

# **Fashion as Communication: A Semiotic Analysis of Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu's Dress Pattern**

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## **Abstract**

We often get enmeshed in symbols and the set of signs that are employed when interpreting communication, due to the belief that symbols or signs stand alone in representing meaning. A dress contains certain symbols or signs that are representations of reality which must be explored and understood as a form of communication or a picture of the social and cultural reality of its wearer. This study examines the communicative variables of Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu's clothing, how they communicate beyond the dress and the non-verbal cues inherent in Tinubu's appearance in different attires. The data for the study which are four pictures of Tinubu in different dress codes were subjected to a qualitative interpretation and analysis by employing the semiotic theory of Kress and van Leeuwen as theoretical framework. Findings reveal that dressing constitutes a type of semiotic symbol as it communicates much about the individual's personality, philosophy and the context of situation behind the dressing. The study concludes that Tinubu's dressing reveals some aspects of his personality, class and social status. The study consequently, recommends that people ought to be circumspect in their fashion choice as it reveals much about their character and identity.

**Keywords:** *Bola Ahmed Tinubu, Clothing, Communication, Fashion, Semiotics*

## **Introduction**

The period of politics and politicking makes people strive to present themselves in positive light in order to be perceived as credible candidates. No wonder people devise various means to make themselves the candidates of choice. Bola Ahmed Tinubu is a Nigerian politician who is vying for the nation's office of the president. Considering the issue at stake, it is therefore necessary that the right signal is sent to the public. One way through which people are assessed is by their appearance which has the capability of earning

the person some respect or of damaging the image.

Prior to this time, some pictures of him looking frail and fragile had been disseminated by some daily online newspapers such as *Blueprint and Punch*. Journalists such as Arowolo (2022) reported that "Tinubu's return to London is happening after about three months he came back to Nigeria following months of medical treatment outside the shores of the country." The *Daily Reality* of 7th February, equally captioned his return as, "Tinubu returns from London in 'youthful

appearance” while *Punch* of 7th February, 2022, captioned it as “Nigerians have had their fair share of deceivers seeking to rule us.” All these packaging razzmatazz doesn’t lead anywhere progressive for the country”, adding that “Them the package Baba as youth, e no go work”.

This study examines how one’s dress pattern is capable of communicating the character, feeling, confidence and identity of a person to other people. In essence, it explores how one’s style validates a person’s individuality and influences the decision and response of other people as it gets converted to into a language of signs or semiotic refinement. Butari (2021, p. 3) asserts that “Besides giving covering to the body, dress patterns possess verifiable and social milestones, philosophical ideas, political contemplations, religious beliefs about the wearer.”

The semiotic nature of clothes helps to reveal values of the person with regard to his community because a person’s fashion or style speaks volumes and communicates much about their character and personality. Gillette (2000, p. 392) affirms that clothes indicate social status and Juneja (2015) also stressed that an individual’s dressing speaks volumes of his character and personality. This is where the semiotics in communication emerge and offer

themselves as a fundamental approach in understanding the true meaning of symbols or signs used in a communication process.

Although several studies have been conducted on fashion and clothes because they provide good materials for examining how meaning is realized, not much research has been conducted on the dressing of political figures. The main thrust of this study is to examine the social function of dress, particularly those of Tinubu, a political figure, who of necessity must project the right image. As Cerny (2018, p.70) explains, dressing reveals meaning through the manipulation of different signs which establish the possession of certain personality within the social contexts.

This study, therefore, investigates the communicative variables presented in the dress pattern of Bola Ahmed Tinubu, a Nigerian politician who was the former governor of Lagos State, in South West, Nigeria and it hopes to add to existing knowledge in the semiotics of dressing which is a form of visual communication.

This study was informed by the researchers’ observations and the media reactions to Bola Ahmed Tinubu’s appearance in blazer and T-shirt on his return from a trip abroad. His declaration to run for president of Nigeria received opposition from some people

who considered him 'too old to run' while some saw him as physically fit and able to deliver the goods. The need to probe the intention behind the blazer and sneakers that he wore on his return following the conflicting comments concerning his suitability to run and his subsequent smart appearance in blazer and sneakers provided the background to the study. Accordingly, the study seeks to examine the social functions inherent in Tinubu's style, establish the communicative variables presented in Tinubu's dressing and determine the impact of Tinubu's fashion on the public.

### **The Communicative Variables of Clothing**

Clothing is made of fabrics or textile and worn on the body for covering and protection from the elements or cold. Das (2019) posits that clothing takes the form of symbols used by individuals as a tool for social interaction which forms non-verbal communication. He equally emphasized that clothing serves basic functions such as the physical need of protecting the body; adornment and identification which satisfy a psychological need, and modesty and status which convey social need. Although fashion and clothes both refer to items of clothing, it is important to note that they are not the same by definition. While clothing is explained as any covering of the human body, fashion is

described as the style of dress accepted by members of a society as being appropriate for specific times and occasions. Rubinstein (2000) defines semiotics of dress as the design and customs associated with dress (clothing), with a kind of symbolism that has rules and norms. It is the study of how people use clothing and adornments to signify various cultural and societal positions and notes that clothing and fashion. Barnard (2011) sees clothing as a non-verbal communication that conveys identity and also constructs it at the same time. In the same manner, and specifically because clothes symbolically represent the life situations of the wearer, Gillette (2000, p. 392) affirms that "Social status has always been indicated with clothes. Someone dressed in shabby, ill-kempt clothes of rough homespun materials would rarely be mistaken for a member of the upper class". Thus, one cannot write about clothes without reference to the messages encoded in them.

### **Semiotics and Fashion**

The term semiotics appeared at the end of the 19th century by the American pragmatic philosopher Peirce (1867) which Atkin (2013) describes as an account of signification, representation, reference and meaning. He argued that a sign consists of

three elements that form a triangle: an object, its representation, and its meaning. Similarly, Saussure (1916/1983) sees semiotics as a formal doctrine of sign which must have real connection with the thing it signifies. Marotta (2017) and Sobur, (2004) submit that language itself is the most fundamental sign system for humans, while non-verbal signs such as gestures, forms of clothing, and various other conventional social practices can be seen as a kind of language composed of meaningful signs that are communicated based on relations.

Barthes (1968) has shown the social constructedness of language in his reference to familiar experiences and believes that it is impossible to act or dress innocently without conveying any meaning. He reveals that dressing may convey rejection or acceptance of dominant norms; in essence, dressing is capable of revealing our thoughts or ideologies. Kamani (2020) asserts that fashion is a wordless means to convey a powerful message to people around: in essence, it is language that is capable of telling a story.

Zaib & Mashori (2014) applied Barthes' five codes in the analysis of the selected story: "A Pair of Jeans" from Moniza Shamsie's anthology entitled "And the World Changed". By dividing the story into texts, the researchers could decode many hidden

meanings. Her clothes, a pair of jeans, displays the conflict between her modernism and the traditionalism of her parents-in-law in the story.

Okadigwe (2021), examined Nigerian video films and adopted semiotics as the theoretical frame work in examining the deeply rooted theatrical and film costumes. The study involved a comprehensive methodology that focused on the intervening mediations between interpretation and meaning of colours, lines, fabrics, textures, and styles of costumes. Semiotics demonstrates that meaning is constructed as a product of shared system of signification Okadigwe (2021). She submits that in Nigerian society, the full length regalia (agbada or babanriga) shows that one is male and most times, signifies that the person is a mature man who wishes to convey the image of a responsible adult. Thus the signification of a man's status is constructed through what he wears.

Butari (2021, p. 30) posits that "one's dress pattern conveys a great deal of things about the wearer, the onlookers and the general public." This submission is in consonance with that of Ododo (2011) who observed that dressing conveys something about a person's socio-mental condition, religious influences or societal standards. The study concluded that a person's clothing performs more functions

than merely protecting the body; it also serves as means of expression, identification and status.

Since Saussure (1916, 1983) sees semiotics as a formal doctrine of sign which must have real connection with the thing it signifies, it is obvious then that there is a connection between B.A. Tinubu, his dressing, and Nigerians. Kress and Leeuwen (2006) explore how figures, places and things in the image compose the visual design to realize the compositional, interactive and representative meanings. The connotative meaning that is suggestible is intensified by his seeming transformation, from a feeble man into a younger person because of the modern dressing which is departure from the native attire he is known to favor. In this present study, fashion is examined as an indicator of identities in society and the interpretation that dressing presents. The aphorism “The way you dress, is the way you will be addressed” (Kamble 2021) is activated by Tinubu and his public relations team who seek a new identity for him by cultivating a new look which depicts youthfulness and vitality.

### **Brief Background of Bola Ahmed Adekunle Tinubu**

According to Tife (2022) of the *Dailytipsfinder*, Bola Ahmed Tinubu was born

in 29 March, 1952 in Lagos. He is a Nigerian politician, national leader and accountant who had his university education in Chicago State University (1979) and Richard J. Daley College. He has been the national leader of the All Progressives Congress since the party's formation in 2013. Tife (2022) reiterates that he had previously served as the Governor of Lagos State, from 1999 to 2007 and Senator for Lagos West during the brief Third Republic. Tinubu is a political figure who is vying for the number one slot of president of the country and has encountered some challenges surrounding his age. His medical condition has been of great concern and the contention arising from it is considered as one of the reasons his dressing was altered on his arrival to Nigeria after spending some months abroad in 2021 as reported by *Daily Trust* and *Sahara Reporters* in 2022. It is important to state that at the time this study was conducted, Tinubu had already been declared the presidential candidate for the All Progressives Party (APC) in the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria as reported by *Premium Times* on June 8, 2022.

### **Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

The data for this study, which are visual, comprised four pictures of B. A. Tinubu and were purposively collected from online

newspapers such as *Blueprint and Punch* of February, 2022 and subjected to qualitative and interpretative analysis by employing the theory of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). A qualitative methodology was adopted by the application of the three meta-functions of images: representational, interactive and compositional meaning. The theory provides an avenue for robust analysis because it demonstrates that clothes do have a distinct voice through the style, texture and context which depict fashion as communication while revealing more than what is visible.

This study employs the theory of Kress and Leeuwen (2006) visual grammar which is theoretically grounded in social semiotics. It is based on the work of Halliday (1978) who proposed that language is a semiotic system that uses semiotic resources to create meaning and documents the system of meaning for their ideational, interpersonal and textual functions. Kress and Leeuwen (2006) proposed the visual grammar to interpret visual composition from representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional. In this model, visual structures are treated as linguistic structures. They use different terms for the same subjects: representational instead of ideational; interactive instead of interpersonal; and compositional instead of textual.

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the representational meaning deals with the way images present aspects of the world. The image uses narrative structure if it represents actions, events or change but in narrative visuals, participants are connected by a vector and represented as doing something to or for each other. The interactive meaning is concerned with the representation of social relations between the producer, the viewer and the subject being represented, which are realized by contact, social distance, attitude and modality (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Interactive meaning has to do with gaze which is described as 'offer' and 'demand'. Direct contact between the subject and the viewers is known as 'offer' while the "demand" gaze is when the subject looks away from the viewers.

According to Nguyen (2021), the compositional meaning works with the "textual" function, the way in which representations and communicative acts cohere into meaningful whole through three interrelated systems: information value, salience and framing (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Information value shows the position of elements and how they relate to each other. Salience is how certain elements stand out through means such as foreground or background placement, relative sizes, contrasts in tonal value or color, sharpness while

framing devices play a critical role in connecting or disconnecting elements in the image.

Kress and Leeuwen (2006) framework serves as a useful tool in visual analysis because they see it as a language which enables one to speak about the forms and meanings of visual communication. Several scholars have realized the importance of the theory which is the why this study is also hinged on the theoretical framework. The justification for anchoring the study on the theory is that the three components of participants, process types and circumstances make representational meaning realizable by the assertive developments of the visual message

which are embedded in the structures, they therefore enhance the meanings one aims to communicate.

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

The data was sourced from online newspapers such as: the *Punch*, *Nationaldaily*, *Idomavoice* and the *Nation* because they are credible newspaper outlets. A total of four pictures labelled Fig.1-4 have been selected for analysis. Two pictures were placed side by side and each picture was compared with the other so as to highlight how the different impressions his clothes communicated

**Fig. 1** Source: National Daily Nigeria, February 10, 2022



**Fig. 2** Source: *Idoma Voice* February 7, 2022



### **Analysis of Fig. 1 and Fig. 2**

The dressing styles are analyzed based on the three meta-functions of images which are the representational, interactive and compositional functions. In terms of participants, Fig.1 represents Tinubu whose facial expression and gown show him as an old man and this creates the identity of somebody who is ill.

In terms of visual analysis, the study shows that the clothes of the main participant in fig. 1 reflects a person in poor health condition. The reaction of people to his appearance in jalabiya which is a loose-fitting traditional garment and the subsequent change in his dress pattern on his return to the country are analysed based on the perception of the public. In Fig.1, Tinubu is seen wearing a jalabiya while in Fig. 2 he is seen wearing a blazer and sneakers. This can be identified through the analytical processes of representational meaning that is embedded in the image of him dressed in blazer and sneakers. In Fig. 1 he is seen wearing a jalabiya which portrays him as a sick person while Fig.2 shows him in blazer and sneakers which conveys youthfulness, strength and virility. The connotative interpretation of this dressing code is that it may instill confidence in the Nigerian people since the belief is that the smart dressing was necessary at that point especially if it could assure Nigerians that the

presidential hopeful is physically fit and vibrant.

The interactive meaning or the social relations between the viewers and the subject(s) based on their perspective of the gaze and the size of frame. Fig. 1 reveal that he is the focal point of attention. The other participants are not highly visible hence his frailty is made obvious particularly when placed beside the other participant whose face is partially covered. The picture shows him with a man in black. From the perspective of modality, two contrasting colors: black and blue-grey (livid) which is what he wore, is seen as emotionless, boring and dull; and sometimes associated with formality and intelligence. Rather, he projected the negative qualities identified with grey did it not boost his image nor did it make him look smart. This may be connected to the fact that the picture was taken after his hospitalization.

The representational significance of his appearance in jalabiya as shown in Fig. 1 can be gleaned from his frail look. The fact that an aspiring president ought to look fit must have prompted his dressing in youthful clothes on his return to Nigeria so as to convince Nigerians that he was fit. Conversely, Fig.2 shows Tinubu looking sporty and trendy in blazer and sneakers, an act which elicited some reactions from Nigerians: for example, Deji

Adeyanju, an Abuja based human rights activist, in the *Punch* edition of 7th February, 2022, stated that “Nigerians have seen ancestors dressing as youth before”. He added that ‘ancestors’ dressing like youths was not a new strategy in the political space as Nigerians had seen the strategy before when Major General Muhammadu Buhari (retd.) was also packaged to win the hearts of Nigerians in 2015 hence, the same motive was attributed to Tinubu whose supporters refuted the claim in *Punch* 7th February, 2022 by stating that

“Tinubu is young at heart, hasn’t changed dress sense”. Thus, there was a need to redress that ugly trend as the jalabiya had shown him looking sickly and old. Subsequently, in Fig.2, we see him dressed in well-tailored blazer with trendy shirt and sneakers; a style more suited to the younger generation in what Sven (2019) describes as clothes worn by the ‘fashionable young set’. Thus, it would not be out of place to infer that Tinubu’s dressing in blazer was intended to create the image of a fashionably young and vibrant presidential candidate.

**Fig. 3** Source: The Nation, November 9, 2021



**Fig. 4** Source: The Punch, February 7, 2022



### **Analysis of Fig. 3 and Fig. 4**

The socio-cultural norm in Nigeria is that older men dress in conservative traditional clothes such as Agbada or Babanriga. Omotoye (2018), describes the ‘agbada’ as “a

traditional attire... which is sometimes regarded as old men thing...” The study observes in Fig. 3, that B. A. Tinubu did not wear the agbada on his return home but rather

wore trendy blazer with sneakers. Although it could be explained as a reflection of the weather, it was observed that it was in sync with what was worn by younger men such as his spokesman, Tunde Arowolo and the other men in his company. In multi-participant pictures, the characters often harmonize with each other in terms of position, action, facial expression and color. Thus, we see that in Fig. 3, he is dressed in basically the same type of clothes worn by his associates who are younger than he is. They seem to be moving in harmony. It is obvious that the people he is walking with are much younger but they share the same fashion sense as almost all of them are clad in blazers and sneakers. The import of this is that he could easily be placed in the same age grade as the younger men.

A dress pattern reveals the roles and status of the wearer and this is interpreted or signified based on expectations; thus we expect certain people to dress in specific attire as a sign of competence, seriousness or any other quality they desire and this is what was conveyed by his appearance in agbada or babanriga. As can be seen, the demand gaze in Fig. 4 shows the participant looking directly at the viewers. Tinubu appears to be focused on the viewers and his facial expression reveals his identity as an elderly man who is ready to face the challenges ahead. This confidence

may not be unconnected with the agbada which seems to bestow and reflect some confidence on the wearer.

Fashion is an indicator of identities in society and in Fig. 4, the agbada or babanriga is used to depict culture and position in the society. Thus, we observe that Tinubu's comportment in the traditional agbada reveals his class, gender, and possibly occupation. Apart from the fact that agbada confers some respect on the wearer, it also communicates much about his respect for tradition as this picture was taken at a formal function hence the need for formality which the agbada confers on the wearer. Clothing has the capacity to communicate one's attention or lack of it to details and one can determine that he pays attention to details from his appearance in blue agbada, which is embroidered in blue thread and complemented with a blue cap. Semiotic factor such as colour are used to show harmony and in this case, the blue color symbolizes stability, wisdom and serenity. Thus, the ensemble of cap and agbada shows a conscious attempt to project a positive image that has been powerfully put together. This echoes Gillette (2000, p. 387) assertion that "What a person wears, and how it is worn, says a great deal about that person and the society in which he/she lives". Consequently, we have understood how Tinubu used clothes and

accessories to represent power, status, character, differentiation, and mood in various ways.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The aim of the study was to examine the communicative variables presented in the dress pattern of Bola Ahmed Tinubu, and this was achieved as findings showed that Tinubu used clothes and accessories to represent power, status, mood and character which includes weakness confidence in various ways. The first objective of the research was to examine the social functions inherent in Tinubu's style and the findings of Objective 1 revealed that the clothes he wore at different occasions reflected how he effectively used clothes to serve social functions. The second objective established that some communicative variables were observed in Tinubu's dressing. For instance, it was observed that certain clothes as presented in Fig 1 and Fig. 2 both communicated different things about him. Fig.1 represented him as fragile while Fig. 2 portrayed him as virile. The third objective was to determine the impact of Tinubu's fashion on the public and findings showed that his dressing actually had some impact on the public as some of the reactions recorded from the public showed. Some people used the word 'ancestor' to

describe him while others observed that he was 'young at heart'.

The application of certain aspects of the Kress and Leeuwen (2006) theoretical framework in the data analysis revealed that the representational meaning which deals with the way images present aspects of the world confirmed that culture plays a significant role in dressing because it highlighted the connotative interpretation of the dressing, particularly Fig. 4 which demonstrated his choice of traditional attire on formal occasions. In other words, the meaning one ascribes to clothes depends on the socio-cultural realities of one's environment as well as previous knowledge of the significance of clothes.

With regard to the research questions, the study provided answers to the research question which sought to examine the social functions inherent in Tinubu's style as social functions. The study revealed that Tinubu's fashion code depicted his social-mental and physical condition; a fact resonates that of Ododo (2011) who observed that dressing conveys something about a person's socio-mental condition, religious influences or societal standards.

Similarly, the study established the communicative variables presented in Tinubu's dressing as was seen in the way his personality was revealed via his dressing code.

Another question which the study addressed was the effect of Tinubu's fashion on the public. The findings resonated with those of Butari (2021) who observed that one's dressing communicates a number of things about the wearer, the onlookers and the general public. The study revealed that his dressing, particularly the ones in Fig.1 and Fig. 2 communicated more than what he wore, hence elicited different reactions from people.

Having examined the significance of dress and the messages encoded in it, it has been observed that clothing reveals the identity of a person. The study has revealed that Tinubu has consciously or unconsciously been able to portray his personality which one can describe as varying, depending on the circumstance as the different clothes he wore on different occasions reflected.

## **Conclusion**

Communication is inevitable in our social relations such that in the process of communicating, symbols or signs become important factors in the exchange of meaning, the messages or intentions communicated. The Visual Grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) with its well-structured system is a powerful tool that makes it possible to analyze visual images in order to construe their meanings. We have seen different representations of Tinubu as weak, trendy, confident, and powerful based on the interactive and representative perspectives which are hinged on the combination of colour, gaze and the relationship between the participants and the viewers. Therefore, this study has revealed the significance of clothes and culture in an unambiguous manner and hopes that fashion enthusiasts will convey specific social and cultural semiotic cues by their choice of clothes.

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