
**LANGUAGE, VISUAL IMAGERY AND CORONAVIRUS MOTIVATED HUMOUR ON
THE SOCIAL MEDIA: A CRITICAL- SEMIOTIC STUDY**

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ABSTRACT

The social media has witnessed a frenzy and influx of discourses from the broad street and world street because of the novel Coronavirus which has infected and killed many people world over. In Nigeria, the ways in which news of the virus is framed communicate ideological meanings which have a range of effects on the readers particularly on social media. Nigerians have taken the issue of Covid-19 pandemics as a form of humour so as to release their stress and tension of the agony which is relatively new. This paper therefore investigates humour that reflect the social, economic and health challenges in Nigeria shared through the social media in order to identify CMH as a form of humour through which real-life experiences of other people can be understood. Insights are drawn from Kress' Critical Semiotic theory to analyse a total of ten (10) purposively selected humour on Coronavirus from social media, specifically Whatsapp and Facebook. The study found that the pictures are framed using both episodic and thematic framing. These frames are interlarded with pregnant ideological meaning(s) as to warn corrupt and inefficient leaders in Nigeria, particularly on health facilities in the country. Also, the paper concludes that humours do not only make people laugh, but also comment on certain societal maladies that finger the minds of Nigerian citizens.

Key Words: Coronavirus, humour, Critical-Semiotics, Cartoon.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication has become ubiquitous. And different meaning making resources have become intrinsic communicative tools, however, only a fraction of readers of these appurtenances, have competencies in deciphering meanings contained in means employed in communication. Furthermore, language users have specific or general intentions for using certain resources in message dissemination. Such intentions have underlying ideologies and purpose which account for the placement of these resources employed. In social media specifically, the freedom and ease of its usage has allowed users to carefully or carelessly post certain resources and these resources have far reaching and endangering effects on readers. This trend has left many users only either laughing at the surface meaning or mourning for the state of the nation. These two diametrically opposite emotional posits are occasioned by the foregrounded resources without recourse to the often meaning-pregnant background resources which inevitably interact with the other resources to communicate holistic messages that ordinary use of words cannot convey or rather render trite (Oyedeji, 2019).

Cartoons are also designed to stand alone as works of art, needing no guidance from an interpreter to be understood. The public want to know hidden truths. Also, they want to change or turn to the right direction. These describe why political cartoons are continued within history. Seymour-Ure

(2001) describes continuity among cartoonists "this combination of familiarity and predictability with a particular freshness every day is what provides a newspaper with its stability as an enterprise" (p. 337). Flows of stories in political cartoons are attractive because it seems like separated story or not connected. However, it is not comics. This means for reading or recognising political cartoons, readers should know the background of each cartoon.

Political cartoon is an illustration containing a commentary that usually relates to current events or personalities (Omolabi& Zakariyah, 2018). It constitutes a specific category of political reporting in that they are pictorial representations which depicts political and social issues and events in a simple, short and condensed manner (Test, 1991). From this assertion, political cartoons are usually simple and compact but they carry large information which have to decode by first understanding the context; that is, the situation surrounding it. This expressive style (pictorial representations) is characterized with the use of humorous representation of events and characters and it employs the ability of irony and satire to, criticize and make people see someone's fault in a funny, playful, witty and artful manner Giarelli and Tulrnan (2003) argue that:

Political cartoons therefore, are a form of media message that harnesses linguistic and non-linguistic devices used not only as vital instruments of information dissemination reflecting social practices and happenings, but also as a principal means of public access by which the public participates in the societal wider spectrum of debate about a particular event or social phenomenon. (cited in Sani, 2013, p.74)

Several pictorial representations of political events will be considered and analysed to determine how the medium has been structured for communicative purposes. Social semiotic theory shall be used as an important element in the contextualization of the use of language by cartoonists in exposing political situations and how they employ linguistic and non- linguistic features in their portrayal of political leaders. However, using social semiotic theory as the theoretical framework for this study is apt, as it takes into account the linguistic and non-linguistic features of language usage in communication, making it a suitable approach to the study of political cartoons. Social semiotic theory was introduced by van Leeuwen and Gunther Kress. However, it is strange that the visual images we see every day in newspapers are a form of discourse analysis as it serves as a mean of language or communication that can affect or influence the thought and behaviour of human lives. Gee (2011) explains that "discourse analysis is based on the details of speech and gaze and gestures and action or writing that are arguably deemed relevant the context and that are relevant to the argument the analysis is attempting to make" (p. 117).

Multimodality tries to investigate how different semiotic modes or resources are combined within a given socio-cultural domain in order to create a semiotic event (Kress &van Leeuwen 2001). This theory is based on the concept that verbal communication can never be completed or through without mentioning the non-verbal communications like painting, images and colours etc. Ariyo (2017) asserts that "Multimodal discourse analysis is essentially concerned with the theory and analysis of semantic resources at the semantic expansion which occur as semiotic choices combined in multimodality phenomena" (p. 2). Political cartoons are one of the most effective multimodal media that combine linguistic and non-linguistic semiotic elements to relay meaning and they are a sub-genre of the news discourse analysis.

Coronavirus Outbreak and the Pains of Lockdown

A novel coronavirus, designated as 2019-nCoV, emerged in Wuhan, China, towards the end of 2019. As of January 24, 2020, at least 830 cases had been diagnosed in nine countries: China, Thailand, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Vietnam, Taiwan, Nepal, and the United States. Twenty-six fatalities occurred, mainly in patients who had serious underlying illness. Although many details of the emergence of this virus — such as its origin and its ability to spread among humans — remain unknown, an increasing number of cases appear to have resulted from human-to-human transmission. Given the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV) outbreak in 2002 and the Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) outbreak in 2012, 2019-nCoV is the third coronavirus to emerge in the human population in the past two decades — an emergence that has put global public health institutions on high alert. China responded quickly by informing the World Health Organization (WHO) of the outbreak and sharing sequence information with the international community after discovery of the causative agent. The WHO responded rapidly by coordinating diagnostics development; issuing guidance on patient monitoring, specimen collection, and treatment; and providing up-to-date information on the outbreak. Several countries in the region as well as the United States are screening travelers from Wuhan for fever, aiming to detect 2019-nCoV cases before the virus spreads further. Updates from China, Thailand, Korea, and Japan indicate that the disease associated with 2019-nCoV appears to be relatively mild as compared with SARS and MERS.

Coronaviruses make up a large family of viruses that can infect birds and mammals, including humans, according to world health organisation (WHO). These viruses have been responsible for several outbreaks around the world, including the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) pandemic of 2002-2003 and the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) outbreak in South Korea in 2015. Most recently, a novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2, also known as COVID-19) triggered an outbreak in China in December 2019, sparking international concern. While some coronaviruses have caused devastating epidemics, others cause mild to moderate respiratory infections, like the common cold (Shrikrushna, Quazi, Shubham , Suraj, Shreya, Rohit, SAGRULE and Biyani, 2020).

The coronavirus pandemic has some effects on Nigerians. The national and state orders for lockdown had adverse effects on the economy. Virtually every activity that requires social, official, and religious gatherings were cancelled. Many private organisations including banks, schools, hotels, airline operators, transport companies, etc., laid-off their staff and the few that were retained had their salaries reduced. In addition, the prices of goods, especially essential products like water and food items skyrocketed. Hence, Nigerians groaned in pains: the pains of job loss, the pains of restriction of movement, the pains of high cost of goods, and above all, the pains of the fear of Covid-19. Therefore, the social media humour became an instrument easing the pains.

2. THEORETICAL INSIGHT

Social Semiotics

The Social Semiotic theory or approach was developed by Gunther Kress and is rooted in Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics from which its analytical principles were taken. Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) state that the primary focus of social semiotic theory is that "media of communication are shaped and organized by a culture into a range of meaning-making systems, modes, in order to articulate the meanings demanded by the practical, social requirements of

different communities” (p.11) therefore, sign is seen as culturally constructed and much more as being interpreted within certain cultural purviews. As aforementioned, social semiotics is closely linked with Halliday’s theory of metafunctions of ideational, interpersonal and textual looking at how the various meanings are communicated by the verbal and visual signifiers.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Visual resources resident in the media are powerful sources of determining the response of readers to social issues, actions and inactions, and worldview. These variables are often determined by the choice of foregrounded and backgrounded resources deployed in these visual resources. Furthermore, the users of these resources represent ideologies which have become a social practice of the people. It is therefore not fictive to aver that most of these visuals express certain subtle bias especially in the representation of people, places and issues. Nothing that appears in the media is free of bias. These biases can therefore be unmarked by a subtle theory hence, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA forthwith). CDA is a multidimensional theory which focuses on unearthing the power relations and dominance in media discourse – texts and visuals. It focuses on describing, interpreting and explaining language variation, communicative interaction with special attention on issues of social literacy and power (Wodak, 2008). According to Taun van Dijk, CDA is a discourse analytical research tool that deals principally with bringing to the fore the way power, abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. According to Norman Fairclough, CDA is method of analysing discourse in a systematic way as to capture the description of the cryptic relationship between the text and society in relation to how “powers” are ideologically enacted.

Schematic Representation of Critical Semiotic Theory

This study in a bid to elucidate the varying ideological embeddings of selected data, the tools in the schematic diagram below will be grossly deployed.

Critical Semiotics

Critical Semiotics is the interaction of CDA and Semiotics for the analysis of how visual resources communicate ideological meanings. Furthermore, it is a truism that semiotic resources communicate messages beyond the visible visual contexts. Meanings are communicated at a level below the visible. Accordingly, CDA goes through the process of describing, interpreting and explain the various textual and visual resources that are contained in a text in relation to the society (Fairclough). Thus, to explicate the semiotic process of cartoons, the engagement of a semiotic theory which allows analysts to explore the various aspects of the data becomes apt. This analytical model proposed in this study takes insight from the ideas postulated by Fairclough (1999) and Kress and van Leeuwen (1996)

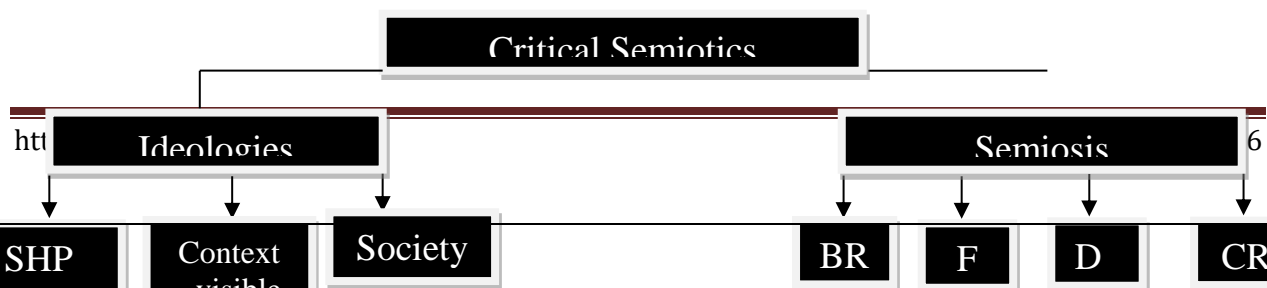


Figure 1: A Theoretical Model for Critical Semiotics

From the diagram above, two categories are anchored – ideologies and Semiosis. The ideological category represents the approach to the analysis of discourse using the CDA. The category, SHP is the Socio-Historical Perspective purview of the data. Usually, discourses are a product of an epoch. To divulge the ideologies of a text, delving into the history of the user of such text is quite important. Furthermore, the contextual situation that produced such text constitutes a strong ideological underpinning (Hymes, 2009 Oyedeki 2019). Two types of contexts that is preponderantly resident in visuals especially caricature are *visible and invisible* contexts. The visible context are clear cut situational issues that account for foregrounded meanings deciphered in visuals, whereas the invisible contexts are infinitesimal nuances that account for the implied messages that are contained in cartoons. These issues are intrinsically connected to the society and prevailing unsaid issues resident in the society. Semiosis is the process undertaken to divulge the componential elements that are contained in visuals. This process begins with the BR – Background Resources which are certain unchecked issues and presentations that are not quite salient to readers. These resources interplay with the invisible contextual issues to communicate implied messages. Foreground Resources (FR) are quite visible elements that are easily deciphered at a go. These are basically the participants that are used, the colour and vector. This has a relationship with the visible context in meaning construction. The Discursive Process (DP) is the varying embellishments that visuals are deployed to communicate. Basically, cartoons are mostly visual metaphors and caricature used to represent other issues. This is deciphered when placed in the societal context. Thus, the DP is assayed in relation to the society category. The CR – Compositional resources are underpinned through a process of explaining the structural organization of the information that is placed within the frame of the visuals.

What is therefore CRITICAL about Critical Semiotics? Critical is an insightful procedure of describing, interpreting and explaining semiotics resources in a way that issues of social process, power relations and enactment of inequality are uncovered. This approach therefore, seeks to unearth the various cryptic representation and misrepresentation of people via the use of visuals.

3. METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative content analysis of selected cartoons in the alternative media basically Facebook, Blogs and Whatsapp. The study collected a corpus of data and selected seven (8) using a purposive random sampling. The data selected covered the theme of poverty as this has become an intrinsic experience of most Africans and in facts Nigerians, political processes and human rights activism. The data are analysed using the scheme presented in this study and the analysis is

structure in a text by text analysis so that the contextual issues of each data can be adequately captured. Critical semiotic appurtenances provided in the scheme above are grossly engaged to elucidate the varying levels of meanings communicated through these visuals. The study also explicates the poverty tendencies that have been portrayed through visual metaphor and caricatures.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Text 1



The foreground resource is a man appears to be a young, homeless beggar. He is staring at an unknown phenomenon which is not known to the readers. This kind of image is referred to as an offer image this is because it captures the attention of the viewers and it is taken from a medium long shot which makes the image visible from the toe upwards. This is used to connect the viewers to the image. The participant is seen using a facemask which represents the current battle the world is currently facing (Coronavirus). The use of face mask has been obligatory for use in all states in Nigeria; this is to prevent the deadly virus from spreading, everybody is expected to wear the face mask with no exception, no matter how poor or rich you are. The participant in this picture although with the situation he is, he didn't violate the rules of not using the face mask and he is seen sitting by the road side continuing his daily activities of begging for alms.

Text 2



The foreground resources are two young men. One of the participants is a barber, while the other participant is his client; they both appear to be doing something which makes the image transactional in nature. There is the presence of vector such as eyeline, facial expression, and gestures. The participants are not staring at the viewers. The barber is staring at the client while the client is staring at an unknown phenomenon, they are both seen to be focused on what they are both doing. The image is taken from a medium long shot which makes the image visible to the readers from the toe upwards. This is to show a formal relationship of the viewers to the represented participants. The image can also be viewed from a vertical angle, this is to make the image noticeable to the viewers.

The barber is seen practicing social distancing in order to prevent him from contracting the deadly virus, known as Covid-19. This is very obvious from the distance he gave himself, by tying bamboo stick to the clipper to maintain the distance from him and his client, he is also seen wearing the face mask. Many are scared of the Corona virus. Social distancing and wearing of face mask is what many are practicing world worldwide in order to stop the spread of the virus.

Text 3



The representational Metafunction here are two represented participants. One is a male who is the bike man which is popular known as okada rider in Nigeria. The other participant is a female who is the passenger. These two are seen doing something which makes the image transactional in nature. The two participants are seen to be practicing social distancing on a bike. These two are not sitting the normal way instead they are sitting wide apart from one another. This is to prevent them from contacting the coronavirus.

Text 4



The foreground resources are a group of men. The men in this image represent the Nigerian leaders, while the green ball positioned in front of them is the Coronavirus. The men in this image looks scared, weak and hopeless as they are seen saying with tears in their eyes “We are sorry sir, we promise to fix it” pleading with the ball (coronavirus) to have mercy on them. The text on the board in the image reads “Nigeria’s Healthcare System” with a building looking tattered and wrongly built. This image explains the current situation Nigerians are currently facing, particularly on health sectors. Most Nigerian leaders travel abroad for medical checkups or for treatment; spending the countries funds abroad without improving or paying attention to the Nigerian health system. They leave the citizens to wander in sickness and die, only caring about themselves and their families. The social vice present in this cartoon is selfishness of our leaders, corruption and embezzlement of nation’s funds.

Text 5



The participants in this image all represent a certain phenomenon and they are the rich and influential Nigerians and the struggling and poor Nigerians respectively. The participants on the left are the influential ones from their weight, while the ones on the right are the struggling and poor Nigerians. The Textual heading of the image says “Covid-19 Lockdown: 14 days after”. The 14 days lockdown due to the coronavirus really affected some Nigerians who are poor as they get their money from daily wage. It didn’t affect the rich ones as they don’t depend on daily wage. There is no presence of verbal utterance in this image. The social vice present in this image is struggle of the Nigerian citizens and bad economy.

Text 6



There is only one participant in this image; the participant is a woman using a nylon wrapper as face mask, to prevent her from getting the corona virus. The use of nylon as face mask is not going to prevent the corona virus from entering her system. She has not been enlightened properly on the right measures to prevent the coronal virus. She doesn't seem to be educated. The image is considered to be an offer image because it attracts the attention of the viewers, the humour surrounding the picture makes it attracting to the viewers. The participant is not staring directly at the viewers but at an unknown phenomom. The image can be viewed from a vertical angle which makes the image visible.

Text 7

Coming December 2020



Korona and Kwarantine

Representational Metafunction:

There are two participants in this picture. These participants are babies, they are seen smiling directly at the viewers. The textual heading says “Coming December 2020” while the bottom says “Korona and Kwarantime” This image is a humour that is centred on Covid-19 (coronavirus). This image is clearly saying that anybody that people in the coming month of December would start naming their children “korona” which means (corona) and “Kwarantime” which stands for (Quarantine). This image is considered to be an offer image because it attracts the attention of the viewers. The fact that it’s a joke and it is centred on the current issues we are currently facing as a whole. The image can be viewed from a vertical angle which makes the image visible and noticeable from the toe upwards.

Datum 8

Compositional Metafunction: Based on the compositional meta functional there are three represented participants in this cartoon. The cartoon has a classification as well as a narrative and transactional process. Two of the participants who appear to be young men wearing tattered clothes and backing the viewers are the subordinate while the man sitting reading the newspaper from the way he is dressed portray him as a politician the superordinate, these element can be termed the classification structure. The cartoon seem to be doing something based on the narrative and transactional process which are obvious with the presence of vector such as eyeline, facial expression, mouth that emanates from their faces. The bubble speech in the image shows that the participants are engaged in a verbal utterance. The textual heading of the image reads “US COVID-19 ASSISTANCE TO NIGERIA HITS 16BN-News” the United States of America and other organisations have contributed to the assistance of the pandemic (coronavirus) in Nigeria with the

donations of funds which is worth billions of naira. From the image above the superordinate participants is seen reading a newspaper which reads “Covid-19: cases hits 28,162” the participant is also seen holding his phone, on the screen is a text message which seems like a credit alert. This image clearly explains that the corona virus funds which were donated by organisations are being looted by the politicians with exaggerations in Covid-19 cases. The funds meant for the Covid-19 victims and to build hospitals and to provide facilities for the upkeep of the hospitals are being looted by the politicians. One of the bubble speech says “have they published the names of the beneficiaries of the Covid-19 funds? The other replies by saying “Can you squeeze water from a stone? What this implies is that the names of the beneficiaries can never be published, and that its an impossible thing to happen because those funds have been embezzled.

The social vices present in this cartoon are embezzlement, looting of funds, selfishness and lies.

Datum 9

The problem with Africa is that if they say nobody should go out, everybody will go out to see if nobody has gone out.



Compositional metafunction; There is only one participant in this image, the participant is seen looking or staring directly at the viewers. There is a presence of vector such as eyeline, facial expression. His facial expression suggests that he is not surprised and he gloomy. The textual heading of the image reads “The problem with Africa is if they say nobody should go out, everybody will go out to see if everybody has gone out”. This image clearly explains the way Africans think. During the lockdown of the pandemic were everybody was asked to stay indoor

majority of Africans still went outdoor to confirm if people were truly staying indoor which is like an irony because they are also violating the lockdown rules of staying outdoor. The social vice present in this image is violation of rules, stubbornness and some not believing that the virus exists.

Datum 10



Compositional Metafunction: Based on the compositional metafunction there are two representational participants in this image. The image is a humour because it doesn't look serious. One of the participant is seen lying down seem to be receiving treatment from the coronavirus. The other which seems to be the doctor treating the patient. The equipment used in treating the patient is not the appropriate equipment used in treating patients. The social vices here in this cartoon is humor, despite the current state of the world right now , people still find ways of bringing jokes out from it.

5. FINDING AND CONCLUSION

The study also discovered that linguistic and non linguistic semiotic resources co exist with one another in such a way that, the linguistic semiotic resources which is the textual component of the cartoons provide the viewer with the ideals through which they can build or understand the meaning of other semiotic resources captured in the selected cartoons. Newspaper cartoons enable readers to be conscious of every details and elements in the cartoons. Each element in the cartoon contributes to the intended meaning of the cartoonist. It enables the readers develop critical thinking. They decode the image not from the surface level alone but also at the phase level. The readers are expected to decode the meaning from the colours, size, frame, and the texts. The linguistic resources are the textual component of the cartoon. It provides the viewer with the ideal through which they can have an insight or build an understanding of what the other semiotic resources is about. The following are some of the linguistic resources captured in this cartoon. It will be cleared that all the mentioned textual semiotic resources above (non-linguistic resources) are meant to give the audience, an insight or understanding of what type of message the cartoon is trying to pass across.

The non-linguistic resources is the hidden meaning of the cartoon which the readers are expected to decode through the use of other semiotic resources such as the use of frame, colour, size, shot, and the represented participants. All these enable the readers to decode the intended meaning of the cartoonists. The non-linguistic resources usually carry more meaning than the linguistic resources as seen in the analysed cartoons, which mean most meanings are embedded in the non linguistic resources when compared to the linguistic resources.

Conclusion

The study has proved that visual images are very important tools that are embedded and rich with meaning and are used to pass across messages to the viewers. The messages behind these visual images are easily interpreted and they are usually one with strong and powerful messages especially when sensitive issues like politics are being discussed. Political cartoons are used in order to relay to the people and society important messages.

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