

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Selected Hate Comments on X Social Media Platform in the 2023 Elections, Nigeria

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Abstract

Hate comments on social media significantly impacted Nigeria's political discourse, particularly during the 2023 presidential election, fueling socio-political divisions and electoral tensions. While Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been widely studied in other contexts, the ideological and linguistic mechanisms underlying hate comments in the election remain underexplored. This paper applied CDA to analyse selected hate comments from this election period. Using a descriptive qualitative design, 30 hate comments from X (formerly Twitter) were purposively selected based on their linguistic patterns, thematic structures, and engagement levels. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model, complemented by Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, and Halliday's Transitivity theory were applied to identify ideological patterns and discourse structures in these comments. Findings revealed that hate comments strategically employed derogatory labelling, neologisms, and metaphors to delegitimise political opponents, reinforce biases, and deepen socio-political divisions. Transitivity analysis highlighted how language shaped ideological narratives of radicalism, exclusion, and power struggles. Socio-cultural factors such as religion, ethnicity, and historical grievances further fueled these trends, impacting voter behaviour, institutional trust, and electoral participation. The paper concluded that hate comments are strategically constructed to reinforce ideological 'Us versus Them' binary, exacerbating political and ethnic tensions. It recommended government-led policy interventions to regulate online hate speech and digital literacy initiatives to educate social media users on the consequences of hate-driven discourse.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Hate comments on social media, Ideological and linguistic mechanism, Political discourse, Social media language

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Introduction

The rise of digital communication has fueled the spread of hate comments targeting ethnic, religious, and political groups, especially during elections. Social media platform like X has reshaped Nigeria's political landscape, enabling engagement and activism while also amplifying divisive rhetoric that threatens national cohesion and democracy. Social media significantly influenced Nigeria's 2023 elections, fostering political discourse but also spreading inflammatory content rooted in ethnic and religious affiliations. This has heightened tensions, contributed to electoral violence, and posed regulatory challenges due to the anonymity and vast reach of X platform and several others. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this paper examined linguistic structures and patterns of hate comments on social media during Nigeria's 2023 presidential elections. The 2023 elections, in particular, saw a surge in misinformation and AI-generated content, complicating the political landscape. These trends highlight the urgent need for regulatory policies and digital literacy initiatives to curb the spread of hate speech in Nigeria's electoral processes.

Hate comments

Hate comments are a specific form of hate speech that predominantly occurs in digital spaces such as social media platforms, online forums, and other online discussion platforms. These comments are typically reactive and directed at individuals or groups based on characteristics like ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or political beliefs, often leading to hostility and toxic interactions. Hate speech, in a broader sense, refers to any form of communication, whether written, spoken, or symbolic, that incites hatred, violence, or discrimination against specific groups or individuals (Brown, 2017). Hate speech can be found in public speeches, media, propaganda, and legal contexts, often spreading harmful ideologies that contribute to social discord and violence (Van Dijk, 2008).

Hate comments on social media

Hate comments on social media refers to any written expression disseminated through online platforms that is intended to demean, threaten, or incite hostility toward individuals or groups based on attributes such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or nationality. These comments are characterised by their derogatory language, inflammatory tone, and a deliberate aim to provoke emotional distress or social division. In digital communication studies, hate comments are examined as forms of cyber aggression that perpetuate digital toxicity and undermine inclusive discourse.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis is an interdisciplinary approach to studying language as a form of social practice. CDA examines how discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1993). It integrates linguistic analysis with social theory to uncover the ideological underpinnings of

texts and spoken language, particularly in institutional and media contexts. CDA emphasises the role of discourse in the production or reproduction of social inequality and the manipulation of public opinion.

Hate Comments versus Hate Speech

Hate comments, a subset of hate speech, target individuals or groups based on ethnicity, religion, gender, or politics, often fueling division and discrimination. While hate speech incites hatred or violence, online anonymity exacerbates its spread. Regulation remains challenging due to differing legal interpretations of free speech. Combating hate speech requires a balanced approach integrating digital governance, legal frameworks, and education to mitigate its societal impact.

Language, Ideology and Social Media

To explore the concepts of language, ideology, and social media in relation to hate comments, it is essential to delve into how these elements interact and shape communication in digital spaces, particularly from a linguistic perspective. The relationship between language, ideology, and social media has become an increasingly important area of study, particularly in the context of the digital era where online platforms serve as powerful spaces for communication, self-expression, and the exchange of ideas. Social media platform such as X, allows individuals to voice opinions, engage in public discourse, and shape social and political narratives. From a linguistic perspective, language on social media is not neutral; it plays a significant role in constructing, reinforcing, and disseminating ideologies. The use of language on this platform both reflects and shapes the ideologies of users and groups, influencing societal attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours.

2023 Nigeria Presidential Election

The 2023 Nigerian presidential election unfolded in a politically charged climate marked by economic instability, insecurity, and public dissatisfaction. Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the APC, a former Lagos State governor, campaigned on national unity, economic reform, and infrastructure, ultimately emerging victorious. His key opponents—Atiku Abubakar of the PDP and Peter Obi of the Labour Party—brought different political legacies and platforms, with Obi particularly galvanizing a youth-led movement that called for transparency, anti-corruption, and systemic reform. The election was significantly shaped by economic challenges, post-pandemic recovery concerns, and heightened insecurity. Campaigns also focused on infrastructure, healthcare, and youth empowerment. Technological innovations like the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) were introduced to enhance electoral credibility, although concerns about voter suppression, low turnout, and digital misinformation remained widespread. Tinubu secured the presidency with 36.6% of the votes amidst allegations of electoral malpractice and disenfranchisement. The election results deepened generational and ideological divides, as younger voters—especially Obi's supporters—challenged the traditional two-

party dominance. Furthermore, social media emerged as a crucial space for political engagement, reflecting an evolving democratic culture. The ethnic representation of the three major regions—North, Southwest, and Southeast—through the leading candidates reignited discussions on power rotation and inclusive governance. Despite the controversies, the 2023 election signaled a transformative moment in Nigeria’s political evolution, underscoring the urgent need for electoral reforms, national reconciliation, and sustained youth engagement in governance.

Objectives of the Study

This paper examines the linguistic structures and patterns of hate comments on social media during Nigeria’s 2023 presidential elections. Specifically, it aims to:

1. analyse the rhetorical and discursive strategies in hate comments;
2. examine the diverse ideological underpinnings hate comments and its implications on democratic participation and social cohesion in Nigeria.

Research Questions

1. What are the rhetorical and discursive strategies in hate comments?
2. To what extent do diverse ideological underpinnings in hate comments affect the democratic participation and social cohesion in Nigeria?

Review of Literature

Conceptual Review

i. Social Media Platforms and Hate Comments

X (formerly Twitter), originally launched in 2006 by Jack Dorsey, became a major platform for real-time discussions across politics, sports, and global affairs. Despite restrictions in some countries, it has been instrumental in amplifying marginalized voices and organising protests. However, concerns over misinformation and harassment have increased, especially following its transition to private ownership under Elon Musk.

ii. Ideology and Hate Comments

Ideology encompasses the beliefs and values that shape perceptions of the world, influencing the production and dissemination of hate speech. According to van Dijk (1998), ideology dictates how individuals justify and enact discriminatory discourse. Hate comments, whether explicit or implicit, reflect and reinforce societal ideologies that marginalize specific groups. Social media platforms exacerbate this phenomenon, with algorithms unintentionally amplifying ideologically driven content (Tufekci, 2015). Hate comments serve as tools for sustaining power dynamics and social divisions, demonstrating how language functions as a vehicle for ideological expression, reinforcing discriminatory narratives, and shaping broader societal attitudes and behaviours.

iii. Hate Speech

In academic discourse, the concept of hate speech is broadly recognised as a form of expression that targets individuals or groups based on inherent identity traits, often inciting discrimination, hostility, or violence. The United Nations (UNO, 2019) defines hate speech as any communication—spoken, written, or behavioural—that employs discriminatory or derogatory language against individuals or groups based on identity factors such as race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, gender, or descent. This position is further reinforced by Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), which mandates the prohibition of any advocacy that incites national, racial, or religious hatred. The Council of Europe (1997) expands this definition to include expressions that promote or justify xenophobia, anti-semitism, and other intolerance-based ideologies, particularly those rooted in nationalism and ethnocentrism. Such definitions underscore the inherently ideological and socio-political nature of hate speech and its capacity to fracture social cohesion.

Contemporary interpretations by private tech platforms echo these institutional definitions, while tailoring them to digital environments. Facebook, for example, defines hate speech as a direct attack on individuals based on ‘protected characteristics,’ which includes dehumanising language and exclusionary rhetoric. Similarly, Twitter’s policy prohibits direct attacks rooted in identity factors such as race, gender, or serious illness. Google’s User Conduct Policy highlights the incitement of hatred and violence as central markers of hate speech, especially when linked to systemic marginalization. Fortuna and Nunes (2018) emphasise that hate speech can manifest in varied linguistic forms, including humour and subtle rhetoric, which complicate detection and regulation. Collectively, these definitions highlight the multifaceted nature of hate speech, its linguistic diversity, and its significant implications for both individual dignity and broader social stability in a digitally connected world.

Empirical Studies

Linguistic research has extensively examined social media discourse, particularly focusing on hate speech in Nigeria and Africa. Studies have explored its role in political communication, electoral influence, and broader implications for democracy. Ikeanyibe et al. (2017) highlighted how hate speech in political campaigns appeals to ethnic voting and exclusionary politics, undermining democratic principles. Ezeibe (2021) linked hate speech to electoral violence in Nigeria’s 2011, 2015, and 2019 elections, emphasising the need for stricter enforcement of anti-hate speech laws to protect minority rights and enhance political inclusivity. Ajani et al. (2019) found that 66% of surveyed voters in Kwara State identified social media as the main source of hate speech in the 2019 gubernatorial election, with 82% stating it influenced their voting preferences. Abayomi (2021) applied socio-cognitive theory to show how linguistic behaviors, shaped by cultural and religious beliefs, contribute to inter-religious conflicts and reinforce group superiority complexes. Adeyeri et al. (2017) examined historical tensions between ethnic groups, particularly the Igbo and Hausa/Fulani, revealing how past conflicts

continue to fuel contemporary hate speech and propaganda. Chiluwa (2020) analysed Nnamdi Kanu's separatist discourse, demonstrating the use of threats, insults, and rhetorical strategies. The study compared this rhetoric to the Rwandan genocide but argued that internal Igbo divisions prevented escalation. Ekwueme (2021) assessed hate speech as a threat to national integration, advocating for Media Information Literacy (MIL) to curb its spread and promote cohesion.

While research has addressed voter attitudes and socio-political divisions (Akinwotu, 2023; Okafor et al., 2022), gaps remain in understanding the ideological and linguistic mechanisms that sustain hate speech in digital discourse. The application of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been effective in examining identity and power dynamics (Ahmed, 2024; Obiora et al., 2021), yet its application to Nigerian elections, particularly in 2023, is limited. Additionally, the political, ethnic, and religious dimensions of hate speech, which surged in the 2023 elections, require deeper analysis to assess their impact on national cohesion and democratic stability. Further research is needed to explore how different demographic groups in Nigeria perceive and engage with online hate speech. Digital media consumption varies across socio-economic and political segments, shaping how communities experience and respond to hate rhetoric (Ibrahim & Adamu, 2023). Understanding these perspectives is crucial for developing counter-narratives that foster inclusivity, tolerance, and constructive political discourse.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This paper employed a qualitative descriptive design within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine political hate speech in Nigeria's 2023 presidential election. By analysing lexical features and ideological representations, the study identified patterns that reinforce power dynamics and social relations within hate comments. A total of 30 hate comments were selected from X social media platform. Purposive sampling ensured relevant data selection, focusing on ethnic, religious, and political targeting, linguistic markers of incitement, and posts from verified and non-verified accounts. Engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and retweets were used to finalise the selection, ensuring its relevance to hate speech discourse.

Method of Data Collection and Presentation

The researcher collected 30 political hate comments from X social media platform during Nigeria's 2023 election using purposive sampling based on engagement metrics. Comments were analysed for linguistic and ideological patterns and categorised into relevant discursive themes with its implication on nation's socio-political psyche.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts an interdisciplinary CDA approach, drawing on van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model (SCM), Fairclough's CDA framework, and Halliday's SFL to examine hate comments from Nigeria's 2023 presidential election. Analysing 30 comments from X social media platform, the paper explores how language was strategically deployed to construct ideological positions, reinforce biases, and shape socio-political discourse. By analysing the rhetorical and discursive strategies in hate comments, this paper examines the diverse ideological underpinnings hate comments and its implications on democratic participation. van Dijk's SCM examines linguistic structures, cognitive processes, and socio-political contexts, while Fairclough's three-dimensional model investigates discourse, ideology, and power. Halliday's SFL framework, particularly its three metafunctions, analyses language's role in meaning-making. This integrated approach provides a comprehensive understanding of hate comments on social media in Nigeria's electoral discourse.

Data Analysis, Results and Discussion of Findings

Presentation of Ideological Representation of Power

Text 1: 'Obidients are nothing but online noise-makers without a plan.'

Text 2: 'Hausa people only understand cows and religion, not governance.'

Text 3: 'Yoruba betrayers will sell their own mother for a political post.'

Analysis of Texts 1-3: Ideological Representation of Power

Text 1: 'Obidients are nothing but online noise-makers without a plan.'

This statement portrays Obidients—supporters of Peter Obi—as politically impotent, disorganised, and irrelevant. It constructs a binary of 'serious politicians' (implicitly the speaker's side) vs 'online noisemakers' (Obidients), delegitimising the political presence and efforts of that group.

van Dijk's Ideological Square: Emphasises the negative traits of the out-group (Obidients): 'noisemakers', 'without a plan'. It de-emphasises or ignores any positive engagement or civic participation they might represent.

Fairclough's Dimensions:

Textual level: Use of pejorative labelling ('noise-makers') and absolute dismissal ('nothing but') reinforces marginalisation.

Discursive practice: The speaker participates in a broader media discourse aimed at trivialising a new political movement.

Social practice: Reflects the ideological battle between established political powers and emerging youth-driven alternatives, positioning the speaker's side as dominant and competent.

Text 2: ‘Hausa people only understand cows and religion, not governance.’

This hate comment is ethnically derogatory, portraying Hausa people as primitive, unintelligent, and unfit to govern. It reinforces a power ideology that disqualifies an entire ethnic group from leadership, suggesting that power should not be entrusted to them.

van Dijk’s Ideological Square: It emphasises the supposed intellectual and civic inferiority of the Hausa ethnic group, which invariably implies the speaker’s own group (likely from another ethnic or political bloc) as more enlightened and deserving of leadership.

Fairclough’s Dimensions:

Textual level: This level is loaded with stereotypes—‘cows’ (economic reductionism) and ‘religion’ (spiritual confinement)—to exclude them from rational political discourse.

Discursive practice: Draws on centuries-old prejudices in Nigeria’s inter-ethnic tensions, especially between the North and South.

Social practice: Reinforces ethnic hierarchies in Nigerian political power and delegitimises Northern leadership based on identity rather than performance.

Text 3: ‘Yoruba betrayers will sell their own mother for a political post.’

This excerpt frames the Yoruba ethnic group as untrustworthy, self-serving, and morally bankrupt, especially in political contexts. It implies that they do not deserve power because they allegedly betray communal or national trust for selfish gains.

van Dijk’s Ideological Square: It emphasises betrayal and greed as essential Yoruba traits in politics. This implies other groups (perhaps the speaker’s ethnic group) are more loyal and virtuous, deserving of political power.

Fairclough’s Dimension:

Textual level: Use of the hyperbolic metaphor ‘sell their own mother’ reflects deep emotional vilification, not mere criticism.

Discursive practice: Reproduces common tropes in Nigeria that accuse the Yoruba of political opportunism, especially during election seasons.

Social practice: This comment legitimises exclusion or hostility toward Yoruba political actors and rationalises ethnically motivated political alignment.

Across all three texts, power is discursively constructed by:

- Disqualifying certain groups (Obidients, Hausa, Yoruba) through negative stereotyping.
- Legitimising other groups (implicitly the speaker’s in-group) as more rational, trustworthy, or capable of leadership.
- Drawing on ethnic, regional, and political identities to reinforce dominance, superiority, and entitlement to power.

Presentation of Ideology of Power Manifest

Text 4: APC supporters were accused of being pro-Northern and Islamist extremists.

Text 5: PDP was labelled as corrupt and dominated by a specific elite.

Text 6: APGA and LP supporters (Obedients) were called tribalistic or religious bigots.

Text 7: NNPP was sometimes dismissed as a regional party with no national appeal.

Analysis of Texts 4-7: Power Manifest

The analysed comments demonstrate how language is used strategically to reinforce political divisions, delegitimise opponents, and uphold existing power structures in Nigeria's electoral discourse. By labeling APC supporters as 'Islamist extremists,' the comment evokes fear politics, portraying the party as a sectarian force and amplifying perceptions of exclusion. Similarly, accusations of corruption against the PDP frame the party as elitist, eroding public trust and positioning alternative parties as agents of reform. The dismissal of APGA, LP, and NNPP as tribalistic, religiously biased, or regional further marginalises emerging political movements, reinforcing the dominance of established parties. These narratives manipulate power by exploiting ethno-religious divisions, corruption claims, and national versus regional legitimacy, shaping electoral dynamics and limiting the potential for change. Ultimately, hate comments function as tools that influence voter perceptions and political engagement in Nigeria.

Presentation of Group Stereotype and Delegitimation

Text 8: 'Obedients are IPOB terrorists in disguise'

Text 9: 'APC supporters are illiterates and cows'

Text 10: 'PDP supporters are thieves and looters'

Text 11: 'NNPP is only for Kano people'

Fairclough views discourse as a battleground for power, where language legitimises dominant ideologies while marginalizing others. Van Dijk highlights how discourse shapes cognitive and social structures, particularly in constructing in-groups and out-groups. In this context, hate comments function as instruments of ideological polarization, discursive control, and power legitimization.

Analysis of Texts 8-11: Stereotype and Delegitimation

Text 8: 'Obedients are IPOB terrorists in disguise' depicts the Obedient movement (supporters of Peter Obi) as dangerous and separatist by associating them with IPOB (Indigenous People of Biafra), a proscribed secessionist group. In Fairclough's terms, this is an example of intertextuality, where past discourses on IPOB's activities are recontextualised to frame Obedients as extremists. From van Dijk's perspective, this is an instance of negative other-representation, where political opposition is framed as a threat to national unity.

Text 9: ‘APC supporters are illiterates and cows.’ This comment reduces APC supporters to a dehumanising stereotype, aligning with van Dijk’s concept of polarisation between the in-group (educated, rational people) and the out-group (ignorant and gullible followers). Fairclough’s notion of discourse as social practice applies here, as the comment reflects a long-standing narrative of linking Northern political dominance to low literacy levels and herd mentality (symbolised by ‘cows’).

Text 10: ‘PDP supporters are thieves and looters’. The framing of PDP supporters as corrupt aligns with both scholars’ views on ideological discourse. Fairclough classified this as a hegemonic narrative that reinforces public perception of PDP as financially irresponsible. van Dijk viewed this as an ideologically driven stereotype, designed to undermine PDP’s credibility and legitimise rival political structures.

Text 11: ‘NNPP is only for Kano people.’ This comment exemplifies regional delegitimisation, where NNPP is confined to a provincial status. Under Fairclough’s CDA, this fits within power structures in discourse, where dominant parties define political relevance based on national reach. From van Dijk’s perspective, this is a case of ideological exclusion, denying NNPP broader legitimacy.

Presentation of Mockery, Ridicule, and Social Control

Text 12: Go and verify, but you won’t understand because you are an agbado eater.

Text 13: Tinubu is a drug lord and a sick old fool.

Text 14: Atiku is a career politician who will sell Nigeria.

Text 15: PO supporters are jobless youths and online noisemakers.

Analysis of Texts 12-15: Mockery, Ridicule, and Social Control

Text 12: ‘Go and verify, but you won’t understand because you are an agbado eater.’ The phrase ‘agbado eater’ is a mocking reference to APC supporters, implying that they are uncritical and driven by economic handouts (symbolised by corn/agbado). Fairclough’s concept of discourse as ideological struggle is evident, as this phrase is used to frame political opponents as intellectually inferior. van Dijk would categorise this as a cognitive strategy of exclusion, where members of the out-group (APC supporters) are presented as incapable of independent thought.

Text 13 ‘PO supporters are jobless youths and online noisemakers.’ This comment delegitimises Peter Obi’s support base by associating them with economic failure and digital activists rather than tangible electoral influence. Fairclough would see this as an example of power dynamics in discourse, where the established political elite discredits emerging movements. van Dijk would interpret this as ingroup vs. outgroup differentiation, where traditional power holders position themselves as ‘real’ political actors, while Obi’s supporters are reduced to mere online agitators.

Text 14: ‘Tinubu is a drug lord and a sick old fool.’ This hate comment weaponises Tinubu’s alleged criminal past and health status to discredit his leadership. Fairclough’s concept of recontextualisation applies here, as past accusations about Tinubu’s history are reintroduced to fit contemporary political discourse. van Dijk would categorise this as negative other-presentation, where the out-group is framed in morally corrupt and physically weak terms to erode public trust.

Text 15: ‘Atiku is a career politician who will sell Nigeria.’ This framing aligns with neoliberal critiques of entrenched political figures, reinforcing an anti-establishment narrative. Under Fairclough’s model, this represents discourse as a form of political strategy, where new challengers portray long-time politicians as corrupt sellouts. van Dijk would analyse this as an ideological generalization, reducing Atiku’s political experience to economic betrayal.

INEC is APC’s rigging machine.

Presentation of ‘Us versus. Them’ Dynamic

This has also been found to often fuel hate comments during and after elections in Nigeria. The ‘Us vs. Them’ rhetoric intensified divisions and had often led to violence, online abuse, and social unrest. It created an environment where supporters of different political parties perceive themselves as enemies rather than political opponents. This played out in the following:

APC vs. PDP – ‘The Saints vs. The Thieves’

Text 16: APC Supporters (‘Us’): ‘We are the only hope for Nigeria; PDP has looted the country for 16 years.’

Text 17: PDP Supporters (‘Them’): ‘APC is a party of propagandists and incompetent people destroying the economy.’

Text 18: LP Supporters (‘Us’): ‘We are the obedient revolution; APC and PDP are the old corrupt system.’

Text 19: APC/PDP Supporters (‘Them’): ‘Obidients are just online noisemakers with no structure, dreaming about a miracle.’

Analysis of Texts 16 – 19: The Socio-Political Consequences of ‘Us’ vs. ‘Them’

Hate comments that reinforce an ‘Us’ vs. ‘Them’ divide in political discourse have significant socio-political consequences, shaping public attitudes, electoral behavior, and national cohesion. These comments deepen ideological polarisation, delegitimise opposing groups, and foster hostility that undermines democratic engagement. By framing political opponents as enemies rather than rivals, they erode constructive dialogue, reducing political discourse to moral accusations rather than policy debates. This rigid partisanship entrenches supporters in their views, discouraging open discussion and compromise. Delegitimisation of political opponents also weakens trust in democratic institutions. Comments portraying APC and PDP as corrupt while dismissing LP as structurally weak illustrate how political movements discredit each other’s legitimacy. This reciprocal attack fuels voter apathy, as citizens lose confidence in the

political system. Additionally, regional and ethnic narratives exacerbate historical tensions, further entrenching political divisions. Ultimately, these divisive narratives promote ideological rigidity, discourage political compromise, and erode trust in democracy. By fostering mistrust, exclusion, and hostility, hate comments do not just reflect political tensions—they actively sustain them, making democratic progress and national unity increasingly difficult.

Presentation of Discursive Variables

In CDA, discursive variables refer to the linguistic and rhetorical elements that shape how power, ideology, and social structures are represented, reinforced, or challenged in discourse. These variables help in analysing how language constructs meaning, influences perception, and maintains social hierarchies. van Dijk and Fairclough, highlight various discursive variables in their frameworks.

Lexical Choices (Word Selection)

This is the use of specific words, metaphors, and terminologies to frame social groups, institutions, or events. For example, using ‘looter’ to describe political opponents reinforces a negative ideological stance.

Text 20: ‘Buhari is a terrorist’. **Text 21:** ‘Atiku is corrupt’. **Text 22:** ‘Tinubu is a drug lord’.

Analysis of 20-22 Discursive Variable

Lexical choice in Critical Discourse Analysis shapes perceptions of political figures and groups through strategic language use. Negative labels such as ‘looters,’ ‘traitors,’ and ‘jihadist’ delegitimise opponents, while positive self-representation reinforces ideological positions. Presuppositions embed unstated assumptions, as seen in claims like ‘The North will always decide Nigeria’s president,’ normalising power structures. Structural manipulation, including nominalisation and passivization, obscures agency and deflects accountability, shaping public perception. Pronoun use constructs an “Us vs. Them” divide, reinforcing polarisation and limiting nuanced debate.

Presentation of Rhetorical Strategies

Rhetorical strategies refer to the techniques and persuasive methods used in discourse to influence an audience’s perception, emotions, and decision-making, reinforce argument, and appeal to an audience. In this study, rhetorical strategies were analysed to uncover how language constructs power, ideology, and social control, particularly in political discourse, media, and propaganda.

Text 23: ‘Nigeria cannot afford another 16years of wanton destruction of our commonwealth by a clueless PDP.’

Vote them out!’ (Persuasion and manipulation)

Text 24: ‘We are the only party that can save Nigeria.’ (Legitimation)

Text 25: ‘The opposition is corrupt and will destroy the country.’ (Delegitimation)

Text 26: ‘We, the true Nigerians, must take back our country’ (in-group vs. out-group dynamic). Logical appeal (logos, pathos, ethos). Using facts, statistics, rational arguments to persuade, e.g. ‘Under our administration, the economy grew by 5%.’ Emotional Appeal (Pathos) was also employed. It is exploiting voters’ emotions. Example, ‘If you vote for them, Nigeria will collapse into chaos.’ Politicians invoked emotions such as fear, anger, and patriotism to sway voters, especially when attacking incumbents. Credibility appeal, was the use of authority or morality to persuade. This is also referred to as Ethos (credibility appeal). E.g. ‘As a man of integrity, I will never let corruption thrive.’ Metaphors and symbolism, which is using figurative language to frame issues. Example: ‘Nigeria is sinking, and we need a strong captain.’ Polarisation (Us vs. Them). This creates divisions between groups to mobilise support. As we have in ‘They are the enemies of progress. We are the true patriots.’

Analysis of Texts of 23-26: Rhetorical Strategies

Derogatory labeling and neologisms were prominent in Nigeria’s 2015, 2019, and 2023 presidential elections, ridiculing opponents and reinforcing ideological bias. Terms like BADluck for Goodluck Jonathan suggested incompetence, THIEFnubu for Bola Tinubu implied corruption, and LIEmohammed for Lai Mohammed portrayed dishonesty. PITobi mocked Peter Obi, while obIDIOTS demeaned Labour Party supporters. These labels deepened political divisions, diverted discourse from policy debates, and shaped public perception. Widely spread on social media, they fueled misinformation and emotional reactions, strengthening group identity while dismissing opponents through ridicule rather than substantive engagement, ultimately weakening democratic dialogue.

Presentation and Analysis from Halliday’s Transitivity Model of Participants, Processes and Circumstances

Data were also analysed from the Halliday’s Transitivity Model, which focuses on how language represents processes, participants, and circumstances.

Text 27: ‘If they rig this election, they’re looking for war.’

Process Types (Main Verbs and Actions)

Halliday classifies processes into six types: material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential.

i. ‘If they rig this election’ ’! Material Process

ii. ‘rig’ is a material verb, meaning a physical or concrete action.

It implies manipulation or control over the election.

iii. Actor - 'they' (The 3rd person pronominal, 'They' is a reference an unspecified group accused of election fraud).

iv. Goal - 'this election' (the thing being manipulated).

Participants (Who is involved?)

'They' (Actor) – The group accused of election fraud.

'This election' (Goal) – The thing being manipulated.

'War' (Goal) – The consequence being sought.

Circumstances (Additional Information)

Conditionality - The first clause 'If they rig this election' functions as a conditional circumstance, setting up a cause-effect relationship. Implied consequence: The second clause suggests retaliation or conflict, reinforcing a threat

Ideological implications

Causal Relationship - The sentence implies that election fraud might justify or provoke war.

Agency and Responsibility - The wording attributes blame and intent to an unspecified pronominal, 'they,' which makes the claim vague but at the same time, accusatory.

Polarisation - The phrase suggests an 'US' vs. 'THEM' dynamic, making it highly political and emotionally charged.

The statement, 'If they rig this election, they are looking for war,' exemplifies how language strategically constructs manipulation, threat, and retaliation. Using Halliday's Transitivity Model, its material and mental processes, conditional structuring, and ideological framing reinforce division and distrust. The verb 'rig' implies deliberate fraud, while 'looking for war' conveys both intent and preparation for conflict, making electoral fraud appear as an inevitable trigger for violence. The conditional 'if' establishes a deterministic cause-effect link, heightening urgency and defensiveness. By using 'they,' the statement creates an unspecified adversary, fostering polarization. This rhetoric fuels tensions, shaping public perception and political action.

Text 28: 'We have credible information that armed bandits and Boko Haram insurgents have been mobilised to engage in massive attacks across several states in the country.'

Process: Material ('have been mobilised,' 'to engage')

Participants: Actor ('armed bandits and Boko Haram insurgents'), Goal ('massive attacks'), Location ('across several states in the country')

Process Types (Main Verbs and Actions)

i. 'have credible information' ! Mental Process (Cognition/Knowing)

ii. 'have' suggests possession of knowledge or awareness.

iii. 'credible information' acts as the Phenomenon (the thing known).

iv. Participant- 'We' (Senser – the one possessing the information).

Participants (Who is involved?)

- i. ‘We’ ’! Senser (the source of the claim).
- ii. ‘Credible information’ ’! Phenomenon (the knowledge being reported).
- iii. ‘Armed bandits and Boko Haram insurgents’ ’! Actors (the people carrying out the action).
- iv. ‘Massive attacks’ ’! Goal (the event being described).
- v. ‘Several states in the country’ ’! Circumstance (Location – where the attacks will occur).

Circumstances (Additional Information)

- i. Source of Information- The phrase ‘We have credible information’ adds authoritativeness to the claim.
- ii. ‘Scope- The phrase ‘across several states’ indicates widespread impact.
- iii. ‘Temporal Aspect- The passive voice ‘have been mobilised’ suggests that the mobilisation has already occurred.

Ideological implications

Language strategically reinforces credibility, fear, and urgency. The phrase ‘credible information’ legitimises the claim, while references to armed bandits and Boko Haram insurgents frame it as a severe security threat. Verbs like ‘mobilised’ and ‘engage in’ depict imminent violence, heightening alarm. The passive structure of ‘have been mobilised’ obscures responsibility, fueling speculation. Politically, such statements justify government actions and shape public sentiment. Through material processes, passive constructions, and authoritative tone, this discourse influences perception, reinforces crisis narratives, and serves as a rhetorical tool in Nigeria’s 2015, 2019, and 2023 elections.

Text 29: ‘Northerners need to vote for me rather than a Yoruba or Igbo candidate because I am a Pan-Nigerian of northern extraction.’

Process types (Main Verbs and Actions)

- i. ‘need to vote for’ ’! Material Process (Action/Doing)
- ii. ‘Vote for’ is a material process, indicating an action that the speaker wants the audience (Northerners) to perform.
- iii. Participant – ‘Northerners (Actor – the ones expected to act).
- iv. Goal – ‘me’ (the person they are supposed to vote for).
- v. ‘rather than a Yoruba or Igbo candidate’! Relational Process (Comparison/ Identification)

This phrase establishes opposition between the speaker and other candidates.

Implied Participant - Yoruba and Igbo candidates (as an excluded category).

- vi. ‘because I am a Pan-Nigerian of northern extraction’ ’! Relational Process (Attribution/ Being)
- vii. ‘am’ is a relational verb, signifying identity and classification.
- viii. Attribute - ‘Pan-Nigerian of northern extraction’ (a self-ascribed identity).

ix. Carrier - 'I' (the speaker).

Participants (Who is involved?)

- i. 'Northerners' '!' Actors (those being instructed to act).
- ii. 'me' '!' Goal (the candidate being supported).
- iii. 'A Yoruba or Igbo candidate' '!' Contrastive Participants (opposing options).
- iv. 'I' '!' Carrier (the speaker's self-identification).
- v. 'Pan-Nigerian of northern extraction' '!' Attribute (a defining characteristic of the speaker).

Circumstances (Additional Information)

- i. Ethnic Appeal -: The phrase 'Northerners need to vote for me' is a direct appeal to ethnic solidarity, implying that voting should be based on regional identity rather than individual merit.
- ii. Exclusivity - The use of 'rather than' sets up a binary opposition, positioning Yoruba and Igbo candidates as less preferable options.
- iii. Justification - The phrase 'because I am a Pan-Nigerian of northern extraction' attempts to neutralize potential accusations of ethnic bias by incorporating the term 'Pan-Nigeria', while still reinforcing northern identity.

Ideological Implications

The statement strategically employs language to reinforce ethnic political mobilisation, paradoxical identity, voter influence, and exclusionary rhetoric. It encourages voting based on regional affiliation, reinforcing identity-based politics. While claiming a Pan-Nigerian identity, the speaker prioritises northern extraction, emphasising regional loyalty over national unity. The phrase 'need to' creates a sense of obligation, pressuring voters into collective duty. By contrasting 'me' with 'a Yoruba or Igbo candidate', the statement subtly delegitimizes non-Northern candidates. Using material and relational processes, contrastive structuring, and ideological framing, the comment exemplifies how politicians navigate identity politics to secure voter support through ethnic alignment.

Text 30: 'Yorubas must deliver 95% of their votes to me; reject Atiku, Obi.'

Process Material ('deliver,' 'reject')

i. **Participants** - Actor ('Yorubas'), Goal ('95% of their votes to me,' 'Atiku, Obi')

ii. Analysis - Bola Ahmed Tinubu's directive employs material processes to command the Yoruba ethnic group to overwhelmingly support him and dismiss other candidates, reinforcing ethnic solidarity and exclusion. Political statements often utilise language strategically to direct, persuade, and mobilize voters. The comment, 'Yorubas must deliver 95% of their votes to me; reject Atiku, Obi,' is a strong directive aimed at ethnic-based political mobilisation. Through Halliday's Transitivity Model, this comment was analysed looking at its process types, participant roles, and ideological implications, demonstrating how language constructs power, obligation, and exclusion in political discourse.

Process Types (Main Verbs and Actions)

- i. ‘must deliver’ ’! Material Process (Action/Doing)
‘Deliver’ is a material verb, indicating an action that the speaker expects from Yoruba voters.
- ii. Participant - ‘Yorubas’ (Actor – those who must take action).
- iii. Goal – ‘95% of their votes’ (what {the thing} to be delivered).
- iv. Recipient - ‘me’ (the beneficiary of the action).
- i. ‘Reject’ ’! Material Process (Action/Doing)
- ii. ‘Reject’ is another material verb, commanding Yoruba voters to take action against certain candidates.
- iii. Participant - (Implied Actor) ‘Yorubas’ (again, those expected to act).
- iv. Goal – ‘Atiku, Obi’ (the individuals being rejected).

Participants (Who is involved?)

- i. ‘Yorubas’ ’! Actors (those being instructed to act).
- ii. ‘95% of their votes’ ’! Goal (the political support being directed).
- iii. ‘me’ ’! Recipient (the candidate benefiting from the action).
- iv. Atiku, Obi’ ’! Goal** (those being rejected).

Circumstances (Additional Information)

- i. Obligation & Command - The use of ‘must’ signals a strong directive rather than a suggestion, reinforcing a sense of duty or necessity for Yoruba voters.
- ii. Numerical Precision - The specification of ‘95% of their votes’ suggests a quantifiable expectation, adding a sense of urgency and pressure.
- iii. Binary Opposition - The command to ‘deliver votes to me’ while simultaneously instructing voters to ‘reject Atiku, Obi’ creates a clear us-versus-them dynamic, reinforcing political polarisation.

Ideological Implications

The statement mobilises ethnic electoral support by prioritising identity over policy, asserting authority, and reinforcing exclusion. The modal ‘must’ imposes obligation, while ‘reject’ delegitimises opponents, deepening divisions. Through material processes and ideological framing, it pressures voters and limits agency, exemplifying how electoral rhetoric in Nigeria shapes voter behaviour through ethnic solidarity.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This paper investigated the linguistic discourse structures and patterns of hate comments on social media during Nigeria’s 2023 presidential election using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Employing van Dijk’s socio-cognitive model, complemented by Fairclough’s three-dimensional model, and Halliday’s transitivity, the paper examined how language was

strategically deployed to construct ideological positions, reinforce biases, and shape socio-political discourse. By analysing the rhetorical and discursive strategies in hate comments, the paper examined the diverse ideological underpinnings hate comments and its implications on democratic participation in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This paper revealed that hate comments are strategically constructed to reinforce ideological representations through derogatory labelling, name-calling, neologisms, and metaphors, all serving to delegitimise opponents. Transitivity analysis showed that actors in hate discourse are framed in negatively charged material processes, intensifying blame, exclusion, and polarisation. Fairclough's model highlights how hate comments shape public opinion by normalising hostility and fostering distrust, while van Dijk's socio-cognitive model demonstrated how historical grievances and ethnic tensions inform discourse. The spread of hate narratives on social media influences voter behaviour, fosters division, and undermines national unity by reinforcing antagonistic political and ethnic identities.

Recommendation

Hate comments online are not merely emotional outbursts but are often deliberate linguistic acts shaped by ideological and political motives. This paper recommends the integration of Critical Language Awareness (CLA) into civic and educational curricula at both secondary and tertiary levels. Through linguistics-informed pedagogy, students can learn to examine critically how language encodes bias and sustains ideological positions through rhetorical devices, lexical choices, and grammar. Such education will empower young citizens, particularly digital users, to deconstruct manipulative discourse and engage in more thoughtful, democratic communication.

In fostering inclusive political dialogue, political actors and institutions must model issue-based and respectful discourse. Hate-laced rhetoric from political elites can legitimize public hostility and polarise national conversations. Political communication should therefore center on shared policy goals and national unity, avoiding ethno-religious antagonism. Campaigns and public engagements such as debates or town halls should incorporate discourse monitoring mechanisms to ensure factual, inclusive, and respectful exchanges that promote democratic stability and civic trust.

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