that in ZANU-PF political discourse, the term Mr is often used to denote (a) those who did not participate in the liberation war and (b those who are not ZANU PF members or supporters. In ZANU-PF political circles therefore, the term has negative connotations. Conversely, the term *comrade*, or its acronym *Cde* is often used in ZANU-PF political discourse to refer to (a) war veterans of the liberation war (b) ZANU-PF members or supporters (c) Anyone who sympathizes with ZANU PF’s values. And anyone who is considered a comrade is often venerated.

Dysphemistic discourse is also directed at Mayor who is the leader of another MDC faction. In the Herald of January 10,2007, as indicated at Excerpt 2, he is described as being drunk with the lust for power because he broke away the from the “mainstream” MDC party to form a rival MDC party. The dysphemistic metaphor *drunk* however appears to be fairly “mild” compared to many dysphemisms that are used in Zimbabwean newspapers. Another MDC official from the mainstream MDC-T party who is always under attack from ZANU-PF is Takesure. For example, as indicated at Excerpt 3, in the Herald of April 18, 2008, dysphemisms such as *lies* and *hypocritical* which Adegbiya (1995) and Van Dijk(1997) characterize as *discrediting acts* and *negative-other- presentation* respectively, are used to refer to Takesure who is accused of blasphemy and intolerance.

Some of the dysphemisms are syntactic in nature. For example, in the Herald of June 23, 2008(see excerpt 6) syntactic dysphemisms such as “he has pot holed cheeks filled with lavish doses of make up” as well as “Thomas in Shameless” are deployed. These dysphemisms, which have been characterized as delegitimization and intensifying acts by Chilton and Schaffner (1997) as well as by Hirschberg (1999:513) respectively, are designed to portray political adversaries negatively. And in the Standard Newspaper of January 13, 2008, MDC politicians describe ZANU-PF politicians dysphemestically as “these people” are failures. The terms, *these people* when used within the context of “failure” have derogatory connotations and are often used to indicate disrespect.

Discussion : Dysphemisms used after the signing of the GPA

The analysis of the discourse that is used by ZANU-PF and MDC politicians after the signing of the GPA focuses on a wide range of dysphemistic devices that characterize the discourse of the parties such as metaphors, diachronic and synchronic repetition, negative other presentation, syntactic dysphemisms, delegitimation, intensifying, alliteration, puns and rhymes as well as sarcasm and humor. I argue that there is a great deal of evidence in the data to suggest that considerable linguistic changes took place after the signing of the GPA. Evidence in the corpus shows that political discourse is not just “tension ridden” as suggested by Galasinski, (2000), Louis (2000), Gelber (2002) and Nyhan (2004) but is also riddled with considerable attacks of a personal nature as can be seen in some of the excerpts that are numbered 8 to 16 that are presented below:

Dysphemisms used after the signing of the GPA

Excerpts 8: Sunday Mail December 4, 2011

The Loverman and his chain of lovers. The joke around town is, "Thomas haanonoke".

Excerpt 9: Sunday Mail December 4, 2011

Thomas is morally depraved ... reckless... politically and sexually promiscuous...he has wayward escapades.

Excerpt 10: Sunday Mail December 4, 2011

...is uncouth... is contemptuous... has serious deficiency... is a reckless womanizer...his hangers on.

Excerpt 11: Daily News December 12, 2011

... has aggressiveness, arrogance, boastfulness... vanity... is pompous... menacing tone... malevolent traits... is coarse, mediocre, snobbish demeanour .

Excerpt 12: Sunday Mail December 25, 2011

Article is scurrilous.. is malicious...abusive, incites hostility, a fortiori...publishes vitriol... vile and vituperation. He can't approbate and reprobate.

Excerpt 13: Sunday Mail December 25, 2011

... gross misconduct by MDC... it mischievously and criminally... He is unscrupulous. He is promiscuous... Takesure is 100% crazy... craziness...

Excerpt 14: Herald December 30, 2011

...article is empty, shallow... nonsense...hollow, laughable... foolishness.

Excerpt 15: Herald January 25, 2012

Minister...rabidly... maintained that punitive measures are restrictive... MDC mischievously... maintains that measures are targeted... minister is myopic.

Excerpt 16: Sunday Mail March 4, 2012

...why reviewing garbage... review garbage... come up with garbage... garbage in garbage out. Garbage begets garbage.

Before we proceed with the analysis, it is important for us to supply the context for excerpts 8,9 and 10 because they refer to a series of a related incidents that revolve around Thomas. These excerpts refer to how Thomas of the MDC party gets romantically involved with Lilian, a ZANU-PF member and decides to

get married to her. In keeping with traditional Shona culture, a traditional marriage ceremony is conducted in the out-skirts of Harare. And in the full glare of the media, Thomas pays a bribe- price of 36 thousand United States Dollars. However, a few days after solemnizing the marriage, Thomas dramatically “somersaults” out of the marriage claiming that the marriage had been manipulated and interfered with by ZANU-PF agents who had “crafted” and “orchestrated” it. Thomas then denies having married Lilian in the first place and argues that the USD36 000 he paid was a fine for impregnating her. In Shona culture the money that Thomas is referring to is metaphorically referred to as “damage”. In the meantime, the newspapers are awash with stories of several other women who say they too have had amorous relationships with Thomas.

In excerpt 8 therefore, a series of syntactic dysphemisms which Taiwo (2004:234) describes as a *paraphrasing* are anaphorically deployed to portray Thomas as a person whose reputation has been tarnished due to his involvement with several women. The except, which is laden with syntactic dysphemisms and sexual ennuendos such as “the newly crowned loverman as well as “Thomas haanonoki”, which can be translated as “Thomas is a massive womanizer” reinforces the idea through diachronic repetition that Thomas as a politician should not be taken seriously.

In excerpt 9, dysphemisms are deployed both through synchronic repetition as well as through diachronic repetition. Synchronically, the *intensified dysphemism promiscuous* is repeated anaphorically ten times in the same article. At the same time, the same dysphemism is repeated diachronically because it has already appeared several times in the text. Furthermore, a dysphemistic pun is deployed where Thomas is portrayed as being promiscuous at two levels, i.e. at the sexual as well as at the political level. The whole text is written in the conversational historic present tense where the writer describes events as they unfold. Milroy (1987) suggests that this enables the writer to create a sense of drama and captivate the audience. The whole sense of drama in this article is highlighted through

Bernards use of dysphemistic rhymes like “sexually scandalous” and sexually frivolous” to describe Thomas. Bernard also uses a series syntactic dysphemisms e.g. “He wants the public to trust him and respect him given the fiasco of his confirmed sexual promiscuity”, as well as , “sexual orgies are the order of the day”. These syntactic dysphemisms, which Taiwo (2004:324) refers to as sensationalism are deployed incessantly through out the article in order to achieve what Chilton and Schaffner (1997”212) refer to as the delegitimization of political competitors.

A considerable number of syntactic dysphemisms that we see at excerpt 10 e.g. “it is important for any leader to think using his head...” have been deployed which clearly indicates that the discourse that politicians use is getting uglier and uglier. To elaborate on this further, in the excerpt 10, the dysphemisms *uncouth* and *reckless womanizer* have been used to paint an unfavorable picture of Thomas.

In the *Daily News* of December 12, 2011 (see excerpt 11) Pona of the MDC-T accuses Themba of ZANU-PF of using undiplomatic language. He uses dysphemistic intensifiers such as *malevolent*, *boastful*, *mediocre* and *pompous* to portray Themba negatively. And towards the end of the diatribe, Pona sarcastically describes Themba as “sophiscated”. Excerpt 12 refers to a letter that had been written by Takesure of the MDC-T complaining about an article that expressed hostility towards the MDC-T which had been written by Bernard of ZANU-PF. There are two important points to note about excerpt 12. Firstly, words that have been used as dysphemistic intensifiers by Takesure such as *scurrilous*, *malicious*, *vile*, *vitriol* and *vituperation* do not occur in the data before the signing of the GPA. Secondly, Takesure even uses alliteration and rhymes as dysphemistic devices (Henceforth dysphemistic alliteration or dysphemistic rhymes) to express his exasperation. For example, it is quite clear that words such as *vile*, *vitriol* and *vituperation* are used alliteratively while dysphemistic rhymes are also evident in words such

as *approbate* and *reprobate* which Takesure deploys to suggest that Bernard constantly contradicts himself.

Bernard's response to Takesure which appears in the Sunday Mail of December 25, 2011 is presented below:

This is gross misconduct by the MDC. The MDC wants to give the impression that it and its leader are victims of abusive language...

When he opens his mouth, he is unscrupulous.

When he opens his zip, he is promiscuous

That is 100% crazy but the craziness designed to institutionalize illegality and destabilize.

I think it is clear that Bernard's response is parody that is used to mimic Takesure's linguistic style.

Bernard, like Takesure, also uses alliteration and rhymes as dysphemistic devices. For example, the words *crazy* and *craziness* are used alliteratively while the words *unscrupulous* and *promiscuous* are used as rhyming words.

One major area of conflict between ZANU-PF politicians and the MDC politicians is whether or not sanctions that were imposed on Zimbabwe by Western countries are targeted at a few ZANU-PF individuals or they are meant to affect everyone. The MDC parties maintain that the sanctions are restrictive and targeted, while ZANU-PF politicians argue that the sanctions are not targeted and they are illegal and punitive. At excerpt 15 therefore, Booker of ZANU-PF criticizes Takesure of the MDC-T party for maintaining that the sanctions are targeted at a few people, which, in his view, is not the case.

As I have already indicated above, the differences between ZANU-PF and MDC about sanctions are not new. And the terms *targeted* and *illegal* have been used several times before and after the signing of the GPA. What is clearly new however, especially after the signing of the GPA, is the discourse that is used to describe anyone or anything that is associated with sanctions. For example, in excerpt 15, Takesure of the MDC is described dysphemistically as *rabid* and *myopic* because of his stance on the sanctions. These dysphemistic devices at excerpt 15, which are often referred to as quantitative

dissimulation clearly suggest that after the signing of the GPA, political discourse has changed considerably. It has become much more “hostile” and belligerent than was the case in 2007 and 2008. These assertions can further be corroborated by excerpt 16 where Bernard of ZANU PF uses the dysphemism *garbage* to refer to the new constitution which he says favours the MDC party. And using what Develotte and Rechniewski (2001) refer to as repetition through synchronicity, the dysphemism *garbage* is repeated nine times on the same page of the same article. At the sametime and within the same text Bernard also describes the MDC-T constitution negotiators dysphemistically as *delinquent* and *truant*.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper has been to show how ZANU-PF and MDC politicians use linguistic resources to portray each other unfavorably through the use of dysphemisms. I also argue that there is a great deal of evidence in the data to suggest that after the signing of the GPA, the dysphemisms that are used by both ZANU-PF and MDC’s change considerably. Three instances of dysphemistic change are presented. Firstly, there are those dysphemisms that occur before the GPA has been signed. These dysphemisms, such as lies and *dishonest* are few, casual and lukewarm in nature. Some are used sarcastically and even humorously. Secondly, there are those dysphemisms that are in the data both before and after the signing of the GPA. These are often accompanied by the intensifiers. And many of them are repeated through what Develotte and Rechnieski (2001) refer to as diachronic and synchronic repetition. Thirdly, and most importantly, after the signing of the GPA the discourse progressively becomes more and more dysphemistic as politicians get more and more involved in the actual implementation of the coalition accord. New dysphemisms such as *vile*, *vitriol* and *vituperation* which are used by MDC ministers have even been deployed alliteratively. Both ZANU-PF and MDC politicians use rhyming dysphemisms such as *approbate* and *reprobate* as well as *promiscuous* and *unscrupulous* as a weapon to deride each other.

And, as Allan and Burrige (1991:234) maintain, politicians use dysphemisms as a weapon against those things that frustrate them or against those people they disapprove of, despise or even dislike. It appears therefore that the dysphemistic discourse that is described in this study reflects the tension that exists between ZANU PF and MDC politicians.

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