Volume 13 Issue 13
Originally issued as F3

Global Journal of human social science
Political Science
Volume 13 Issue 3 Version 1.0 Year 2013
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

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GJHSS-F Classification : FOR Code : 380299



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A Linguistic Analysis of Zimbabwean Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai's Image Repair Discourse: Letter to the Zimbabwean Public (30 November 2011)

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Abstract - The reputations of politicians as well as other popular figures depend on public perceptions and once reputations are threatened, images repair becomes vital. This paper focuses on the image repair strategies used in the public letter of apology (30 November 2011) by Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai released shortly after divorcing his wife Lorcadia Karimatsenga. The major concern is to determine the effectiveness of the communication devices used in redeeming the PM's image in the public eye. Benoit's Image Repair Theory (1995) is used as theoretical guide and methodological impetus of the study. Benoit theory provides a mechanism for analyzing the communication strategies used. Five major impression management strategies are adopted: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the event, corrective action and mortification. It is concluded in this study that despite the mistake of omitting some important details that could have assisted in clearing his name, the image repair strategies used by Tsvangirai were to a large extent effective. He was successful through this letter to present himself as a victim of political circumstances, a human being with flaws and a humble servant of the people who is able to admit to his errors.

I. Introduction

Political figures, constantly in the public eye, will doubtlessly face a crisis situation at some point. Since politicians are usually elected, reputations become extremely valuable.

The opening paragraph of the letter of apology admits that his private life is not private, he admits, "I have been a subject of intense media coverage regarding my relationship with Lorcadia Karimatsenga." Admitting mistakes may be difficult (Sheldom and Sallot 2009). A political figure, especially a party president is the face of his or her political party. Party presidents personify the party. They represent the brand that the party is. Whatever they do in public or in private have repercussions for the party. Scandals of any nature have the potential to hurt the party. In this situation Tsvangirai's conduct in the whole Tsvangirai-Karimatsenga saga threatened to harm MDC-T party. When the story came out in the news papers it left the public with many questions. Though Tsvangirai's image repair efforts came a bit late, they were a welcome relief for his publics since that was an opportunity for him to make an attempt clear himself.

II. Background To The Study

This letter of apology is released after Prime Minister Tsvangirai decides to divorce his wife Lorcadia Karimatsenga whose marriage lasted eleven days according to the media. Before this initiative a number of accusations had been thrown at the PM by the media for poorly handling his relationship with Ms Karimatsenga, which it claims was taboo, improper for some one of his social standing and un-Zimbabwean. He, according to the public media (The Herald, The Sunday Mail, The Chronicle) had married in November, which is a taboo in the Shona culture. The papers also sought to cast him as a bed hopper, women abuser, having poor judgment on women issues and big spender (US $10 000/ $30 000), therefore unfit to rule.The situation was compounded by the fact that the marriage debacle also drew in three other women that Tsvangirai was said to have dated, all insinuated to be of dubious character. The prime minister believed that he had to terminate the relationship immediately because he claimed he had been tricked into the marriage which he believed was a politically driven set-up. This study thus focuses on the image repair strategies used by Tsvangirai so as to determine the extent to which they are effective in repairing his reputation which had been wounded by negative publicity.

III. Theoretical Framework

The study employed Benoit (1995)'s theoretical framework as its basis for analysis. The theory provides a methodological impetus and theoretical guide to understanding crisis communication messages. The data used for analysis is based on the Zimbabwean Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai's letter he wrote to the public following his alleged marriage to Ms Leocadia Karimatsenga. The letter was published both on line and Zimbabwean Newspapers (private and public).

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a) Image Repair Theory

Benoit's (1995) Image Repair Theory (IRT) is used to guide the study of Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai's letter of apology. Image refers to how the individual or organization is perceived by its publics or stakeholders. IRT is a theory of crisis communication which emphasizes repairing the threat to the image of the accused. It also focuses on accounting for actions that caused the crises and features communication strategies for managing the account. Benoit (1997) explains that "the key to understanding image repair strategies is to consider the nature of attacks or complaints that prompt such responses" (p. 178). Benoit (1995) identifies fourteen impression management strategies, with five major strategies as: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the event, corrective action and mortification. Sellnow and Ulmer, (1995) argue that each strategy can be used individually or in combination. Benoit's image repair strategies thus focus on how individuals respond to accusations or account for their actions after being accused of a transgression. In this study, Benoit's (1995) theory of image repair provides a guideline for analyzing the communication strategies used by the Prime Minister faced by a crisis to repair his image in the public eye. It also makes an assessment of the effectiveness of these strategies as communication devices in the image repair discourse

IV. Justification

Through the influence of globalization and developments in politics, high ranking personalities and party officials are showing accountability for their actions, thus, they may publicly apologize for their mistakes. Given the importance and prevalence of public apologies, it is significant that communication scholars pay attention to the rhetorical dimensions of image repair speeches made by such individuals. This study is thus important as it analyses the image repair strategies used by the Prime Minister in a statement of public apology. The communicative function of the letter is assessed and may stimulate further debate on image repair. One may find that the image repair discourse is central to the role of the media in political communication. A positive public image is the essence of any political figure, in fact the political discipline is preoccupied with image building or image destruction and the media plays the role of an umpire in this match

V. Methodology

This study identifies the specific image restoration strategies in a media release apology by Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai following allegations of immoral relations with his fiancé Lorcadia. as defined in the context of Benoit's (1995) Image Restoration Theory. This document therefore comprises the sample of the study. This research used content analysis methodology to gather data for analysis. This involved critically examining the language content of this document, and classifying information. While Walizer and Wienir (1978) define content analysis as a systematic procedure devised to examine the content of recorded information, Kerlinger (2000) defines it as a method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner for the purposes of measuring variables. Data gathered through language content analysis technique was analyzed in an interpretative manner to deduce themes and motifs, and the units of analysis were words, phrases, and sentences used in the present document. These samples of language were understood according to context of use. Abrahamson (1983) suggests that in an interpretative approach, the researchers begin by immersing themselves in the text in order to identify the themes (inductive) and then use some categorical scheme or theoretical construct for assessment (deductive). This is the procedure employed by the present research where CDA was used to interpret and explain why language is used in the manner and frequency it is used, and to determine the effectiveness of the linguistic devices used for image reparation.

VI. Literature Review

Image is essential to individuals and organizations as it is the central element in the field of public relations (Benoit, 1997), hence the need for organizations, politicians, leaders etc, to take preventive and restorative approaches to image problems once their image has been threatened. According to Brinson and Benoit (1996), image problems may result from allegations and appearances of wrong doing and the need for image repair will follow as long as individuals or organizations are motivated to defend one's image through "explanations, justifications, rationalizations, apologies or excuses"(p. 30). The audience's perception is manipulated so that a politician's reputation is exposed and seen in ways that society does not approve of. It is this element of approval or disapproval that is detrimental to image. Some schools of thought have a established a link between image repair and conflict management (Benoit, 1997).Resolving conflict is synonymous with image repair, it could be a state's, image, an organization's, image or an individual s image.

Benoit (1995) presents a comprehensive and unified theory of image restoration discourse. Arguing that communication is a goal-directed activity to help an individual maintain a favorable reputation, Benoit presents his typology of image restoration with five strategies, three of which have subcategories: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Denials take the form of simple refusal to take responsibility or blaming

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the other party. Evading responsibility can involve claiming to be provoked, and reducing offensiveness may incorporate bolstering one's reputation, minimizing the grievousness of the act, differentiating the act and transcending the act (Benoit, 1995). Benoit also argues that corrective action can be implemented with or without admitting guilt by restoring the situation to what it was before the crisis, or by promising to make changes to prevent the reoccurrence of the crisis. Mortification according to Benoit's model includes admitting responsibility for wrong doing and asking for pardon.

Benoit's image repair theory has been used in analyzing image restoration discourse enacted by corporations, governments, religious, political, sport, and entertainment figures to mention a few. Thus, image repair discourse, when applied by individuals, exists across communication, political, and religious disciplines etc. (Miller, 2002). This study focuses on image restoration communication strategies used in the case of a political figure involved in a relationship scandal. Studies show that in Africa, the images of political figures are mainly threatened by factors such as fraud charges or mismanagement of state income or resources. In the Western politics, however, sex scandals are a common factor in damaging individual reputations. Examples are that of the former US president Bill Clinton who made a public apology regarding his affair with Monica Lewinsky and the New York Governor Eliot Spitzer who also apologized for cheating on his wife (Blaney and Benoit, 2001). Other examples of image repair within political spheres include that of Queen Elizabeth's speech released after the death of Princess Diana in 1997. Benoit and Brinson (1999) made an analysis of the Queen's speech. This speech was delivered in an effort by to counter suspicions that the British Royal Family did not share the sorrow of its publics and is not concerned for their subjects. In this speech, the Queen used two primary image repair strategies: denial of accusations and bolstering the image of the royals (Benoit and Brinson, 1999). Outside the political spheres, popular television personalities also find themselves in situations where they have to make public apologies. Hugh Grant, for instance, used bolstering, mortification, denial and attacked his accusers to redeem his injured reputation after he was arrested in 1995 for lewd behavior with a prostitute (Benoit (1997). From Benoit 's (ibid), discourse, it emerges that he bolstered his image by being honest with the audience, adopting a modest demeanor, expressing his concern for the welfare of his girlfriend, and employing humor.

Blaney and Benoit (ibid), further note that it is typical of these apologies to often invoke the religious and moral value of forgiveness in asking the public to see beyond the failures of the individual. Because reputations are so valuable in the political sphere, when politicians are in the midst of a crisis, they will inevitably work to repair their embattled reputation. Thus, appropriate and effective image repair discourse is essential for politicians (Len-Rios and Benoit, 2004). According to Benoit and Brinson (1999), when public figures from different public spheres are faced with the publics' doubt or perception of wrong-doing, they normally use denial and bolstering as key image restoration strategies, along with variations of other strategies depending on the crisis nature, to redeem their injured reputation. It must also be noted that though much of the literature examines image repair discourse in Western contexts image repair rhetoric is relevant to African contexts as well. However, strategies that may work in Western contexts may not necessarily work in African contexts. For instance, the electorate did not punish the South African president Jacob Zuma for his unprotected sex escapades possibly because in an African context, though embarrassing, his behavior may be secretly admired by the ordinary African man and dismissed as typical male behavior by the generality of African women. This study therefore analyses the communication strategies employed by an African political figure so as to maintain a positive image in the public eye. The crucial question is: How does Benoit's image repair theory help us to assess the Prime Minister's letter of apology?

VII. Data Presentation, Analysis and Interpretation

Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai used a combination of image restoration strategies. The most apparent ones are mortification, evasion of responsibility, corrective action and reduction of offensiveness. These stratagies are apparently the same as those put forward by Benoit (1997).

VIII. Mortification

Morgan Tsvangirai apologized to his publics for the damage his relationship with Lorcadia Karimatsenga had caused.

"There are many things I have learnt in the process and one is that with the benefit of hindsight, I could have done things differently.

In this regard, I apologize to every single Zimbabwean for any discomfort caused by any of my actions."

By offering his apology Tsvangirai takes responsibility for the damage his relationship with Lorcadia has done to his reputation. However his apology is offered in the context of what he sees as a hijacked relationship by his political opponents who in his view have "choreographed" the whole crisis. One is persuaded to see a political figure that is making an

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apology but at the same time is claiming to be a victim of circumstances.

IX. Denial

Tsvangirai uses denial as another strategy to repair his damaged reputation. Though admitting that in deed he had a relationship with Lorcadia he argues that the accusations in the media are not entirely true but have a hidden political agenda. By so doing he shifts the blame and makes his audience understand the 'marriage' from the context of politics and the machinations of his political foes. Tsvangirai blames the short lived relationship with Lorcadia, on the state, Lorcadia herself and presumably his political opponents in the inclusive government. "…everything has been played in the press and I have remained an innocent bystander in what is supposed to be my relationship" (paragraph 6). Here Tsvangirai implicates that the publicity surrounding his alleged marriage is calculated and designed to cause political damage to his person. "Things are happening too fast, in camera and without my knowledge" "This has led me to conclude that there is a greater and thicker plot around this issue which has undermined my confidence in the relationship." (paragraph 7) By alleging that his political enemies have taken over the relationship Tsvangirai insinuates that Lorcadia herself could be part of a political conspiracy to damage his reputation. Such accusations justify his severing of his relationship with Lorcadia, which can also be damaging to his reputation in the circumstances. In order to also shift the blame Tsvangirai argues that Lorcadia herself had actually betrayed him "I also realized that sometimes when you are searching for a partner especially after losing your wife, there are many stakeholders in the process some of whom have their own ulterior intentions." "…mutual trust upon which such relations are built and maintained has been lost." Thus Tsvangirai argues that what has come out in the media is a result of the actions of his political foes. He sees these political enemies as benefiting from the crisis generated by his supposed marriage hence his argument that half truths have been peddled for political gain. He denies ever having gone to Christon Bank to pay "lobola" in person. Such discourse presents him as a victim of politics thereby eliciting empathy from his publics.

X. Evasion Of Responsibility

Tsvangirai also buttresses the denial image repair strategy by employing what is known in Benoit' s language (1997) as evasion of responsibility strategy. While admitting that something had indeed taken place regarding his relationship with Lorcadia he says that his intentions all along had been to rebuild his family since the death of his wife. Accordingly when he realized that their relationship had resulted in pregnancy he had tried to rectify things by sending a delegation to the Karimatsenga family to settle the issue the traditional way.

"Like every cultured Zimbabwean, on Friday, November 18, 2011, I sent a delegation to the Karimatsenga family homestead to perform traditional and cultural rites to formalize this relationship." (Paragraph 5) This statement, strongly supported by the word "cultured" is intended to persuade the reader to see Tsvangirai in positive light, a cultured citizen who deserves sympathy.

"I was well-meaning and had good intentions to rebuild my family and start a new lease of life following the tragic passing on of my wife on March 6, 2009."

"My original intention was to make this thing work, to rebuild my family once again and to serve my country with honor and distinction not only as a national leader, but as a respected family man who owned up to his responsibility by following cultural and traditional procedures." In this part of the letter Tsvangirai stresses his good intentions in sending a delegation to Lorcadia's family to settle issue of her pregnancy according to the tradition. This is a strategy that is aimed at bolstering his image. The rhetorical effect is to reduce offensiveness of the whole issue. This is meant to present him as somebody who has always had good intentions despite what the papers were saying. His good intentions in the whole issue are supposed to cast him in a good light. The tragic loss of his wife has been referred to in this instance for the purpose of evoking sympathy. Some Newspaper reports accused him of being a bed hopper and quick to take women to bed. By evading responsibility, Tsvangirai is also claiming that " I have become an innocent bystander" and "spectator". The publics are called to empathize and accept an apology from a "cultured" leader who has also become a victim of circumstances.

XI. Reducing Offensiveness

In order to reduce the offensiveness of the marriage debacle Tsvangirai employs bolstering and attack the accuser to persuade his publics to believe that he is not what the papers were suggesting. Bolstering is evident where he emphasizes that he had been married for thirty two years until he lost his wife in an accident. This is meant to counter the insinuations that he was a bed hopper who finds it difficult to stay in a single relationship, "Having been married for 31 years, the tendency is to want to use your experience as a yardstick for future relationships." This is a persuasive strategy that high lights his good behavior of staying married for thirty one years. Tsvangirai also attempts to reduce offensiveness by attacking his accusers. To achieve this he takes aim at his accusers by attacking their credibility. "State security agents have also weighed in to force and direct proceedings which has

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resulted in everything regarding this relationship now taking place in camera, with the public media journalists in tow " (Paragraph 9). Here Tsvangirayi accuses his political enemies for eliciting the help of the state media and state agency to manipulate the media frenzy surrounding the alleged marriage (paragraph 9). He further attacks his accusers for having no moral grounds to question his private life and asserts his commitment to carry on the fight for democracy in Zimbabwe. "I will not expose the people's struggle for democratic change to machinations of infiltration by those that have oppressed the people of Zimbabwe for the past 30 years." The strategy is to bolster his image by reminding his public that he has done greater good for the Zimbabweans and he remains resolute in his struggle for change in Zimbabwe. This has the effect of discrediting his political opponents (Brinson and Benoit 1996) whom he blames for using his relationship with Lorcadia for political gain. The strategy here is clear as he is asking his publics to not to judge him harshly as he has done good things for them in the past. Another strong message to the publics is "My private life is inevitably a public issue because of the public position that I hold" The implication is that the whole saga in question is private as he admits, but there are a number of implications for his political career.

XII. Corrective Action

Evident also in Tsvangirayi's message to his publics is Benoit (1997) strategy of taking corrective action in order to repair one's damaged image. According to Benoit an organization or individual tries to make amends for the act that was committed and takes measures to prevent the event from reoccurring.

"I have followed the traditional and cultural route and I have communicated my position through the same channel to inform the Karimatsengas of my position.

This relationship has been irretrievably damaged to a point where marriage is now inconceivable."

"I will not expose the people's struggle for democratic change to machinations of infiltration by those that have oppressed the people of Zimbabwe for the past 30 years.

Here Tsvangirai commits himself not to allow a similar incident to tarnish his image as this has repercussions on the bigger mission, "fighting for democracy". In this way he pleads for leniency in judgment to his publics. "When the time comes, and when the right person fit to be a reliable partner and mother of my children is found, I will advise the nation accordingly." His commitment to make sure that a similar lapse in judgment will not be repeated should be persuasive to his publics.

XIII. Evaluation

While Tsvangirai apologized for his marriage fiasco with Lorcadia Karimatsenga he fails to address other concerns raised about his conduct towards women. He does not say anything concerning the other three women that he has been linked to. His silence could thus be seen as confirmation that he had relationships with the named women. In his confession he admits" ….The dark patch in my private life will not dampen my commitment to serve my country and to deliver real change to people" The confession may be interpreted as admission of guilt, but what guilt precisely? He is very much aware of the damage done to his political life but he chooses not to address that directly and makes a blanket statement to leave people to read in between the lines. He is also not clear whether he had actually paid lobola as stated in the papers or that he had married in November against the Shona tradition that regards such an action a taboo. The real issues seem to have been left hanging." When times come….. and when the right person fit to be a reliable partner is found, I will advise the nation" It would appear then that the irregularity is the "unreliable partner" and not his actions seen in the political sphere.

However, despite his errors of omission, Tsvangirai is able to present himself as a victim of political chicanery, a fallible human being who is man enough to admit to his mistakes. He also admits the inevitable link between his private life and public life. This should win him empathy in a context where political figures have been traditionally known not to apologize for anything. On the overall however, his image repair efforts leave readers with a lot of questions.

XIV. Recommendations

It is recommended that image repair discourse adequately address the concerns their audiences in order to foster credibility, a significant factor for successfully communication. Also suggested is the concurrent use of different image repair communication strategies as stated by Benoit in order to effectively convince the hearer of the message. Lack of conviction may lead to rejection and may further damage the image of the concerned individual or group. However, there is need to avoid over evading of responsibility and to stress more on corrective action instead. Usually, the addressees are not interested on details as to whether one is responsible of the accusations or not, rather they need to know what measures are being put in place to remedy the situation.

Corrective action is thus crucial for settling dust on issues. Denial is important but it needs not be aggressive and confrontational, but remorseful and modest. This approach may draw sympathy and understanding from the audiences who should be

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carefully analyzed before any form of communication is sent.

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