A corpus-based discourse analysis of the rhetoric of Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe

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Abstract

The paper examines cohesion in the rhetoric of former Zimbabwean President, Robert Mugabe (RM). The study, which focuses on the funeral speeches for national heroes buried at the National Heroes' Acre (NHA), was motivated by apparent contradictions between praise and criticism of RM's funeral speeches. Whereas RM is praised as "Africa's most eloquent speaker" who "speaks the Queen's language better than the rest of the World" (www.africacradle.com, 2015), opposing views describe his speeches as "unrelenting rants" (www.theindependent.co.zw. 2015). Using these completely different assessments as a departure point, the study investigates cohesion in the former president's funeral speeches. To achieve this overarching objective, the study analyses the discourse in the selected funeral speeches, to unpack the rhetorical and ideological functions behind the linguistic choices made by the former Zimbabwean president. The study is guided by the following question: Which features (if any) establish cohesion within and across the speeches in the corpus? In order to address the question, corpus linguistics (CL) was employed as a method of analysing the specialised corpus of twenty-six (26) funeral speeches by RM at the NHA. This method of corpus-based discourse analysis is not available in previous scholarship on political discourse in Zimbabwe (e.g., Chan, 2003; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2009; Onslow, 2011; Ndlovu, 2011) or any studies of RM's speeches (e.g., Kangira, 2010; Brokensha, 2011; Chimbarange et al, 2013; Khany and Hamzelou, 2014). CL provides effective tools to identify, extract and analyse data in the form of frequent function and content words in the corpus. From these data, the features which establish cohesion and coherence in the speeches were identified and examined. Theories that conceptualise coherence as either internal to the text or internal to the listener (Lee, 2002:136) were utilised to identify the features of cohesion and coherence. The established theory of cohesion by Halliday and Hasan (1976) was central in identifying the features of cohesion in the corpus, which establish coherence as internal to the text. One significant finding in the study is that, while the text by Halliday and Hasan (1976) is titled *Cohesion in English*, the words used as references (e.g., pronouns, locatives) and conjunctions to establish cohesion in the corpus, are in Shona. Further research could examine the implications this finding has on the teaching of coherence in multilingual settings. The findings reveal that RM also manipulates the lexical features of cohesion to serve his rhetorical and ideological purposes. This manipulation is revealed by how he reiterates selected content and function words, and exploits their collocations and colligations, to depict discourse participants in particular ways so as to promote his preferred values and political ideology.

Keywords: Corpus; Rhetoric; Discourse analysis