
Covid-19 Discourse in the New Media: The Language Use Perspective

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Abstract: This study is a language based analysis of COVID-19 related discourse on social media, particularly the Face book. The analysis centers on the linguistic mode of communication. Investigation of selected data fundamentally focuses on how various users of Face book deploy language to negotiate meaning, seek affinity, index superiority and assert ideology. Using M.A.K. Holliday’s Systematic Functional Grammar Model, the study aims to analyze language use in social media COVID-19 reportage and also examine and unearth how the social media goes on, cultural dynamics and perception help in generating and constructing text. Holliday’s SFG model has purposively been chosen for this analysis because of its extensive consideration of form, functions and context in the realization of meaning at the multidimensional level. The study discovers, among other things, that the deployment of simple sentences in communicating COVID-19 preventive measures is very necessary as it enhances the free flow of communication and proper understanding of the message to the targeted readers. It also recommends, among other things, that social media discourse should always appear in straight –to – the – point language for ease of communicating the intended message to the targeted readers.

Keywords: Covid-19, Discourse, New media, Language.

1.0 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic which reportedly broke out from Wuhan, China, in late 2019, altered greatly the dynamics and progression of the world’s social system. Across all spheres of human endeavors, the pandemic struck with precision, the normalcy of everyday life. It affected the educational sector in various countries - with underdeveloped countries like Nigeria being chiefly affected; owing to her inability to digitalize the teaching and learning process as most developed countries had long ago adopted. The economic upheavals experienced in the peak of the pandemic, as reported by World Bank, is without doubt, one of the worst in the history of global economy, as countries imposed (still imposing) tight restrictions on human movement in a bid to halt the spread of the virus.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic took the world by surprise, so much that there is hardly any aspect of our daily undertakings that hasn’t been affected. It suffices to say that people are learning to live with the virus, while trying to avoid it. Countries have placed restrictions on movements which have led to the need for businesses and other activities to be conducted from a “safe distance”, or in some cases, the comfort of our houses. This leaves us with utilizing judiciously, the oldest resource known to man, Language. The ban on social gatherings in many countries across the world has led to the increase in the need for digital communication. To stay in business, companies did/do not have to shut down operations completely, rather, digital communication was/is utilized to transact with the end-users. Schools in most developed countries deploy(ed) technology as an interface between teacher

and student, making sure that learning was/is not brought to a total standstill. Families and friends are/were conditioned to connect more through social media like Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp, Twitter, Skype etc. With the help of technology, communication was made possible, even in the wake of extreme restrictions of movement, businesses thrived to a considerable degree; people felt closer even in distance; governments of various countries were able to disseminate sensitive information about the virus; though not typically exhaustive, language, communication and social media were veritable tools in the hands of people all over the world in their quest to conduct businesses, reach out to loved ones, receive vital information about the spread of the virus and possible ways to prevent it etc.

This study will investigate the multimodal dimensions of COVID-19 discourse in new media, particularly face book - to help construe how various organizations, government institutions and individuals deploy various mode of communication in actualizing effective communication. The five modes of communication are:

- Linguistic Mode
- Gestural Mode
- Visual Mode
- Aural Mode
- Spatial Mode

Because our data is drawn from various Facebook posts, our analysis will focus on the linguistic mode to investigate the dynamics of the selected data, and how language is socially constructed, perceived and understood.

2.1 Theoretical Justification.

The theory adopted for this study relies on insights from Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA Henceforth) of M.A.K Holliday Systematic Functional Grammatical Model. A MDA is an approach that looks at multiple modes of communication such as colour, texts, images, signs, symbols etc. Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996:183) maintain that discourse is multimodal if “its meaning is realized through semiotic code”. A MDA involves planning under investigation, every linguistic and non-linguistic item that is deployed in actualizing effective communication. Gul Esra Coskun (2015:42) in assertion to the above claim posits that “in media, especially in television, film and newspaper magazines and in internet, images are very important. Images are usually used to say things that we cannot say in language. Text will use linguistic and visual strategies that appear normal and neutral on the surface, but which may, in fact, be ideological and sick to shape the representation of invents and persons for particular ends”. Gul here contends that ideologies and the perception of the society is framed through deployment of certain linguistic items and representations. He is of the opinion that the visual representations like colors, images; pictures etc are far more efficient in specific context where words will fail to capture the core of the speaker’s ideology. This, he says, is summarized in the popular axiom first used by a popular advertising executive, Fred. R. Bernard, when he says “one picture is worth a thousand words”.

2.2 Empirical Study

Discourse Analysis is a valuable and fecund linguistic approach to understanding the relationship between language, ideology and society, exploring the ways in which theories of reality and power relationship are perceived. Various scholars in the field of linguistics have used Discourse Analysis theory to conduct reviews and investigations on certain diseases. Zelling Harris in Stubbs (1983:131) examined the relationship of sentences in various

discourses and named his study Discourse Analysis, making him the first linguist to use the term. He explained that discourse is a higher level of the traditional levels of linguistics (phones –phonemes –morphemes –syntax –semantics – discourse) Stubbs also points out that the formalists see discourse as “language above the sentence or above the clause.” He further maintains that any study which is not dealing with (a) a single sentence (b) contrived by the linguist, (c) out of context, may not be called discourse analysis. Analysis of text will focus on the various discourse strategies deployed by different institutions, organizations and individuals in relaying meaning to targeted readers in different social contexts. More so, its qualitative and interpretative method of text analysis provides useful insight in the ideological goings – on and preferences on the writer/speaker of any text under investigation.

Also, Oluwabunmi Oyebode and Foluke O. Unuaboriah (2013) using the MDA framework examined the generics of HIV/AIDS awareness posters. The study showed the substantial dependences on semiotic resources which ultimately relay the intended meaning in the posters to their targeted readers.

Correspondingly, Claire, E. O’Hanlon (2019) did a comparative discourse analysis on social media discourses on heart diseases and cancer. The study revealed how the language choices of American social media users unearthed their views and general perceptions of the two diseases. In this study, the use of discourse analysis in re-presenting Facebook to be precise will reveal the importance of the use of simple and declarative sentences in understanding the covid-19 messages communicated to the targeted readers.

3.0 Data Presentation

The core of this study is to analyze selected Covid-19 related languages from Facebook to reflect the ideologies of speakers, organizations, governments etc. and to see how the sensibilities and perceptions of the disease condition the lexical and semiotic choices of various speakers.

3.1 Grammatical Level

Our analysis here will focus on sentence construction. (E.g. structure and functions of sentences used)

Analysis of Sentence Structure

A sentence structure refers to the overt features of a sentence and how the components of the sentence are arranged and presented. The four types of sentences structures are simple, compound, complex and compound complex. The quantity and arrangement of clauses (dependent and/or independent) determines the makeup of each type of sentence structure. Here, we will be looking at the simple and compound sentences.

3.1.1 Use of Simple Sentences



Image 1

Simple sentences are used here to relay the preventive measures one need to take in order to protect oneself from contracting the virus. The post is made by African Region of the World Health Organization. The deployment of simple sentences in communicating these COVID-19 preventive measures are primarily borne out of the facts that: (a) complex sentences jaded with highfalutin words might disrupt the flow of communication and possibly impede understanding of the text which will become detrimental in the fight against COVID-19; (b) The message is originally directed to Africans as we can clearly see that the post was made by the African Region of the WHO. This implicitly places the targeted readers as people being incapable of construing and decoding complex sentences-bringing back the long ideology of racial hegemony.

Another instance of the use of simple sentence from the selected data is seen in the post made by Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). The construction, though lengthy, expresses a single thought.



Image 2

Sentence 1: “Face mask serve as a barrier to limit the risk of spread of respiratory droplets from a COVID-19 infected person “. The use of simple sentence here is primarily to point out the importance of the use of face masks. Other types of sentences could have been used to express the importance of wearing a face mask, but the Organization has purposively deployed the use of simple sentence to relay meaning easily. In disseminating sensitive information to the general public, it is essential to use relatable and easy-to-understand words and sentences. This will make meaning effortlessly comprehensive even to the uneducated. Esoteric in such instances could be fatal as misconceptions arising from ambiguity, complexity, or verbosity can prove to be disadvantageous to the core or essence of the message.

Social Media discourse thrives in simple constructions. All social media platforms are primarily recreational in nature where people visit with their devices to unwind and have fun. It would be quite out of place to subject readers (educated or not) to torturous sentential constructions. Sentences should be short and simple enough to catch the attention of the readers and must also be able to sustain their attention till the end. Bearing this in mind, the data presented above shows that these organizations have used this knowledge judiciously to frame their language to achieve effective communication.

3.1.2 Use of Compound Sentence

A compound sentence consists of two or more independent clauses that are joined with a comma, and any coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). These simple sentences are combined to form a unified whole through the deployment of coordinating conjunction.

Sentence 2 (in Image 2 above): “Take responsibility to wear a face mask to public spaces and adhere to all non-pharmaceutical measures”. Two independent clauses have been joined by a coordinating conjunction. Reading from the first sentence to the second, and with the animated illustration in the post, we can see that the organization’s overriding theme has been on the need to wear a face mask. The reader who approaches the text will see that the fulcrum of this post is to emphasize the need for face mask usage. The organization has very tacitly, in a bid to also ascribe same importance of wearing a face mask, added the need for its targeted readers to adhere to COVID-19 measures, as seen in the second clause in the construction. The reader, by this, has been conditioned to assume the same level of urgency given to wearing a face mask, to adhering to’ other COVTD-19 preventive measures, of which, wearing a mask is just one.

3.1.3 Analysis of Sentence Function

Whereas structural analysis answers the “how” of a sentence, functional classification answers the “what” of a sentence. A speaker’s motive or perspective is purely represented in the manner with which s/he chooses to arrange order and present the words in his construction. Sentence function simply explains the per formative roles sentences play in a discourse. Sentences could either be interrogative, declarative, imperative or exclamatory, depending on the position of the speaker in the discourse. This study will look at declarative and imperative sentences in its investigation.

3.1.3.1 Imperativization

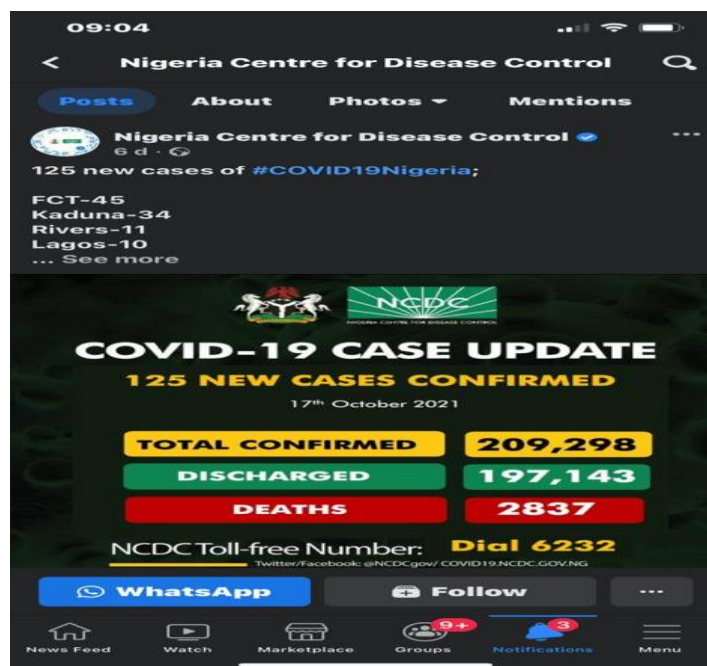
Imperative sentences give commands, orders, directives, instructions etc. The subjects in imperative constructions are “given”, therefore, they are superficially omitted from the sentences.

In image 1 above, we can see a list of six outlined items giving directives on what to do to

prevent the contraction and spread of the disease. imperatives covertly hint at an asymmetrical power relation between the discussants in a discourse. This is evident in the choice of words used to relay the message in the above post. The World Health Organization is the premier health institution in the world at the moment — operating under the auspices of the biggest and most influential political institution in the world, the United Nations. This status confers on them the rights and privileges to assume a position of authority on health discourse. This authority is materialized in discourse through the deployment of linguistic items that point out the supremacy and dominance of one over the other.

3.1.3.2 Use of Declaratives

A sentence which asserts or declares a proposition is a declarative sentence. Declaratives are plain and straightforward sentences that express an idea, emotion, or a thought, usually ending with a stop or period (.).



The caption of the above post shows the number of COVID-19 cases recorded (as at 17th, October 2021) in Nigeria. The NCDC uses declaratives to pass information to the general public on the rise of the spread of the disease. Whether it is a bold statement or a simple fact, the sole purpose of declarative sentences is to give information to the target readers. We can affirm that the NCDC has deployed the resource of declarative to inform the public about the increase in the spread. “new cases” in the construction points out to the reader that there is an exponential growth in the spread of the virus, this spontaneously instills in the speaker, the need to adopt all recommended preventive measures so as not to be recorded as a “new case” in the subsequent publication.

Another instance of the use of declaratives is in the post by WHOM (African Region).

“THANK YOU to all the healthcare workers still at the forefront of the fight against COVID-19 and other diseases”.

This is a message of gratitude to healthcare workers who put themselves at risk to provide Medicare to the general public, especially to those who have contracted the virus. This message is coming at a time when health workers around the region of Africa are complaining of poor welfare and lack of appropriate remuneration from their governments. The WHO sends this timely message to stand in solidarity with all the healthcare workers in Africa as a way of encouraging them to keep fighting on to save lives. The message is tagged

“Monday Motivation” — clearly seeking out to motivate the health workers to do more work.

3.2 Lexico-Semantic Level

The lexico-semantic level of discourse analysis is the level at which the discourse analyst looks at the author’s deployment of words and their meanings within the text. Our analysis here will focus on the use of cohesion, and neologism.

3.2.1 Cohesion

Cohesion is the grammatical and lexical connection within a text or sentence that holds a text together and gives it meaning. Kamalu (2015:165) sees cohesion as “a chain that connects sentences with each other in a coherent manner”. He further adds that “The resources of cohesion make it possible for the language user to string sequences of related sentences into a coherent and meaningful text”.

Cohesive devices are either grammatical or lexical. Grammatical cohesive devices include; reference, substitution, and conjunction. Lexical cohesive devices include; repetition, synonyms, super ordinate, collocation.

3.2.1.1 Grammatical Cohesive Devices

Here, we will investigate the deployment of reference and conjunction.

3.2.1.1.1 References

The kind of referencing used here is the anaphoric reference. Kamalu and Osisanwo (2015:186), describe anaphora as “a kind of reference which is backward looking”. This means that the reader has to look backward to find the connection between the reference and the referent.

IMAGE

KAYD 101.7 makes use of this style when it posts that;

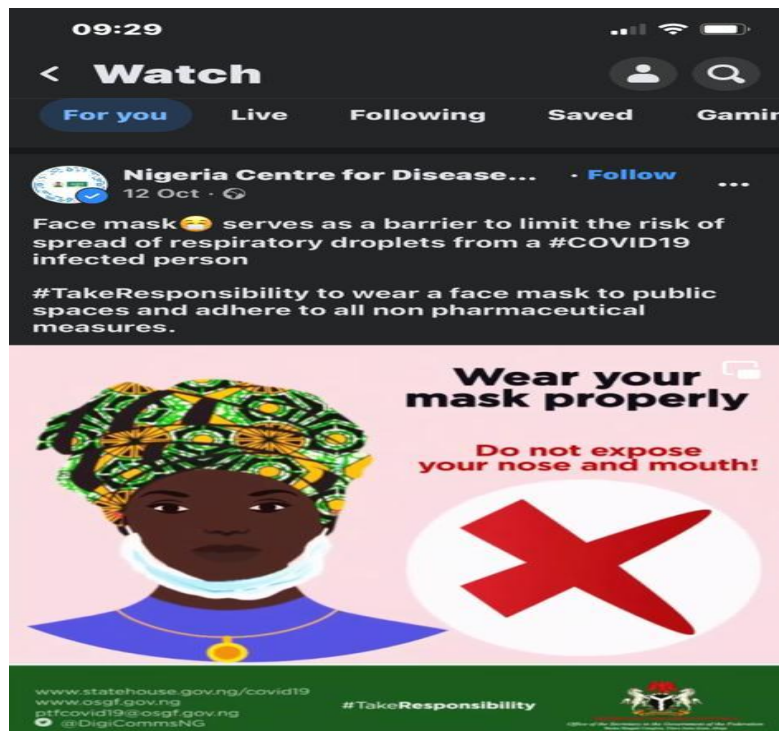
“**COVID** is no laughing matter. But laughter is helping us get through **it**”. The nominal item “**COVID**” is the referent that the reference “**it**” refers back to. This is done to reduce verbosity. Social media discourse thrives in short and simple expressions. Expressions that create a feeling of speedy reading and comprehension so the reader does not get disinterested halfway. The use of reference is a good way of keeping the expression short and simple, much to the appreciation of all who come in contact with the text. Another example of anaphoric reference is seen in the post by Union européenne au Cameroun when it says;

“**Get vaccinated, it’s** the simplest and safest solution to save lives”. The nominal group “**Get vaccinated**” is the referent that the reference “**It{’s}**” refers back to. To avoid being jaded with words, referencing becomes an escapist itinerary to writers in their quest to negotiate meaning using fewer words as possible. Language would have been horrendously difficult if not for the resource of reference. The expression in datum 2 for example would have been “**Get vaccinated, {because} getting vaccinated is the simplest and safest solution to save lives**”. Social media discourse is characterized by a straight-to-the-point language style, as much as possible; users tend to simplify their messages so they don’t appear too wordy. Wordiness is the fastest way to make social media users loses interest in a post, and over time, the writer.

3.2.1.1.2 Conjunction

Kamalu (2015:175) sees conjunction as “a term used to describe the cohesive ties between clauses or sections of a text in such a way as to demonstrate a meaningful relationship between them”. This simply explains that conjunctions are words that serve the purpose of

linking clauses or sentences in a text with a view of arriving at a unified meaning.



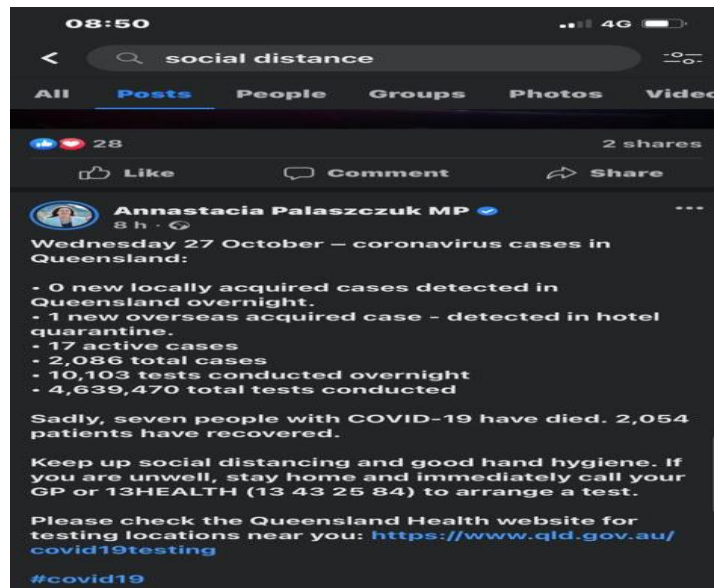
“Take responsibility to wear a face mask to public spaces and adhere to all non-pharmaceutical measures”. This is an example of additive conjunction. Additive conjunctives indicate that the two elements being joined complement each other. This is evident in the datum above as the user is seen to place two supporting elements side by side, using “and” as a linking conjunctive. This strategy is deployed to reduce what would ordinarily be presented in two or more sentences into one. Computer Mediated Discourse is framed in a way that the message intended to be relayed is gleaned by the reader at a single glance. Unnecessary elongation of constructions proves to be futile as most users of social media, particularly Facebook, prefer to read abridged constructions, to save them time and stress.

3.2.1.2 Lexical Cohesive Devices

Our analysis of lexical cohesive devices will focus on the use of collocations, repetition and super ordinate in the selected data.

3.2.1.2.3 Collocation

This is the habitual and conventional juxtaposition of a word with another. The outbreak of the pandemic heralded the coinages of new words, phrases and even collocates (some of which will be studied under neologism). The frequency of the appearance of the term “social distance” on COVID 19 corpus justifies its usage as a mainstay, rather than attribute it to chance or coincidence. There are over one million uses of the phrase on Facebook in the last two years. This validates its usage as an indispensable feature in COVID-19 discourse, especially in new media. Social distance (-ing) is a preventive measure given by the World Health Organization — where individuals who, for one reason or the other, must visit public places are tasked to stay 1.5 meters away from the next person so as not be too close to a seemingly infected person, thereby increasing the chances of contracting the virus.



In the post by **Annastacia Palaszczuk**, after reeling out the total number of cases, she goes on to encourage her readers to maintain social distancing.

“Keep up social distancing and good hygiene. If you are unwell, stay home and immediately call your GP or 13HEALTH (13 43 25 84) to arrange a test”.

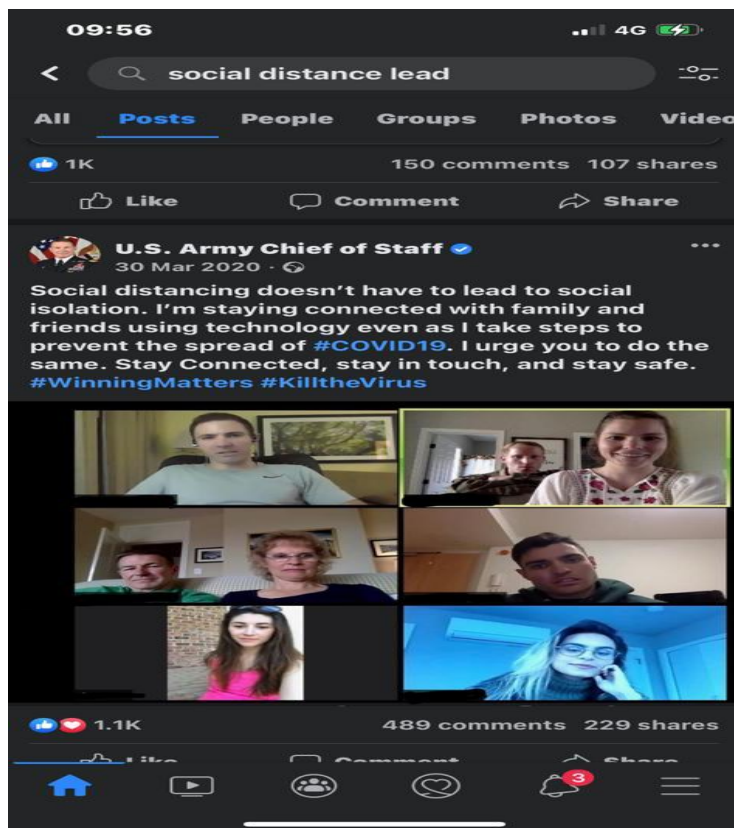
The position of the above excerpt in her post is quite significant. The call to her readers to keep up social distancing was carefully done after reeling out the number of cases. The idea is to first of all instill the sense of urgency and fear, and then purge her readers of this fear and uncertainty by assuring them that maintaining a social distance can help them forestall the contraction of the virus. Users of social media, typically Facebook, usually skim through posts with lengthy write-ups. A writer who wishes to catch the attention of his/her readers must be able to manipulate their consciousness with the first two or three sentences so as to sustain their interest. Anastasia has very skillfully achieved this by using fear to sustain their interest. By giving the number of cases first, the attention of the reader is summoned and s/he spontaneously becomes attached to the post, until it gets to the point where the core of the post (maintaining social distancing) is made.

3.2.1.2.4 Repetition

This is basically concerned with saying a word, phrase, or sentence repeatedly. Two types of repetition are total and partial repetitions. Total repetition occurs when the same word, phrase or sentence is repeated; while partial repetition occurs when variants of the root word are repeated.

The post by the U.S Army Chief of Staff shows a rich deployment of repetition as he says;

*“Social distancing doesn’t have to lead to social isolation. I’m staying connected with family and friends using technology even as I take steps to prevent the spread of COVID-19. I urge you to do the same. **Stay** connected, **stay** in touch, and **stay** safe “.*



Repetition here has been used for emphasis. And also, it has gone further to reveal the identity of the writer. It is said that language is a betrayer of identity. The writer has deployed a tone of coercion and compulsion. Urging people to **stay** “connected”, “in touch”, and “safe”, in repeated fashion makes the reader assume a position of helplessness in the discourse. Repetition is a military-esque style of communication and it is not surprising to see that the individual who is credited with this post is the U.S Army Chief of Staff (as the username states). The prevention of the contraction and spread of the COVID 19 pandemic has constantly been reported and looked at as a “fight” or ‘battle”. CGTN for example, reports that “Kenya’s **fight** against COVID-19 received a major boost “, following the supply of some vaccines as the post states. This metaphor of warfare in the social media reportage of Covid-19 related news erupts an aura and sense of urgency in our pursuance to normalcy and the restoration of social order. The health workers and government institutions have played the role of commanders, as they are always being addressed as being at the “forefront” (a term used in military operations), and the masses have been the foot soldiers. This feeling of warfare has aptly been represented in the choice of words and tone the speaker has opted to deploy.

3.2.1.2.5 *Super ordinates*

Kamalu (2015:178) opines that super ordinate (or general term) “involves the use of an umbrella or general term to avoid repetition while still referring to the referent with a noun”. This simply explains the hierarchical relationship words share with each other.

The below post by Channels Television succinctly shows this relationship;



YouTube said Wednesday it would remove videos that falsely claim approved vaccines are dangerous, as social networks seek to crack down on health misinformation around COVID-19 and other diseases.

The comment above shows the super ordinate-hyponym relationship between disease (generic term) and **COVID-19** (hyponym). The super ordinate-hyponymy relationship is used to show emphasis, clarity and to reduce ambiguity. From the report, we can see that YouTube is out to crack down on all posts misinforming the public about various diseases. But **COVID-19** has purposively been amplified since it is the trendy disease and most talked about, while the supposed co-hyponyms have been reduced to “other diseases”. The prominence given to COVID- 19 above “other diseases” shows its present status-quo and importance in social discourse. The corona virus is not the deadliest diseases in the world at the moment, as it has been proven time and again that many infected people recover from it. Ordinarily, it is expected that such diseases that leave humans with little or no chances of survival will be given prominence in the post. COVID 19 is selected because of its present social status, and the perceived influence its prominence will have on the text.

3.2.2 Neologisms as Discourse Strategy

Neologism simply means the coining of a new word into a particular language. It also explains the process by which new meanings are associated to existing words. Some words and phrases have gained entry into the English lexicon as a result of the outbreak of coronavirus. Other existing words have also become prominent due to the semantic relationship they share with COVID 19 discourse. Our interest here, however, will focus on the new words.

Below are list new coinages brought about by the outbreak of the Corona virus?

- Social Distancing {noun}: The act of staying far away (1.5 metres) from any individual when in public gatherings.
- Co idiot {noun}: One who disregards the preventive measures and directives given by health professionals and institutions?
- Covariant {noun}: One who applies all the preventive measures and directives given by - .health professionals and institutions in the fight against COVID-19.

Datum 1, as earlier stated, is a coinage that succinctly describes the recommended proximity individuals should assume in public places. This technique is deployed in social media discourse to avoid redundancy. Seemingly, there would hardly be any shorter expression that best captures the essence or semantics embedded in the coinage. The expression relays so much meaning using just two words. Computer mediated discourse is characteristic of brevity and precision in language use, which are what various users have adopted.

Data 2 and 3 show ideological dichotomy, “othering” and labeling. Othering in discourse is the deployment of linguistic resources to create boundaries, seek affinity, claim to be the “like” and not the “other”. Datum 2 shows a blending of the words “covid” + “idiot” (co idiot). This term has been coined to label people who are recalcitrant and defiant of covid prevention stipulations. The term is derogatory and it clearly seeks to reduce to naught, the ideology and beliefs of people who are not covid compliant. It also shows that the individual or group who is credited with the coinage of the word, and the individual who uses the word is all on the other side of the ideological divide. Datum 3 too shows a blend of the words “covid” + “{obed}ient” (covidient). The term has been coined to label people who are covid compliant and obedient. The word carries a semantic import of appreciation and commendation to people who religiously follow all covid instructions. The coinages of these two words mean that in the fight against COVID9, there is no position of neutrality. It is either the individual is on one side or the other.

4.2 Summary of Findings

The analysis of the data reveals that the deployment of simple sentences in communicating COVID-19 preventive measures is very necessary as it enhances the free flow of communication and proper understanding of the intended message to the targeted readers.

The World Health Organization being the premier health institution in the world at the moment and conferred with the rights and privileges to assume a position of authority on health discourse. This authority is materialized through the deployment of linguistic items that points out the supremacy and dominance of one over another.

Social media discourse is characterized by a straight-to-the-point language style as users tend to simplify their message so they don't appear too wordy.

Repetition as a tool in fighting Covid-19 is a military-esque style of communication which has constantly been used in reporting the prevention of contraction and spread of the Covid-19 Pandemic and looked at as a “fight” and “battle”. This language device is a warfare used in the social media reportage of Covid-19 related news that erupts an aura and sense of urgency in our pursuance to normalcy and the restoration of social order.

4.1 Conclusion

The different linguistic strategies employed in representing and re-presenting Covid-19 discourse in one of the new social media, the facebook, coupled with the coinages of these terms stem from the many conspiracy theories that sprung up on social media about the virus. Many believed it was a hoax, and should be taken with a pinch of salt. Negativities fly higher and faster on social media. These erroneous theories about corona virus spread to gullible people who became carefree about the contraction and spread of the eruptilefallacies. The appropriate language styles were deployed and terms were coined on social media to create the boundary. Netizens like to assume a state of perfection on social media platforms, and since nobody wants to be publicly associated with the downward axis of the curve, it is believed that from assuming the position of a covidient one develops the urge to do the things expected of him/her.

4.3 Recommendations

1. Social media discourse should always appear in a straight-to-the-point language for easy flow of communication and understanding of the message by the targeted readers. In other words, there should be avoidance of the use of complex sentences for ease of understanding.
2. Also, unnecessary elongation of constructions in facebook should be avoided as most readers prefer abridged constructions to save them time and stress.
3. Above all, the idea of placing the Africans as being incapable of constructing and decoding complex sentences by the premier health institution of the world (W.H.O) thereby bringing back the long ideology of racial hegemony should be dismissed especially for the fact that Africans have been able to device and coin their own languages through which they understand better the intricacies involved in Covid-19 Pandemic.

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