



Face-Saving as a Relative Phenomenon in Parliamentary Context: A Study of the Nigerian National Assembly

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is one of the post-colonial countries in the world that is struggling to find political stability in a democratic culture. Amidst the palpable influence of the protracted military rule, the Nigerian Parliament is in constant conflict with decisions seen to be meted out by the Executive arm of government, in the English Language, one of the country's official languages. While the Executive Arm is controlled by the ruling Peoples Democratic Party, the Parliament comprises representatives from at least three political parties across the countries. The Parliamentarians belong to diverse linguistic backgrounds with different cultural indexes in handling situational faces. In the daily parliamentary deliberations, issues of national integration, distribution of economic amenities and political positions, individual and community empowerment, are negotiated in sometimes very volatile atmosphere exuding immense pragmatic interest. In these contexts, there are possibilities of exposure to personal insult, derogatory remarks, disregard for one's status to achieve desired goals and damage to valued friendly and political relationships. It was observed that at the end of face-threatening behaviours, faces observed saving or face-honouring processes also occur with due reference to an application of the Parliament Rules Book coded in English, Structured after Universal Pattern but with matters relative to the Nigerian Parliament. Can this reference to Universal Parliamentary Ethics, coded in English but applied by Nigerians from a mix of indigenous languages and linguistic identities said to be really universal? This paper seeks to answer this question.

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on face-saving among the members of the National Assembly in the Post-colonial era in Nigeria, a multicultural, multi-religious, multilingual country in West Africa sub-region of the Sub-Sahara. Our approach is patterned on a brief overview of the colonial and post-colonial Nigeria vis-à-vis her National activities in relation to the concept of face-saving.

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Our scope is a presentation of the data, episodes of interlocutions among the parliamentarians within and outside the chambers, outcomes of their acts in the realm of face-saving. The data analysis will help answer such questions as to what role language use or abuse play in the sociopolitical areas of post-colonial life; and to establish whether or not the mix of languages and linguistic identities created by colonialism plays a significant role in the way speakers in multilingual post-colonial speakers in multilingual post-colonial speech communities produce and react to speech acts related to politeness and face-saving.

We have adopted a simple definition of face-saving for the purpose of this work. Sarah Rosenberg ([http:// www. Beyond_intractability.org/essay/face/3/28/2006](http://www.Beyond_intractability.org/essay/face/3/28/2006)) page 1 states that face-saving means:

Not being disrespectful to others in public, or taking preventive actions so that we will not appear to lose face in the eyes of others.

Rosenburg further quotes Ting Tooney on face-saving as “the interaction between the degree of threats or considerations one party offers to another party and the degree of claim for a sense of self-respect (or demand for respect towards ones national image or cultural group) put forth by the other party in a given situation.

The sum of face-saving concept therefore appears to be how people can leave conflict situations not just unharmed, but also departing gracefully, avoiding injury, embarrassment, humiliation or loss of dignity. The universal element in face-saving is rooted in the linguistic nature of the concept since social interactions among humans are basically expressed through language communication, above all other possibilities. But face-saving can also be a relative phenomenon in the light of the interplay between cultural and communicative indifferences in various contexts, situations and subjects of discourse.

This is where our sub-topic gains relevance. We want to appraise how Nigerian parliamentarians react to face-saving situations considering the context of post colonialism and its concomitant consequences of multicultural, multilingual, multiethnic and apparently multicollectivist or special group interests.

Nigeria and her Post-Colonial Parliament

Nigeria, in the pre-colonial period existed as distinct fragments of kingdoms, each with its culture, language and political norms. The western colonialists, the British, merged the various peoples and christened the territory Nigeria. The political structuring then subsisted in the post-colonial era leaving out only the English speaking peoples of the now Republic of Cameroons.

Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has passed through various forms of political changes. There have been four parliaments convened in the four

Civilian regimes (usually called First, Second, Third and Fourth Republics), interspaced with protracted military regimes. Each Nigerian Parliamentary regime operates the bicameral system with the lower House called the House of Representatives and the higher chamber called the Senate.

The post-colonial Nigeria is an amalgam of three major groups, so described because of their higher populations, and hundreds of other groups, each identifiable by its culture, language and other norms. And with the introduction of English as Colonial Language, it is commonly known that Nigerians speak many indigenous languages in addition to non-indigenous ones such as English, French, German and Spanish. This situation makes Nigeria qualified to be referred to as a multilingual nation with an estimated 513 languages and clusters (Bamgbose 1978:65).

Of the 513 languages and clusters, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are recognized in the Nigerian constitution to be used along with the English Language 'when adequate arrangements have been made therefore' (cf Nigerian Constitution of 1999). Problems arise often when there is attempt to use any of the three indigenous languages for parliamentary activities. This is because some people in Nigeria tend to attribute the term "major" to the three languages in while relegating the other languages to mere "minor". But Eka (2000:3) has debunked such classification for the Nigerian languages, positing as in Ferguson (1968:27) that no language is more efficient than another as every language can be developed as a system of communication.

The above background, coupled with the multiethnic composition of Nigeria is important in understanding the making of the Nigerian Parliament which of course must comprise representatives from all the ethnic groups which though delineated into states and constituencies still bear identifiable ethnic (collectivist) identity which supposes political party alignment. Thus many issues in the Nigerian Parliament take the colour of ethnic claims and often erupt into misunderstanding demanding face-saving acts. Most Nigerian parliamentarians see themselves as ethnic champions who must go back to their ethnic groups with a fair share of the "national cake" a Nigerian English coinage for the federal funds and amenities. The situation is usually further complicated by a kind of zoning of political offices. For example in the this dispensation, the President of Nigeria Olusegun Obasanjo is a Yoruba man, his Vice Atiku Abubakar is a Hausa person while the head of the upper chamber, the senate is Ken Nnamani, an Igbo man. This implies that the three most important political positions are shared among the three 'major' ethnic groups. Problems arise where representatives from the other groups, mostly in the Niger Delta region where oil, the mainstay of the Nigerian economy is drilled, often feel cheated in both the allocation of political offices and sharing of national amenities.

The post-colonial Nigeria Parliament is therefore easily described as hotbed of arguments, claims and counter claims, sometimes heated to points of physical combats against all known parliamentary ethics. In such contexts, friendships formed along professional or party lines may be injured. 'Verbal missiles' (insults) are thrown without caution. Decorum breaks down and

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individual ‘dignities’ are sacrificed on the altar of protecting collectivist or ethnic interests.

This is where we locate the relativism in face-saving with reference to the Nigerian Parliament. In the above scenarios, how do Nigeria Parliamentarians save face? What strategies are adopted? Are such acts universal or relative to the Nigerian experiences? Are there influences on face-saving in these contexts that are traceable to the conflicts in the use of English and the indigenous languages? Are there influences on face-saving acts that are born out of the cultures of the different ethnic personalities with diverse Mother Tongue (MT). These questions are answered in the following episodes and the accompanying analysis.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The data here are obtained from an eye-witness account by this researcher as well as from reports in the print media, national dailies circulated within and outside Nigeria such as *This Day*, *Daily Independent*, *Punch* and *The Sun newspaper*.

Episode One

Constitution Review Committee Members alleged to collect bribe (This Day, 1/2/2006, p. 4).

On this occasion, it was reported that some members of the Constitution Review Committee were given huge sums of money (bribe) to unduly influence the process of amending the constitution to favour a Third Tenure for the incumbent President. Being ‘Men of Honour’, and considering that bribery is a criminal offence in Nigeria, in the law books of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, this allegation was not only face-threatening to the honourable parliamentarians, it was also portending criminality.

Our suspicion therefore is that the money is intended to unduly influence some of our colleagues to agree to a particular script, which is the endorsement of a third term of office for the president” a Senator said.

In a shift reaction, some senators, about seven (7) out of the 40 in the Committee were reported to have declined to take the money, saying that it would on point of principle amount to selling their conscience. For the remaining 33 senators who may have reportedly accepted the monies, their own part of the story was that the money was part of their ‘welfare packages’, even when the amounts were triple what each Senator was entitled to as regular travel and duty allowance. The drama unfolded more when the senators spoke individually on the constitution amendment, and it became

apparent that those who were said to collect the 'Largesse' spoke in favour of tenure elongation or third term.

The above episode indicates that Nigerian parliamentarians who face face-threatening measures are quick at devising face-restoring mechanism in offering escapist excuses. In the defence of 'welfare packages', the bribery culprits found solace in the fact that no specific amount may have been stipulated for their welfare, especially for assignments outside their regular legislative jobs or oversights. And assignments such as consulting the people on constitutional change concerned to be done to favour a serving executive was labeled as a "security job". In Nigeria, monies earmarked for security purpose are not normally accounted for by the officials since the political terrain is seen to be fraught with security lapses. This outcome is rooted in the native political norms where the pre-colonial natives rulers were given juicy packages by their subjects to whom they gave no accounts under the understanding that the 'king' or 'chief' needed to be given adequate resources to empower him to fare well and also protect his subjects against external aggression. The coinage 'welfare package' therefore is typical Nigerian English Coinage which has relative significance in the sense that it is derived from the indigenous norm.

It therefore appears that in face-saving or face-restoring acts, Nigerians find rescue in some special coinages which are not necessarily universal but specific enough to secure them a face. In this context, the standard English semantics would be grossly inadequate since 'welfare allowances' from the public treasury in a democracy must be constitutionally stated.

Episode Two

The Impeachment attempt on the House Speaker

This was another interesting episode in the Lower Chambers of the Nigerian parliament. Here, it was apparent that the Representatives in their majority were bent on removing their Speaker Rt. Hon. Masari, whom they accused of favouring the President in his adoption of a 'yes' vote of confidence on the President in controversial circumstances.

Before this particular episode, the Speaker had already suffered another removal threat spearheaded by his fellow Hausa/Fulani kinsman, Hon. Safana. But in this particular episode under consideration, Safana had joined Hon. Bugaje to announce the threat, referring to those bent in removing Masari,

"In the fact these people can never, I mean never can they even mention anything near impeachment on the floor of the House. They were just ranting."

Hon. Safana and his group further said the Katsina PDP caucus in the House of Representatives would fight and fight whoever attempted to dethrone the speaker.

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Nigerians were amazed at the sharp reversal of roles played by Hon. Safana whom as we indicated, only a few months earlier was fingered as the man who wanted the speaker to go. In this episode, two acts of face-saving are noticeable. First is the reversal of intelocutory roles by the persona, the attacker now becomes the defender. The second is the brazen use of antiparliamentary, uncomplimentary, boastful and militarized language. This is a common feature in the Nigerian post-colonial political scene.

On the slightest provocation, the Nigerian politician slides into the military diction 'fight', 'never', 'capture', 'storm', etc. For instance, the party in power (PDP), very frequently boast that it will 'capture' and 'conquer' Lagos State, now in control by opposition party (AD). Both Hon. Masari and Hon. Safana are kinsmen from Katsina State. It was therefore considered a surprising affront to the 'collectivist' or 'ethnic' spirit for Safana to have fought Masari in the first instance. The Second threat to Masari's impeachment therefore provided an ample opportunity for Safana to save or restore his face and he utilized it maximally, using the exclusive military-oriented political parlance in Nigeria he would "fight" and "fight" whoever attempted to dethrone the speaker, his Kinsman.

Episode Three

Senator Ahmadu Ali in Face – Off with Senators Over Third Term

During the sessions for Constitutional Amendment in the current parliament in Nigeria, the chairman of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Senator Ahmadu Ali held a closed door meeting with PDP Senators where he said party would not hesitate to show any recalcitrant senators the exit door of the party should they fail to actualize the Third Term Agenda for President Obasanjo.

This directive did not go down well with all the PDP Senators, some of whom openly spoke against the third term and accused Senator Ali of handing down threats to Party faithfuls who are of equal standing or status with him.

The rest of the story by the media revealed that a handful of the Senators felt deeply slighted by their party Chairman and were bent on fighting back. This scenario put Senator Ahmadu Ali in a great potential danger of losing his face among his party subjects.

As the drama unfolded, the Sun Newspaper of May 19, 2006 reported under the heading "I didn't mean to disparage Senators" that the National Chairman of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Dr. Ahmadu Ali, on Thursday defended his earlier comments on the dumping of constitution amendment by the senate which pitted him against Senators.

The chairman on an international radio interview had described the lawmakers as "a bunch of rascals and unpatriotic people". But when the senators reacted by voting to have Ali investigated for possible sanctions including being stripped of privileges as an ex-lawmaker, Ali said his

comments over the fate of the third term bill were not aimed at any person neither were they meant to defame any person but expressed in a free and democratic society. In this context, it is obvious that the chairman, Dr. Ahmadu Ali adopted the “Contradiction Method” to save his face. The process involved saying one thing and stating he had a different intention from what he said. Between these two contradicting positions, a safe escape route is available as any affirmation of his first meaning would have not only caused him to lose face but would result in deeper injuries to his political party.

CONCLUSION

We set out to consider face-saving acts as a relative phenomenon in a parliamentary context using Nigeria, a post-colonial nation as a case study. We examined three episodes of face-threatening situations involving members of the parliament and found out that face-saving acts are the use of denial expressions rooted in Nigerian English coinages, overture to ethnic or collectivist kinship alliance, and creation of contradictory communication. From the above analysis, we can conclude that though face-saving is a universal phenomenon because it is embedded in language and culture, it can also be relative due to cultural and contextual differences. Thus, in the multilingual post-colonial, post-military, Nigerian parliament issues such as kinship protection and traditional welfare packages are ready instruments in face-saving.

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