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Gombe Savannah Journal of Language, Literature and Communication Studies (GOSAJOLLCOS) is a peer-reviewed journal of the Department of English, Gombe State University. The journal is committed to the development of communication arts through researches in Language, Linguistics, Literature, Theatre Arts, Cultural Studies, Creative Arts, Media and Communication Studies. It has both print and online versions. The Editorial board hereby calls for thoroughly researched papers and articles on the subject areas already mentioned. Submissions of papers are accepted all year round but publication is expected to be done in May/June annually. All manuscripts should be accompanied with the sum of ten thousand (10,000) naira only. On acceptance of any manuscript, contributors will pay the sum of twenty five thousand (25,000) naira only as publication fee.

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## LINGUISTIC CONSTRUCTION OF DEPRESSION: AN APPRAISAL OF PERSONAL NARRATIVE

<sup>1</sup>OGUNJIMI, Florence Taiye and <sup>2</sup>MOHAMMAD Abubakar Musa

<sup>1</sup>Directorate of General Studies, Gombe State University and

<sup>2</sup>Department of English, Gombe State University

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### Abstract

*The aim of this study is to investigate the intersection of Psycholinguistics and appraisal theory of language and emotion. The focus is on how language is used to convey and express emotions associated with depression. To achieve this aim, a qualitative analysis is conducted on the excerpts of a personal account of an individual experiencing depression; sourced through the Internet Public Library (IPL) via Google search engines. Specifically, the study examines how language of depression employs linguistic markers to convey affective reactions, evaluative attitudes and intensity levels in the context of depressive accounts. Utilizing the appraisal framework, the analysis examines how language is utilised to convey and express emotions in a narrative centered on depressive episodes. The findings highlight the subjective nature of individuals' experiences when managing mental health challenges as well as the linguistic expressions of emotional processes. Notably, also, is the emphasis on the significance of the coping mechanism employed by the narrator.*

**Keywords:** Psycholinguistics, Appraisal Theory, Depression, Linguistic Construction, Mental Health

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### Introduction

In the domain of Psycholinguistics, the interface between language and emotion has become an interesting area of study. Here, the detailed dynamics between linguistic structures and emotional experiences have become the focal point of scholarly inquiry (Okhrimeko, Okhrimeko, Geivorgian, Uriadova, & Shevchenko, 2005). Psycholinguistics is the study of how humans acquire, use, comprehend and produce language, and the psychological and neurological factors that make these processes possible (Field, 2004). It is an interdisciplinary field that draws ideas and methodologies from related fields like psychology, anthropology, linguistics, cognitive science, discourse analysis, language and speech, and pathology.

Depression is a serious mental health challenge that makes people feel very unwell. According to the World Health Organization WHO (2020), depression is one of the leading causes of disability worldwide. It is characterized by persistent feelings of fear, sadness, hopelessness and loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities. Thus,

mental health challenges impair significantly on individuals' ability to function in daily life (Otto, & Roedel, 2022).

The digital landscape's portrayal and discussions on depression and other mental health issues have become a flourishing area of study (Eichenberg, & Otto, 2016). This is largely because of its potential for self-directed help-seeking and access to credible information. Eichenberg & Otto (2016) submit that individuals are more likely to engage with online resources when they perceive their symptoms as severe or encounter relatable narratives, foregrounding the significance of online platforms in mental health support and help seeking. Thus, the acknowledgement and response to depression have gained traction. Despite extensive research on depression from clinical, psychological and other related mental health fields (Patel, 2014; Kanske, & Kotz, 2010; Gross, 2014), a psycholinguistics approach offers a novel angle for the understanding of personal stories on depression. This is largely because; Psycholinguistics explores how language serves as a primary medium through which

individuals communicating internal emotions, (Harley, 2001). Examining the linguistic constructions of personal narrative on depression, this study brings to light distinction in language that reflects emotional patterns unique to individuals experiencing depression. Thus, this approach moves beyond the traditional clinical assessment of language use, to a linguistic focus on how language is used to express and communicate emotions reflecting episodes of depression.

### **The Psycholinguistics of Emotion**

It is not new that Psycholinguistics as a field of study combines ideas and methods from many related fields including Linguistics, Cognitive Science, Discourse Analysis, Psychology, and Neurolinguistics among others. This means that it re-contextualizes concepts and research paradigms from these fields to understand how language works in the mind and in the society (Levelt, 2013). Thinking along the same line, Frederica (2017), submits that recent researches on Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) reveal the neural correlates associated with the brain regions involved in semantic processing and syntactic parsing.

Remarkably, the field of psycholinguistics has been classified into varied specialized topics, chief among which are; language and cognition, language disorder and language impairment, language and culture, neurolinguistics, language acquisition and development, language production and speech, language and emotion (Traxler, 2012). The key concerns of these specialties seeks to answer questions such as understanding the cognitive and neural bases of language impairment, how language interacts with human thoughts and perception, investigating the neural correlates of language processing and language-related brain disorders, and developing computational models and theories to describe and explain language processing phenomenon among other relevant questions (Levelt, 2013).

The Psycholinguistics of emotion, a subfield of language and emotion, primarily investigates how language is used to express, perceive and interpret emotions. It focuses attention on how individual's emotive states (anxiety disorder, depression, bipolar disorder, PTSD and their likes) influence language processing and comprehension. Scherer (2009), for instance, asserts that language serves as a primary medium of expressing emotional states. It is used to shape individuals' emotional experiences. In a similar view, Kanske & Kotz (2010) argue that emotional words elicit faster compared to neutral words. The bottom line in their argument is that emotional contents or experiences influence language processing at both cognitive and neural levels.

Additionally, the examination of emotion regulation strategies through language is another focus of language and emotion. Studies have explored how individuals use language to regulate their own emotions and those of others. This is a demonstration of the effectiveness of strategies such as reappraisal and distancing in regulating emotional responses (Gross, 2014). Also, studies into the linguistic features of emotion regulation reveals patterns of language use associated with regulating strategies that shed light on affective processes underlying emotion regulation (Citron, 2012).

In all, the Psycholinguistics of emotion explores the use of language in real-world context drawing insights from related fields to show interconnectivity. It focuses on how individuals express emotions through language and how language shapes emotive experiences. By analysing the cognitive and neural processes involved in language use and emotional expressions, this field aims to enhance understanding of the complex interaction between language and emotion.

### **Empirical Studies**

Across the globe studies on emotive states have emerged as a critical area of concern

(Atilola, 2013; Matsumoto, 2009; Moors, 2020). These studies highlight varied mental health challenges including depression, substance use disorder, PTSD, bipolar disorder and anxiety from different scholarly perspectives. In Nigeria for instance, research on mental health, particularly focusing on depression, has begun to explore the role of language use in understanding and addressing the disorder. In their work, Adebowale & Ogunlesi (2017) highlight the significance of linguistic factors in the expression, perception and interpretation of depressive symptoms among Nigerians. Through a qualitative approach to cultural distinction in the language used to describe experiences, their study reveals the unique use of idioms, metaphors and depressive expressions specific to the Nigerian context.

Ogundipe, Olagunju, Adeyemi, & Erinfolami (2019) identify modal verbs and mood elements as crucial grammatical features used to express emotions, attitudes and subjective evaluations in depressive discourse. Applying a qualitative approach, their research found that modal expressions such as *could* and *wanted* are employed by individuals to convey emotional desires and anticipations. This illustrates the affective depth of personal accounts of depressed individuals. From a linguistic-cultural perspective, Duranti (1997) studies the role of language use in depression assessment and intervention. The research emphasises the sociocultural dimensions of language use and how cultural norms and communicative practices shape depressive narratives and help-seeking behaviors.

This study nonetheless, offers a fresh perspective to the analysis of personal accounts of depressed individuals by harnessing the appraisal theory of language and emotion proposed by Martin & White (2005) from a linguistic dimension. The framework focuses on how language use influences the appraisal of emotive experiences. The goal is to lay bare the

underlying mechanisms through which individuals communicate their depressive experiences through language. Consequent to this, the framework demonstrates its applicability to various specialized domains.

### **Theoretical Framework**

At its nucleus, Psycholinguistics examines the relationship between language and cognition. It delves into how individuals produce, comprehend and use language in real-world contexts. Therefore, appraisal theory is selected for empirical investigation in the natural world; following the account of a depressed individual. This is to examine its applicability in understanding language-cognition-environment relationships. The research aims to contribute to psycholinguistics by testing the theory in environmental contexts.

### **Appraisal Theory**

Appraisal Theory, developed by Martin & White (2005), offers a systematic framework for analysing the language of evaluation, attitude, and emotion. This theory posits that language users employ a range of linguistic resources or constructions to negotiate and naturalize their inter-subjective and ideological positions. It posits that emotions are elicited by individuals' subjective evaluations or appraisals of events, situations or stimuli (Lazarus, 1991). For instance, when an individual gets a raise in pay at work (event), they tend to evaluate it as positive. The reason is it aligns with their goals of being well paid. This evaluation tends to lead to happiness – an emotive state. However, in a case where there is a reduction in pay at work (event), it is evaluated as negative because it does not align with the goals of gainful employment. This is evaluated as negative and can lead to sadness or depression – an emotive state. Thus, appraisal theory agrees that emotional responses are shaped by individuals' personal goals and values and how we perceive events and experiences in relation to them.

Against this background, Martin & White's (2005) dimensions of appraisal (*affect*, *attitude* and *graduation*) are applied to examine the psycholinguistics of personal accounts of a depressed individual. These dimensions interact dynamically in language use. They shape ways in which individuals communicate their subjective experiences. Linguistic markers/constructions, which are indicative of depressive episodes, are identified and analysed to gain a clear understanding of language usage. Thus, the central theme of these dimensions is that emotions are caused and differentiated by an appraisal of the stimulus as mis/matching with the goals and expectations as easy/difficult to control and as caused by others themselves or impersonal circumstances (Moors, 2020).

### **The Dimensions of Appraisal**

The three dimensions of appraisal, as conceptualized by Martin and White (2005) comprises *Affective*, *Attitude*, and *Graduation*, which collectively constitute the key linguistic resources through which individuals evaluate, position, and negotiate meaning in social contexts. In Appraisal Theory, these three key dimensions help to understand how language is used to evaluate, position, and negotiate meaning. On this account,

- Affective refers to the expression of emotions and feelings, such as happiness, sadness, or anger.
- Attitude refers to the evaluation of entities, events, or situations as positive, negative, or neutral, including judgments of like/dislike, good/bad, or beautiful/ugly.
- Graduation refers to the modification of evaluative meanings to intensify, mitigate, or focus them, using resources like amplification (example, "extremely"), moderation (example, "somewhat"), or sharpening (example, "precisely").

These three dimensions are interconnected and work together to shape the evaluative and emotional resonance of language. In the context of personal accounts of depression, the Appraisal Theory provides an important tool for examining how individuals linguistically construe and negotiate their experiences of depression, including their emotions, attitudes, and evaluations. The theory's focus on the language of evaluation, attitude, and emotion is particularly relevant to the study of personal accounts of depression, as individuals' linguistic choices can reveal their subjective experiences, emotional states, and interpersonal positioning.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore the linguistic construction of personal experiences of depression. This is glaring in the excerpt for analysis titled "*My life as a 24-year-old living with depression and anxiety*" (Google search, 2023), extracted from Internet Public Library (IPL). The webpage where the excerpt is sourced is titled *Medium Daily Digest* – a platform featuring articles and essays on various topics including mental health. A descriptive qualitative approach is particularly suited for examining the distinction and subjective nature of mental health experiences, allowing for an in-depth analysis of the language used to convey emotional and evaluative meanings.

The data extracted from the public library is subjected to a careful coding scheme, which involved identifying and categorizing linguistic constructions that reveal the author's affective, attitudinal, and graduation stance towards their experiences. This coding scheme was informed by the Appraisal Theory, which provides a systematic framework for analysing the language of evaluation, emotion, and engagement. The coding process enabled the identification of patterns and themes in the data, shedding light on how

the author linguistically negotiates their experiences of depression.

The use of publicly available online data offers a unique opportunity to examine the ways in which individuals share their personal experiences of mental health in a digital context. While this methodology presents some limitations, such as the lack of control over the data collection process, it also provides a window into the authentic language use of individuals living with depression. By examining this data through a descriptive qualitative frame, this study aims to contribute to a clearer understanding of the linguistic and emotional dynamics of mental health experiences, ultimately informing more effective support strategies and interventions.

### **Analysis**

This section undertakes a detailed analysis into the linguistic construction of personal experiences of depression, as expressed in online personal narratives. Through the framework of Appraisal Theory, the study examines how individuals evaluative position themselves and others in relation to their mental health experiences. The analysis focuses on the *affective*, *attitudinal*, and *graduation* language resources employed in the narratives. It lays to bare patterns that reveal the complex emotional and evaluative dynamics in the description of experience. By exploring how language is used to construct and negotiate meaning in the story, it contributes to a clear understanding of the psycholinguistics of mental health experiences. The following analysis presents the findings of the study. It also highlights the key linguistic features and strategies used by the narrator to make sense of their experiences of depression.

### **Excerpt 1**

'Last night again, I wanted to disappear, to stop existing, to just be unconscious of anything and everything. I could feel the wave of depression coming'.

### **Affective:**

- The narrator expresses a strong negative emotional state, characterized by a desire to "disappear", "stop existing", and be "unconscious of anything and everything".
- The use of the word "again" implies a sense of recurrence and familiarity, suggesting that the speaker has experienced this feeling of depression before.
- The phrase "I could feel the wave of depression coming" suggests a sense of anticipation and dread.

### **Attitude:**

- The narrator's attitude towards their depression is characterized by a negative evaluation, sense of resignation and hopelessness, evident in their desire to escape or disappear.
- The use of the phrase "I could feel the wave of depression coming" implies a sense of inevitability and powerlessness.
- The narrator's language suggests a negative evaluation of their depression, viewing it as an overwhelming and uncontrollable force. The intensifier adverb *again* indicates a recurring pattern of depressive episodes which further reinforces a negative mismatching of goal.

### **Graduation:**

- The scalar representation of appraisal is high. The narrator uses intensifying language to emphasise the severity of their emotional state, such as "wanted to disappear" and "stop existing".
- The phrase "unconscious of anything and everything" suggests a complete and total escape from their emotions and experiences.
- The use of the metaphor "wave of depression" implies a large and overwhelming force, amplifying the narrator's sense of helplessness.

### **Excerpt 2**

'Before last night, I had been better, better for a few months. I haven't been so overwhelmed that I have to write dark poetry to soothe

myself. And I had almost forgotten I lived with depression’.

**Affective:**

- The narrator expresses a sense of contrast between their previous state “better” and their current state “overwhelmed”.
- The use of the phrase “dark poetry” suggests a negative emotional state reflecting the feeling of despair and emotional turmoil, as poetry is often used as an outlet for intense emotions.
- The narrator’s language implies a sense of relief and forgetfulness (“I had almost forgotten I lived with depression”), which is now disrupted by their current experience.

**Attitude:**

- The speaker’s attitude towards their depression is one of management and control, evident in their statement “I had been better”.
- The use of the phrase “I haven’t been so overwhelmed” implies a sense of evaluation, comparing their current state to previous experiences.
- The narrator’s language suggests a sense of surprise and disappointment at the return of their depression “I had almost forgotten”.

**Graduation:**

- The narrator uses moderate language to downplay the severity of their previous state “been better, better for a few months”, implying a sense of stability and control.
- The phrase “almost forgotten” suggests a near-complete absence of depression from the author’s awareness.
- The contrast between “better” and “overwhelmed” highlights the intensity of the narrator’s current emotional state, amplifying the sense of disruption and distress.

**Excerpt 3**

‘In 2020, I experienced my first full-blown depressive episode, all I wanted was death, I had tried to forget it and could say I won because I am alive now’.

**Affective:**

- Joiner (2005) mentions that the thought of death are common symptoms of depression.

It reflects the emotional distress experienced by depressed individuals during their episodes. In the excerpt, the speaker expresses a stark and intense desire for death during their depressive episode “all I wanted was death”.

- The use of the phrase “full-blown depressive episode” suggests a severe and overwhelming experience.
- The speaker’s language implies a sense of triumph and resilience “I could say I won because I am alive now”, contrasting with the darkness of their previous desire.

**Attitude:**

- The narrator’s attitude towards their depression is one of stark realism and honesty, evident in their direct language “all I wanted was death”.
- The use of the phrase “I had tried to forget it” implies a sense of evaluation, acknowledging the difficulty of overcoming their experience.
- The speaker’s language suggests a sense of pride and accomplishment in having survived their depression “I won”. For instance, Fredrickson (2001) acknowledges that positive thoughts against depression are highly encouraged. The reason being that is a surviving depressive episode can be viewed as a form of victory.

**Graduation:**

- In this excerpt the intensity of appraisal is high. The speaker uses intensifying language to emphasise the severity of their depressive episode “full-blown”.
- The contrast between “death” and “alive now” highlights the intensity of the author’s emotional journey and their hard-won resilience.
- The use of the phrase “I won” amplifies the author’s sense of triumph, resilience, adapting coping strategies and accomplishment, thereby emphasizing their determination and strength.

**Excerpt 4**

‘I could feel my brain either shrinking or exploding, I thought I was going to run crazy,

so I packed a few things and travelled to Benin City to meet my friend who had told me weeks before to come and rest, I had told her I was in a really bad condition’.

**Affective:**

- The speaker’s emotive state expresses a sense of intense anxiety and desperation. Such experiences are often reported by people who undergo not only depressive episodes but high level of stress (Joiner, 2005). Thus, the narrator describes their brain as either “shrinking” or “exploding”.
- The use of the phrase “I thought I was going to run crazy” suggests a feeling of losing control and approaching a breaking point.
- The narrator’s language implies a sense of relief and hope in seeking help and support from their friend “to meet my friend who had told me weeks before to come and rest”.

**Attitude:**

- The narrator’s attitude towards their mental state is one of urgency and vulnerability, evident in their direct language “I was in a really bad condition”.
- The use of the phrase “I had told her” implies a sense of openness and trust in their friend and a strong will of resilience of seeking support and relief.
- The speaker’s language also suggests a sense of gratitude and appreciation for their friend’s support “who had told me weeks before to come and rest”.

**Graduation:**

- The narrator used high intensifying language to emphasize the severity of their anxiety “shrinking or exploding”, “going to run crazy”.
- The contrast between “really bad condition” and “rest” highlights the author’s desire for relief and relaxation. Hence, Folkman (1984) emphasizes the role of problem-focused coping strategies such as seeking support with close allies which helps in managing mental health crisis.
- Also, the use of the phrase “weeks before” amplifies the speaker’s sense of anticipation

and gratitude for their friend’s support, which is perceived as a positive appraisal.

**Excerpt 5**

‘Kehinde nursed me back to life; her roommates were also welcoming and fun. They made me laugh. Kehinde cooked beautiful meals and fed me, boiled water and prepared me to bathe’.

**Affective:**

- Fredrickson (2001) opines that positive emotion play a crucial role in building resilience and promoting psychological well-being. The speaker expresses a sense of gratitude and appreciation towards Kehinde and her roommates, using words like “nursed me back to life” and “welcoming”. As such, there is a sharp shift from distress to a more positive appraisal state.
- The use of the phrase “made me laugh” suggests a sense of joy and relief.
  - The speaker’s language implies a sense of care and nurturing, describing Kehinde’s actions in detail “cooked beautiful meals”, “fed me”, “boiled water”, “and prepared me to bathe”.

**Attitude:**

- The narrator’s attitude towards Kehinde and her roommates is one of deep appreciation and gratitude, evident in their glowing description. In the words of Seligman (2011), the power of gratitude is transformative in enhancing psychological resilience towards life’s challenges.
- The use of the phrase “nursed me back to life” implies a sense of debt and obligation.
- The speaker’s language suggests a sense of warmth and affection towards Kehinde and her roommates.

**Graduation:**

- The narrator uses intensifying language to emphasise the impact of Kehinde’s care “nursed me back to life” indicating an emotional struggle.
- The repetition of Kehinde’s actions “cooked”, “fed”, “boiled”, “prepared” amplifies

the author's sense of gratitude and appreciation, negotiating a shift from earlier emotional struggle. Also the use of the phrase "beautiful meals" adds a sense of delight and pleasure to the narrator's description.

### Findings

The findings of the study reveal the linguistic construction of depression as a complex, multifaceted experience characterised by intense affective states, evaluative attitudes, and graduated intensities. Through the frame of Appraisal Theory, the analysis sheds light on the ways in which individuals evaluative position themselves and others in relation to their mental health experiences. This reveals patterns of self-blame, hopelessness, and helplessness. However, the analysis highlights the significance of supportive relationships, coping strategies and care in facilitating recovery and well-being.

The findings of the study contribute to a better understanding of the psycholinguistics of mental health experiences, underlining the importance of language in shaping and negotiating meaning. The analysis demonstrates the value of Appraisal Theory in illuminating the affective, attitudinal, and graduational dimensions of language use in personal narratives of depression.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this study' offers a critical understanding of the linguistic construction of depression, emphasizing the complex interplay between affect, attitude, and graduation in shaping individuals' experiences and perceptions of their mental health. The analysis stresses the significance of supportive relationships and care in facilitating recovery and well-being. It also lays to bare the importance of language in negotiating meaning and facilitating support in the context of depressive episodes. The findings have implications for mental health support and recovery, emphasizing the need for a clearer understanding of the linguistic

and communicative dimensions of mental health experiences.

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- Ogunjimi, Florence T. is a lecturer at the Directorate of General Studies, Gombe State University, Gombe Email – [taiwoflo.tf@gsu.edu.ng](mailto:taiwoflo.tf@gsu.edu.ng)
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