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Social Media Discourse and Peace Negotiations in Contemporary Nigeria

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Abstract

Previous studies on the social media in Nigeria have focused largely on its tendency to spread fake news and fuel ethnoreligious crises in the country. Although studies have dealt sufficiently with the negative use of the social media, they have not accounted for the potentials of social media discourse in promoting peace and managing conflict in Nigeria. This gap is significant when viewed in the light of how crises-prone the contemporary Nigeria has become in the last few years and the role the social media has played in aggravating these crises. Conceptualized from the perspective of peace linguistics and situated within Leech's (1983) model of politeness principles, the study examined the linguistic potentials of social media discourse for peace negotiation in contemporary Nigeria. Over twenty posts were sourced from X (formally twitter) handle of Nigerians, twelve of which were purposively sampled and subjected to pragmatic analysis using insights from Leech (1983). The findings of the study reveal conformity of the posts with the maxims of agreement, sympathy, and modesty, with the agreement maxim having the highest percentage of occurrence. The study thus concludes that despite the abuse of the social media which has led to the perpetration of diverse online social vices in Nigeria, with widespread consequences on the society, there are still discourses from the social media that are useful for enhancing social cohesion and peaceful co-existence, thus making the social media a potential tool for national reconstruction in Nigeria.

Key words: Social Media Discourse, Peace Linguistics, Politeness Maxims

Background to the Study

Across the world, there has been serious concern by governments of nations, non-governmental organizations, and other private and public civil society organizations on the increasing abuse of the social media by some of its users (Kilvington & Price

2019). Concerns have been expressed concerning social media abuse on such platforms as the Facebook, WhatsApp, and twitter (Nwafor et'al, 2021). Forms of abuse have ranged from cyberbullying, sexual exploitation internet fraud, and fake news, etc (Valero,2023) While the issue of social media abuse remains a global



phenomenon, its manifestation in Nigeria appears alarming, especially when viewed against the backdrop of the harm it has wrecked on the country's ethnoreligious composition. Findings from empirical studies on this phenomenon authenticate the above assertion. For example, Adelekun (2018) reports how the social media was negatively deployed by politicians of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives' Congress (APC) in the build up to the 2015 Nigerian General Elections to perpetuate campaign of calumny, which further divided the country along ethno-religious lines. Also, Abosirade and Adebayo (2021) investigate the link between the behaviour of the youths and their exposure to the social media. Drawing insights from sociological and psychological theories, the study posits that the aggressive behaviour of youths towards one another is a product of their exposure to online violence. Igwebuike et al (2020) examine the use of the social media in Nigeria for the construction and propagation of fake news. Anchored on Van leuwen's (2017) Discourse Legitimization approach, the study appraises the influential impact of fake news on the social media for facilitating persuasive political participation. Anaekperechi (2019) evaluates how words are maliciously used by social media handlers to trigger disharmony among interactants. According to the study, the bulk of utterances on the social media are hate speeches which sponsor much negative reactions such as anger, resentment, disillusionment, pride, prejudice, acrimony, insults, derogatory and defamatory terms, and so on. These feelings, according to the study, are the underlining causes of Nigeria's

recurrent ethnoreligious crises. The study further posits that a relationship exists between hate speech on the social media and hate actions in the society. This means that to avoid conflict in the society, language use on the social media has to be controlled.

Sharehu (2021) uses the Facebook as the case study to discuss the effects of negative language use on the social media space on the nation. According to the study, prolonged negligence on social media abuse in Nigeria poses a threat to the unity of the nation, especially as people continue to discuss sensitive issues without a control of what should and should not be said. The study thus advocates the stoppage of inappropriate use of utterances that are provocative and incite hate because of their perlocutionary effects on their victims. Omondi (2016) evaluates the connection between language use on the internet and violence, using Kenya as a case study. According to the study, the online media is made up of two groups- information producers and information consumers. While the former have a great influence over the belief system, thought process and actions of the latter on the core issues discussed, the latter in most cases hardly filter the negative effects of the information on them. The study discusses how the online media has been deployed to perpetrate conflicts between Christians and Muslims through inciting comments and hate speech about the tenets of these religions. The result of this study shows that the Kenyan online newspaper may have unconsciously contributed to the outbursts of violence sometime in 2007.



Whilst the above studies provide conceptual underpinning of the abuse of the social media in Nigeria and its negative impact on the society, the studies have neither accounted for the linguistic undercurrent of this abuse, nor do they offer alternative discursive strategies the use of which can mitigate social media abuse and promote ethno-religious and political harmony among Nigerians. This gap is what the proposed study undertakes to fill. Borrowing insights the conceptual framework of peace linguistics and situated within Leech's (1983) model of politeness principles, the study is an empirically-driven peace advocacy that seeks to examine how discourses on the social media can be the ideological motivations and linguistic manifestation of social abuse, in order to engender an awareness campaign on how the discourse on social media can be pragmatically deployed to promote peaceful co-existence in Nigeria.

A Conceptual Review: The Social Media

The media could be regarded as instruments of communication, while social media is to be seen as a social instrument of communication. According to Nicole (2023), social media broadly refers to websites or applications that focus on communication and shared community-generated content. To Johnson, social media has exploded as a category of online discourse where people create content, share it, bookmark it and network at a prodigious rate. The social media is largely considered as one of the biggest modern markets across the globe (Gleason 2012). It has attracted a lot of

patronage due to the peculiarity of the postmodern age. Serious transactions (buying and selling), interviews and other national and international negotiations are often made via the social media. As a mainstream of modern communication, the social media has also attracted attention in other social sectors. To Mayfield (2006), social media is the core factor of human communication, possessing characteristics of participation, openness, conversation, community, and connectedness. Moreover, Solis (2009) argues in a recent survey, in which 92% of communication practitioners surveyed believe that blogs and social media now influence mainstream news coverage. Most people consider the media as a reliably fastest means to getting problems solved, and arriving at desired results. For instance, Behzadan et al (2012) further maintain the argument that recent findings indicated that when properly implemented, social media has a significant effect on student achievement, stimulated increased instructor-student interaction, encouraged cooperative learning, collaboration, problem-solving, and student inquiry skills. Apparently, Behzadan's findings are generally applicable to other sectors of the society.

In the view of Bowie (2018), the social media may have its disadvantages, the utility value it commands is however undeniable in the modern society. It enhances social networking, social interaction, social news, social sharing of pictures and videos as well as information gathering. In fact, the utility of social media has attracted the



attention of researchers from many fields of study, including sociology, political science, communications, education and linguistics. Based on the assertions of Gleeson (2012), researchers have begun to explore the ways in which social media can support and aid their respective social endeavours.

Social Media Platforms

This simply refers to the specific social media website or application. To Nicole (2023), when discussing social media, serious considerations must be extended to accepted digital sources and platforms. Thus, at its highest peak, the social media has assumed the position of linking humans across the globe through its various platforms such as Facebook, X, WhatsApp, Instagram, Blogs, TikTok, LinkedIn, YouTube, SnapTube, Gmail, Podcasts, etc. Also, Dreiling (2023) maintains that the various types of social media platforms have specific purposes. Through these platforms, social media users share content of their messages or information. The platforms also enable comments, replies or subsequent collaborative engagements of users. Most social media allow transfer of certain contents such as images, videos, audios and texts from one social media platform to another.

Furthermore, Wigmore (2020) argues that most social media platforms are designed for quick communication. This also means that information on social media is sent faster with minimal editorial focus. This could also affect the accuracy of the posts or information shared on social media. However, Nicole 2023 further asserts that social media, as the name implies, carries a social undertone in which the

users are allowed to interact with others in order to promote interpersonal relationships and give a certain effect on the social behaviors of individuals worldwide, and this is largely achieved through the use of the various social media platforms.

Social Media Users

The professionals, individuals, groups, or entities engaging on the social media platforms are referred to as users. This means that social media platforms are not only used by single individuals, they are also used by recognized public and private organizations such as institutions, companies and other users of varying credibility. Martin (2008) shares the concept of social media users as people who use Facebook, Blogs, Twitter, MySpace and LinkedIn for the purpose of communication, sharing photos as well as videos. However, Lusk (2010) reveals that the purpose of social media is captured within the use of internet through Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, Skype, MySpace as well as Yahoo Messenger for job searching and communication sharing of ideas by users. This has resulted in increased use of Social Networking Websites by users to become an international phenomenon in the past few years. In the view of Boyd. 2007, users of social media consider the media as a social norm and way of life for people from all over the world. Social media aids the acquisition of new cultures and tradition. Siddiqui (2016), therefore, concludes that social media has become an important part of one's life, as it plays a vital role in transforming people's lifestyle.



Whilst the impacts of social media largely revolve around its ability to serve as an umbrella term for technologies that provides space for people to create and send content, link up, and connect with others, its commercial value in the 21st has drawn special attention from users (Lewis 2010). Many social media users have learnt how to monetise their contents on the various social media platforms. This has also brought a lot of participation to the media. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) consider this as a major advantage of the social media.

Peace Linguistics: An Overview

Linguistics focuses on diverse aspects of language, such as conversational interactions, sound systems, languages used by people in social situations, the function of language and the brain, language development and change, and language storage and production. (Whitla, 2010). Language does not only describe reality but gives meaning to human experience, as it communicates ideologies, which help in justifying social practices and attitudes. Human life revolves around communication and language. When language is constructively used, it can champion peace-building by possessing human dignifying attributes. Language can be marked with communicative violence when used in an offensive, and aggressive construction which often has the potential to harm and escalate conflict. For Gomes De Matos (2005, p. 2), language is “the complex cognitive or mental system of symbols shared by all humans everywhere and used for communicating intra and interpersonally through spoken written or sign languages”. This

definition explains language as a tool of communication that has multiple channels of use. The function of language in communication can be seen as a tool used for disseminating information, and for building of social interactions (LeBlanc, 2011).

The establishment of peace in language use occurs as a result of the needs and feelings in valuing the other as a human that has rights. The notion of peace has occupied a focal position in aspiring individuals and the nation at large. Peace, in its literal sense, means the avoidance and absence of all forms of violence or anything resulting in conflict. Schilling (2011, p. 20) states that “peace is a process, a struggle to transform violence as it “describes the unfolding of conflict in a constructive way”. According to Schilling, peace does not only mean the absence of violence. This is because, people interact non-violently, by positively managing their conflict, to be concerned about the needs of others. This therefore means that peace could either be positive or negative.

Language and peace play an important role in the interface between social institutions and ideology. Ugoji, 2017 evaluates the use of language, not just to achieve peace but for its appropriateness for suitable communication at all times. Language use can cause conflict and, at the same time, restore peace. It is important to note that language is not only viewed as an element of conflict, but its identification signifies the resolution of conflict and the initiation of peace. The concept of language and communication connects to man's



ability to exchange and engage in social actions and interactions freely. According to Gay (1988), language can be regarded as violence, when words are used to hurt people psychologically and socially. This he refers to as 'linguistic violence'. The notions of communicative peace and peace linguistics are advocated to make our language use violence-free.

Peace Linguistics as an interdisciplinary approach aims at creating conditions for human beings to use peaceful language. This can be achieved by prioritizing the humanizing nature of language use as well as the other side of communicative reality, which is the dehumanizing use of language. **(Gomes de Matos, 2012)**. According to Gomes de Matos, peace linguistics is a branch of applied linguistics, which studies how language is used inappropriately to cause conflict and the resolution of such conflict through language. Innocentia (2020) posits that Peace Linguistics advocates preventing communicative aggression, creating harmony, and promoting peace, using the appropriate language use and application principles. For Crystal (1999, pp. 254-255), "peace linguistics is a climate of opinion which emerged during 1990 in which linguistic principles, methods, findings, and applications were seen as a means of promoting peace and human rights at a global level ... to foster language attitudes which respect the dignity of individual speakers and speech communities". His notion of Peace Linguistics further broadens to the essentiality of multilingualism, at various levels, the diversities of languages, and language attitudes among speakers in a speech community. Curtis (2018a, p.12)

asserts that "peace linguistics is concerned with the applications of the insights gained from the [scientific] study of language to practical problems such as how to help bring about world peace".

Peace Linguistics emerges as an approach born out of the need to control linguistic violence and conflict resolution. Here, language is used, not only as a tool for exchange but as a tool 'used to communicate peacefully'. LeBlanc (2011) opines that peace linguistic approach finds itself in peace studies which is the United Nations' response field to the pressing need for peace after World War II. Linguists like Gomes De Matos, and Freidrich (2007) propose the integration of peace into language education. Language use is seen as a tool for creating an understanding, thereby deducing the underlying peace potential of language. Peace Linguistics thus advocates that language can be used to "promote peace" by incorporating the values of "human rights, justice, and peace into one's array of core values" (Friedrich, 2007, p. 50).

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The study is a qualitative research that seeks to analyse the discursive potentials of social media posts for peace negotiation in Nigeria. Over twenty posts were sourced from X (formally Tweeter) handle of Nigerians. The collected tweets were made by Nigerians between 2023 (the year of the presidential election that swore in Nigeria's current President Bola Tinubu) and 2024 (the year in which some of the unpopular policies of the new government were announced).



The period during which the posts were made is therefore significant to the political history of Nigeria.

Twelve of the tweets were purposively sampled, coded for peace -related themes, and subjected to pragmatic analysis using insights from Leech's (1983) model of politeness principles. Leech's politeness model outlines six maxims to guide and regulate polite and harmonious behaviour among language users. The theory postulates that as a social behaviour, politeness exists in an atmosphere of harmonious interaction between the self and the other. The six politeness maxims outlined in the theory are the tact maxim, the generosity maxim, the approbation maxim, the sympathy maxim, the modesty maxim, and the agreement maxim. In the generosity maxim, Leech postulates that language users should minimize expressions of beliefs that suggest benefit to self and maximize expressions of beliefs that imply cost to self. In adhering to this maxim, the speaker simply places the other(s) at a more advantageous position than he/she is.

In the agreement maxim, the speaker minimizes expressions of disagreement between self and other, while also maximizing the expression of agreement between self and others. The approbation maxim emphasizes the need for the speaker to minimize expression of beliefs which suggest dispraise of others and maximize expression of beliefs which express approval of others. In the sympathy maxim, there is the need for speakers to minimize antipathy between them and others and maximize expression of beliefs that demonstrate sympathy for others. The modesty maxim emphasizes the need for the speaker to minimize expression of praise to self and maximize expression of dispraise to self. Since peace in its loose and general sense could be conceptualized as the totality of all the attitudes and behaviour that enhance harmony and tranquility, politeness as a linguistic phenomenon is certainly a basic requirement for the facilitation and sustenance of peace and reconciliation in any form of human engagement.

Analysis of Data

S/N	TEXT	MAXIM	COMMUNICATIVE INTENTION
1	Always think before you tweet. Societies need promoters of unity, kindness and peace, not promoters of evil, disunity, hatred and confusion. Remember that your tweets will live longer than you, and they will speak for or against you when you're no more. Ponder.	Agreement	Instills the ideology of peace, unity and brotherliness on the social media.



2	There are powerful people in this world hell bent on destabilizing the peaceful co-existence we all enjoy. We need to shut out their noise and instead look for the good in our fellow humans regardless of their tweets. This world is still a beautiful place.	Agreement	Emphasizes collective, communal effort in the fight against disunity and the promotion of humaneness and tolerance on the social media.
3	Where there is injustice or suffering, there must be audible objection, advocacy for victims, defense of the vulnerable, justice, empathy, progress toward peace...together with love	Sympathy	Advocates a sense of empathy for the victims of social injustice and mistreatment, as a demonstration of .of love and desire for peaceful co-existence in the society.
4	We are here for love, inner peace, tranquility, wisdom, empathy, compassion, advocacy, among our and our loved ones and our grandchildren.	Sympathy	Promotes the ideals of peace and love among both the senate as playing a major role in the progress and growth of the university, and consequently sustain their continual support.
5	No one is higher; no one is lower because in God's eyes we are equal and have no equal. Justice for all... NEW	Modesty	Projects the ideology of human equality, uniqueness, and justice among social media users.
6	We are made for togetherness, for fellowship, for oneness, and for peace	Sympathy	Demonstrates the idea of unity, tolerance and peace among social media users.
7	Let go, find peace.	Agreement	Conveys the idea of peace as an ideal to be passionately sought after by the people.
8	Strength does not come from physical capacity alone, but from an indomitable will and unwavering determination. We stand ready to safeguard our nation's peace and security. We march forward guided by the spirit of resilience, courage, and unwavering commitment. Together we are the embodiment of strength and	Agreement	Demonstrates the need for unity and determination in the pursuit of peace and a secured society.



	unity....		
9	Peace is not just the absence of conflict; peace is the creation of an environment where all can flourish, regardless of race, religion, gender, or any other social marker of difference.	Agreement	Demonstrates the ideology of tolerance and peace amidst diversity.
10	Peace is the result of accepting one another and to love life as it is, rather than to hate because it's not the way you want it to be.	Sympathy	Conveys the ideology of love and unity among social media users.
11	Peace means respecting each other's differences, agreeing to disagree, agreeing to live together peacefully without hurting or impinging on the other.	Agreement	Projects the ideology of tolerance and peace amidst conflict.
12	Everyone claims that they want peace until they have to adjust how they talk to people, change their tone, be very selective in word choice and delivery. You can't want peace and not give it.	Sympathy	Projects the need for social media users to demonstrate sensitivity to others in their communicative encounters.

Findings and Discussion

This section focuses on discussion of the findings of the study. Attention is given to explicating how social media users in the analysed texts comply with Leech's politeness maxims in their effort to promote the ideology of peace on the social media. Their communicative intentions revealed through their use of pragmatic cues are also captured in the section.

Excerpt 1

Always think before you tweet. Societies need promoters of unity, kindness and peace, not promoters of evil, disunity,

hatred and confusion. Remember that your tweets will live longer than you, and they will speak for or against you when you're no more. Ponder.

Conforming to the agreement maxim, the above social media post advocates unity, love and peace on twitter. By so doing, the poster promotes the minimization of disagreement between self and other and the maximization of agreement between self and other. This is reflected in both the linguistic and sociocultural contexts of the post. Linguistically, there is a deliberate choice of words that clearly portray a sense of social harmony which is contrasted with such negative vices as



disunity, hatred, and confusion, among others. Socio-culturally, the post is situated in a context that places premium on the impacts of people's action/inaction with regards to how such actions/inactions are perceived by the public. This reflects the need for social media users to prioritize the social needs of the "other" by minimizing actions that have the potential to trigger social disharmony. This ideology is accentuated with the reference made in the post to the lingering effects of posts on twitter, long after the demise of the poster. The post thus explains the need for social media users to demonstrate sensitivity in their use of language as failure to do so has the potential to trigger conflict, the far-reaching implication of which transcends the social media world.

Excerpt 2

There are powerful people in this world hell bent on destabilizing the peaceful co-existence we all enjoy. We need to shut out their noise and instead look for the good in our fellow humans regardless of their tweets. This world is still a beautiful place.

The above social media post also conforms to the agreement maxim as postulated by Leech. As stated earlier, the maxim has its propositional content as the minimization of disagreement between self and other and the maximization of agreement between self and other, with the self in this context referring to the poster and the addressee as his/her online audience. The agreement maxim is linguistically portrayed in the post through the repeated use of the personal pronoun *we*. In its first usage, the poster collectivizes the sense of

pleasure derived from the dividends of peaceful existence in the society, through the expression "we all enjoy", which is situated against the determined effort of some "powerful people" to cause social disharmony through their comments on twitter. This contrast portrayed in the use of the agreement maxim is pragmatically designed for a strategic mobilization of the audience to dissociate themselves from the negative elements in the society and align themselves with the lovers of peace for the collective benefit of all. In the second use of the *we* pronoun, the poster invites his audience for a united effort in jettisoning disharmony and promoting humaneness and tolerance among social media users. Both instances of the usage of *we* pronoun in the post reflect the inclusive ideology that seeks to emphasize equality, inclusivity, and the value and dignity of humans, regardless of their differences. Within the context of the social media, this ideology aligns properly with the agreement maxim as it seeks to de-emphasize social friction and promote harmony and peaceful co-existence among the people.

Excerpt 3

Where there is injustice or suffering, there must be audible objection, advocacy for victims, defense of the vulnerable, justice, empathy, progress toward peace...together with love

The above post conforms to the sympathy maxim as shown in the poster's effort to promote emotional support, concern and empathy for the victims of social injustice. First, the poster admits and recognizes the possibility of the existence of an



imperfect society characterized with suffering arising from social injustice. In such a society, the community of social media users are admonished in the post to demonstrate sensitivity to the plight of others by objecting to the perpetration of the vices that trigger the said social injustice in the society. This is linguistically captured in the post as raising an “audible objection” and putting up a “defense for the vulnerable...”. Pragmatically, these expressions are demonstrative of the active sympathy that commits the sympathizer to doing something practical to alleviate the suffering of the victims of injustice. This way, the sympathy maxim transcends a mere display of concern and feeling for the hurt, to include what can be practically done to alleviate the hurt. Within the context of social media discourse, the outcome of the foregoing has the potential to promote social harmony and engender peaceful co-existence which, by extension, will facilitate progress and development in the society.

Excerpt 4

Strength does not come from physical capacity alone, but from an indomitable will and unwavering determination. We stand ready to safeguard our nation's peace and security. We march forward guided by the spirit of resilience, courage, and unwavering commitment. Together we are the embodiment of strength and unity....

The post adheres to the propositional requirement of the agreement maxim outlined in Leech which stipulates for language users to minimize instances of disagreement between oneself and the other, and maximize agreement

between self and the other, on the other. The linguistic strategies that signal the agreement maxim in the post is the use of the pronoun *we* which altogether occurs three times in two sentences. The first usage expresses the poster's determination to unite with other members of the society to “safeguard” the peace and security in the country. This is significant within the broader sociopolitical context of Nigeria characterized with recurrent incidences of sectarian and ethno-religious conflicts. The second usage of the pronoun resonates with the progressive ideology guided by “the spirit of resilience, courage, and unwavering commitment”. In this usage of the term, the post reflects the centrality of the agreement maxim in the facilitation of national progress. This is all the more significant when seen against the backdrop of its usage within the context of the social media where the youthful population of the Nigerian society reside. In the third occurrence of the *we* pronoun to reflect the agreement maxim, there is an invocation of the ideology of national strength and unity in an atmosphere of peaceful co-existence.

Excerpt 5

Everyone claims that they want peace until they have to adjust how they talk to people, change their tone, be very selective in word choice and delivery. You can't want peace and not give it.

The post above conforms to the propositional contents of the sympathy maxim outlined by Leech, by seeking to promote the minimization of antipathy and maximization of sympathy among the community of social media users. In the post, emphasis is placed on



consideration for the feelings of others as a demonstration of sympathy which, according to the poster, should be reflected in “selective choice of words and delivery” on the social media. This implies that sympathy as an expression of politeness is essentially a linguistic phenomenon. This understanding is significant within the context of the social media space that is characterized by diverse forms of language abuse in form of hate speech, linguistic violence and bullying, and so on. Therefore, in promoting sensitivity to linguistic choices as a mark of sympathy for others, the post seeks to promote the centrality of language in the quest for social cohesion, which is a sine qua non for peaceful co-existence among the community of social media users. The last part of the post makes the wish for, and possibility of a peaceful society, the sole responsibility of the wisher: “You can’t want peace and not give it”. This promotes the ideology of mutual responsibility in both the expression of sympathy and the quest for peaceful co-existence among not only the community of social media users, but the generality of Nigerians.

Conclusion

The study explores the discursive potentials of social media posts for peace negotiation in Nigeria. Conceptualized from the perspective of peace linguistics and situated within Leech’s (1983) model of politeness, the study unveils how Nigerians conform to the politeness maxims in making posts on X. Of the twelve tweets analyzed, six conformed to the agreement maxim, five with the sympathy maxim, and one with the modesty maxim. The foregoing illustrates the commitment of

Nigerians towards ensuring a peaceful and socially cohesive society devoid of hate, insensitivity and rancor. This commitment, as shown in the study, is reflected in their deliberate linguistic choices which not only demonstrate politeness but also illustrate their sensitivity to the feelings of others. The study thus concludes that although the social media has been largely abused in Nigeria and other parts of the world, some discourses emanating from it have the potential to redirect the society towards the path of peace and national reconstruction.

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