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A Semiotic Study of Selected Political Cartoons in Nigerian Newspapers

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Abstract

Communication has become inextricable part of human lives and the visual modes of communication has been employed in the print media as a veritable means of communicating very serious issues metaphorically. Thus, Semiotic study constitutes a form of discourse which requires visual display of knowledge to understand and interpret any given text. Thus, several attempts have been made on the study of political cartoons using the canonical classifications of Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1969) speech acts, implicature, contextual variables as well as Pragmatic Acts theory. However, little attention has been given to van Leeuwen & Gunther Kress' Semiotic Theory in analysing political cartoons in Nigerian newspapers. Hence, this study explores social semiotic theory perceived with the use of language in political cartoons in order to bring to the fore the covert meanings concealed in it, and to correct the societal ills in witty and humorous ways. The study is anchored on van Leeuwen and Gunther Kress' Social Semiotic theory as the theoretical appurtenance. A total of ten (8) political cartoons were selected and analysed from three Nigerian daily newspapers (The Nation, The Sun & Daily Trust). The study revealed that more meaning would have been lost, if not for the advancement of scholars on the exponent of multimodality. This was because people tend to be more concentrated on the monomodal; linguistic approach to meaning, whereas study of data as newspapers' cartoons and other visual designs transported more than one mode of meaning to communicate a more complete, coherent and complementary meaning. It was also discovered that cartoons enable the readers to understand the difference between the linguistic and non-linguistic resources and how they are used together to create meaning. The study concludes that cartoon has become a haven for journalists in unveiling and satirising delicate political issues.

Keywords: *Social Semiotic Theory, Political, Nigerian Newspapers, Cartoons and Datum.*

Introduction

Communication is a means through which social integration is fostered in the society. One of the powerful modes of visual communication which has become famous in Nigerian Newspapers is the cartoon. Cartoons are simplified drawings, representational or symbolic, which make satirical, witty or humorous points. Cartoons play a prominent role in correcting societal ills, entertainment etc. (Alimi & Shopeju, 1999 cited in Oyedeki 2013). Among the genre of visual art that proves potent in putting checks on the political class in the contemporary society is the art of political cartooning. Cartoonists are like traditional palace jesters who lampoon the political class using satire as tools (Akinloye, 2014).

Cartoons are classified as Cartoon of opinion and cartoons of jokes. Cartoons of opinion focus on domestic politics and social themes while cartoons of jokes are designed to communicate humour (Adejuwon & Shina Alim, 2009). The cartoon of opinion is synonymous to an editorial or political cartoon. An editorial cartoon can be defined as an illustration containing a commentary that usually relates to current events or personalities. This type of cartoon serves as a visual commentary on current events. Editorial cartoons are usually satirical rather than merely humorous in nature as they may communicate the political viewpoint of the cartoonist or add depth to an editorial opinion article in a newspaper or magazine. As observed by Diamond (2002), political or editorial cartoons are important mode of communication worthy of increased academic attention. He observes that these types of cartoons provide alternative perspectives at a glance because they are visual and vivid and often seem to communicate clear or obvious messages to their readers.

Editorial cartoons often use caricature, which is a deliberate distortion or exaggeration of a person's features in order to make fun of well-known figures who are often politicians. They typically combine artistic skill, hyperbole and biting humour in order to question authority and draw attention to corruption and other social ills in the society. The presentation of editorial cartoons in this manner is an avenue for cartoonists to effectively express their thoughts about any event in the society in a comical manner. According to El Rafaie (2003. p. 185)

These illustrations are usually in single panel with visual symbolic elements to express the cartoonist's views on societal issues in humorous or subtle ways. Most commonly, cartoons address a current political issue or event, a social trend, or a famous personality in a way that takes a stand or presents a particular point of view. Although political cartoons are not always humorous, they do generally contain a clement of irony...

Language use varies as it is used to perform different functions: we communicate ideas, thoughts and opinions through language; we use language to warn of danger, to advise, to arouse emotions and to make people accept our point of view. The use of language for these purposes is dictated by the context and they have their own unique form. The expressive use of language with its unique features is captured by cartoonists' use of language in their cartoons. This brings us to the concept of political cartoon (Ashiru, 2017).

Political cartoon is an illustration containing a commentary that usually relates to current events or personalities (Omolabi & Zakariyah, 2018). It constitutes a specific category of political reporting in that they are pictorial representations which depicts political and social issues and events in a simple, short and condensed manner (Test, 1991). From this assertion, political cartoons are usually simple and compact but they carry large information which have to be decoded by first understanding the context; that is, the situation surrounding it. This expressive style (pictorial representations) is characterized with the use of humorous representation of events and characters

and it employs the ability of irony and satire to, criticize and make people see someone's fault in a funny, playful, witty and artful manner Giarelli and Tulrnan (2003) argue that:

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

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

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

Cartoons are also designed to stand alone as works of art, needing no guidance from an interpreter to be understood. The public want to know hidden truths. Also, they want to change or turn to the right direction. These describe why political cartoons are continued within history. Seymour-Ure (2001) describes continuity among cartoonists "this combination of familiarity and predictability with a particular freshness every day is what provides a newspaper with its stability as an enterprise" (p. 337). Flows of stories in political cartoons are attractive because it seems like separated story or not connected. However, it is not comics. This means for reading or recognising political cartoons, readers should know the background of each cartoon.

The study is therefore significant in exploring how reality maintenance, as Kress (1998) puts it, is a multimodal negotiates meanings in a conversation that requires average readers to fix the meaning(s) of and ascribe evaluative character of cartoons. In this regard, Fowler (1998) argues that “the greater part of reality maintenance in conversation is implicit, not explicit. Most conversations do not in so many words define the nature of the words. Rather it takes place against the background of a world that is silently taken for granted. It is against this backdrop that the paper tries to investigate on: “A Semiotic Analysis of Selected Political Cartoons in Nigerian Newspapers.

Theoretical Framework

Social Semiotic Theory

The paper employs the social semiotic approach to multimodality developed by Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen (1996). This approach has its origins in Functional Linguistics, more specifically in the work of Michael Halliday (1978), and has been later developed as a theory of multimodal sign-making in the works of Robert Hodge, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (e.g. Hodge/Kress, 1988; Kress/van Leeuwen, 2001; van Leeuwen, 2005; Kress, 2010). In Hallidayan theory, language is a product of social processes; the resources of a language are shaped by the functions it has developed to satisfy the communicative needs of people’s lives. Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress (2006), in their book, *Social Semiotics* extended Halliday’s approach from language to sign-making more broadly, and argued that societies develop and shape all semiotic resources to fulfil given social functions, express a social group’s values, systems of knowledge (i.e. discourses), structures and power roles. They discuss examples from a range of social contexts involving a range of modes, but focused primarily on writing and image in ‘print’ media (e.g. magazines, billboards).

Kress and van Leeuwen extended Halliday’s work, notably the idea of meaning as choice, to develop a social semiotic approach to the visual, and to theorize the visual as a mode, culminating in their seminal book *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996). This opened the door for multimodality in the way that it discusses key concepts such as composition, modality and framing. The issue of mode and multiple modes became increasingly foregrounded in social semiotic work in the early 2000s and led to an expansion of multimodality, questioning the boundaries of individual modes and examining common principles underpinning multimodal communication.

Social semiotics sets out to understand how representations are produced by and contribute to cultural settings, that is, to get at their social function and meaning potential in the communicative landscape. Their textual features are analyzed in order to comment on social relations, power, signification, and the interests of sign makers, the imagined audience, and the social purposes realized by texts.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) remark that a primary consideration in the approach is that media of communication are shaped and organized by a culture into a range of meaning-making systems, so as to articulate the meanings demanded by the practical, social requirements

of different communities. Therefore, the approach to semiotic analysis sees signs not only as culturally constructed but also interpreted within certain cultural purviews. Furthermore, social semiotics adopts Halliday's metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal and textual) in the analysis of semiotic ensembles showing how the various meanings are communicated by the verbal and visual signifiers in a semiotic ensemble, while Lemke (1998) call them presentational, orientational, and organizational meanings. However, the construction of meanings in any society involves not only the verbal components but also the nonverbal/visual components. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) model of social semiotics allow us to read a single image in multiple ways. Their method analyses images on the basis of semiotic principles describing meanings as representational, interactive and composition.

Methodology

This study is a critical qualitative approach. It purposively selected 8 political cartoons from three different newspapers, namely; *The Nation*, *Daily Trust*, *The Sun Newspaper*. The three selected newspapers are privately owned corporation and they were chosen due to their wide readership and geographical spread. Moreover, they operate with a functioning internet visibility for easy retrieval of data. These newspapers are widely read newspapers in Nigeria and they share the same feature in terms of popularity, coverage of national issues and enlightening the public on issues going on in the country. The analysis is carried out using Social Semiotic approach to multimodality developed by Gunther Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) as a linguistic framework for the study to analyse the data in this study this is because it allows one to read a single image in numerous ways. The method of analysing is describing meaning as representational, interactive and compositional.

Data Analysis

Datum 1

Daily Trust, March 12, 2020

The foreground resources are two men. One is a medical doctor and the other is a patient who appears to be an influential man in the society which is noticeable from the way he is dressed and his brief case which has money popping out from it. The participants appear to be doing something which makes the image narrative and transactional in nature. There is also the presence of vector that emanates from the cartoon and these include the eye line, mouth, facial expression and gesture. The facial expression on the participant's face suggests that he is surprised and in sad mode. The doctor seems surprised that the patient as usual couldn't go abroad for medical check-up as he says: "Ahh! Babban Muttum, why didn't you travel abroad for your medical check-up?" The man replies the doctor by saying "Doc, the fear of being 'CORONAized' is the beginning of wisdom." Over the years, many Nigerian politicians and rich men never do their medical check-ups here in Nigeria but rather they go abroad and this is because of the poor conditions they leave the facilities at the hospitals after embezzling the money that is supposed to be used for the betterment of health care in the country. However, the wild spread of corona virus in European countries hinder many Nigerian politicians from going, and majorly the fear of getting infected by the virus. The politician's facial expression is that of sadness, disappointment and fear. The social vice that was raised in this cartoon is embezzlement, lack of faith on the Nigerian health care, and the fear of getting infected by a virus.

Datum 2

Dailytrust, January, 2 2019

There are two represented participants in the cartoon. The cartoon has a classification as well as a narrative and transactional process. One of the participants faces the opposite direction and looks at an unknown goal. His dress and his size portray him as the boss and the super ordinate. The other participant's eyes fix on the boss, and by the way he is dressed is the subordinate this element can be termed as the classification structure. The cartoon seems to be doing something based on the narrative and transactional process which are obvious with the presence of vector

such as eyeline, facial expression and mouth that emanates from their faces. From the bubble speech present in the cartoon, there is presence of verbal utterance going between the participants. One of the participants who is the superordinate is seen saying to the other “We can’t afford 30,000 minimum wage.” The other participant responds by saying “But honourable, you didn’t use can’t in your campaign.” The represented participant who is the subordinate’s reaction is that of astonishment and disgust. The subordinate’s reaction is because his boss who is an honourable and despite the amount he is paid as salary and the amount he embezzles still mentions that he couldn’t afford the thirty thousand naira minimum wage. This explains the lies the politicians tell to get in office. The bubble speech by the participant shows some social vices like greed and lies.

Datum 3

Dailytrust, February 12, 2020

The foreground resources are two young men who are seen doing something very important, as this suggests that the image is narrative and transactional in nature. The two young men seem to engage in doing something. There is also the presence of vector such as eye line, mouth, facial expression that emanates from the image that indicates complain, disappointment, anger. The cartoon carries a textual heading, “Don’t rely on govt for jobs, FG tells unemployed graduates” which is like a warning to graduates who still have hope of getting jobs believing the government would create jobs as the government is not willing to provide them with any. There is the presence of verbal utterance by the represented participants in which one is saying “But I remember they promised to create 20m new jobs in 4 years”. The other responded by saying “haha.....that was a campaign anthem.” The social vices present in this cartoon is that of unfulfilled promises by the politicians, how politicians give the citizens lies in order to get favour from the citizens but after they get in office they do nothing.

Datum 4

The Sun Newspaper, October 7, 2020

There are three represented participants in this cartoon. The two conspicuous participants are seen doing something which makes the image narrative and transactional in nature. The vector that emanates from this cartoon includes facial expression, gestures, and mouth. The healthy participants are politicians; one is the former president of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo while the other is the current president of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari. The two politicians are seen holding a small, tattered and lean person which is a phenomenon that represents Nigeria. From one of the bubble speech of the participant which says “Mr. President, see an average Nigerian man weighing 23kg with a well-nourished moustache! Does he look hungry? The other participant replies by saying “hmmm....looking nice really!” The average Nigerian man looks unhealthy and malnourished and it is glaring and obvious but the politicians decide to just let it slide by deciding that the Nigerian man is looking nourished. They embezzle money meant for the citizens despite the fact that they know people are wailing of hunger but decide to turn a blind eye and pretend like everything is fine. The social issue raised in this cartoon is embezzlement, hunger and lies.

Datum 5

There are a group of women in this cartoon, the participant is not facing the camera, and she seems to be talking to the other ladies whose faces are not seen as well. This cartoon is conceptual in nature. There is no presence of vector such as gestures, facial expression etc. These women are seen queued up in front of a room which seems to be an office of a pastor. On the door is written Pastor Nkaba's Ministry, from the bubble speech of one the ladies it reads "Since he could successfully predict Buhari and now Uzodinma's victories, he'll be able to tell us when we'll marry". Many Nigerian pastors often predict about thing that would happen in the nearest future, some predict about politics, some about social issues. Some of these pastors' prophecies are sometimes lucky, and most are sometimes wrong. Social issues raised in this cartoon include miracle and desperation.

Datum 6

The Nation Newspaper, August 28, 2019

Based on the represented metafunction, there are two participants in the cartoon. One is a woman while the other is a man. The man is a politician while the woman seems to be the wife of the politician. They seem to be discussing something important. Their facial expression suggests that the cartoon is narrative and transactional in nature. The vector that emanates from their faces such as eye line, facial expression and mouth is that of fear on how dangerous spending stolen government money lavishly abroad is. This is because ever since president Buhari started fighting corruption, most of the politicians are scared of spending lavishly abroad in order not to create suspicion towards them and when they are caught, investigated; they may be arrested and prosecuted. Some of the social vices observed in this cartoon are corruption, stealing of government money, and selfishness.

Datum 7

The Sun Newspaper, August 20, 2019

The cartoon has two represented participants who are actors. The expression on their faces suggests a narrative process which shows that these participants are doing something. The facial expression, mouth and eye-line forms a vector which is that of fear and surprise. One of the represented participants is a Nigerian politician who is demanding for more escorts from the other participants who is a foreign police officer because he doesn't feel safe any longer. The president of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari's mission is to conquer corruption; when he got to office, he made a promise to Nigerians to fight corruption which he is trying and this becomes a threat to those corrupt politicians. The social issue raised in this cartoon is that of corruption, fear, and embarrassment.

Datum 8

The Sun Newspaper, November 12, 2019

There are three participants in this cartoon. These participants all represent a certain phenomenon. The first signifies a governor, the second signifies a revenue collector, and the third participant signifies a labour leader. The participants have an action and reaction process. These participants are all doing something which makes the cartoon narrative in nature. There is also the presence of vector such as gestures and mouth. The participant that represents governor is seen carrying heavy sacks on his head, these sacks represent certain phenomenon which include Security vote, hazard allowance, constituent allowance and jumbo salary. The participant that is labelled labour leader is seen saying “Oya go after him and cut off all those allowances!” the other participant that is labelled Revenue Mobilisation Center is seen holding a huge scissor to carry out the order made by the Revenue Mobilisation Center to cut the sack the third participant is carrying on his head. What this cartoon is trying to explain is that the governors are being greedy, they are paid so many allowances and they pay civil workers very low salaries. The social vices raised in this cartoon are corruption, greediness, stealing and selfishness.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it was discovered that more meaning would have been lost, if not for the advancement of scholars on the exponent of multimodality. This was because people tend to be more concentrated on the monomodal; linguistic approach to meaning, whereas study of data as newspapers’ cartoons and other visual designs transported more than one mode of meaning to

communicate a more complete, coherent and complementary meaning. The study also discovered that linguistic and non-linguistic semiotic resources co-exist with one another in such a way that, the linguistic semiotic resources which is the textual component of the cartoons provide the viewer with the ideals through which they can build or understand the meaning of other semiotic resources captured in the selected cartoons. Newspaper cartoons enable readers to be conscious of every details and elements in the cartoons. Each element in the cartoon contributes to the intended meaning of the cartoonist. It enables the readers develop critical thinking. They decode the image not from the surface level alone but also at the phase level. The readers are expected to decode the meaning from the colours, size, frame, and the texts. The linguistic resources are the textual component of the cartoon. It provides the viewer with the ideal through which they can have an insight or build an understanding of what the other semiotic resources are about. The following are some of the linguistic resources captured in this cartoon; Datum 3 “Don’t rely on govt for jobs, FG tells unemployed graduates”, Datum 2 “We can afford 30k minimum wage”, Datum3 “Coronavirus”, Datum 6 “Going overseas to spend Govt money lavishly is now dangerous. It will be cleared that all the mentioned textual semiotic resources above (non-linguistic resources) are meant to give the audience, an insight or understanding of what type of message the cartoon is trying to pass across.

The non- linguistic resources are the hidden meaning of the cartoon which the readers are expected to decode through the use of other semiotic resources such as the use of frame, colour, size, shot, and the represented participants. All these enable the readers to decode the intended meaning of the cartoonists. The non-linguistic resources usually carry more meaning than the linguistic resources as seen in the analysed cartoons, which mean most meanings are embedded in the non-linguistic resources when compared to the linguistic resources. The study, therefore, concluded that visual images are very important tools that are embedded and rich with meaning and are used to pass across messages to the viewers. The messages behind these visual images are easily interpreted and they are usually one with strong and powerful messages especially when sensitive issues like politics are being discussed. Political cartoons are used in order to relay to the people and society important messages.

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