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Nigeria's 2019 electioneering discourse: Strategies for delegitimizing political opponents on social media

1 Introduction

Political discourse, in van Dijk's (1997, 12) words, "is identified by its actors or authors, viz., politicians". In this paper, we describe it as any discourse with politics, politicians, and political issues as its subject matter. In the 21st century, social media (SM) has become a key platform for such discursive engagement. In the countdown to elections, political opponents and the general public resort to various discourse strategies on SM to make the political field less favourable for their rivals and thus win votes, and this is also true in Nigeria.

Out of the 91 registered political parties for Nigeria's general elections on 23rd February, 2019, only two, namely the All Progressives Congress (APC), and the People's Democratic Party (PDP), have true popularity and spread (Nwachukwu, 2019). The keenly contested presidential election was therefore between the PDP presidential candidate, former Vice President Abubakar Atiku (from the North-East geopolitical zone) with former Governor Peter Obi (South East) as his running mate, and the APC presidential candidate, the incumbent President Muhammadu Buhari (PMB) (North West) with the incumbent Vice President Prof. Yemi Osinbajo (South West) as his running mate. The election was eventually won by APC's Buhari (see Reports on Nigeria's 2019 General Elections).

This paper aims to show and evaluate the discourse strategies used on Facebook (FB) to perform the pragmatic act of delegitimizing political opponents in the build-up to Nigeria's 2019 presidential elections, and thus illustrate the ways in which words have become an effective battlefield for political struggles on SM, with an increasing influence on how modern elections are won and lost even before a vote is made.

Studies (Apuke, Tunca, 2018; Opeibi, 2019; Bello, et al., 2019) have shown the significant role played by SM in Nigeria's 2011, 2015 and 2019 elections and elsewhere (e.g. Harfoush, 2009; Ng, 2016). Whereas the total number of accredited voters on election day (February 23, 2019) was 29,364,209 (Independent National Electoral Commission, 2019), in 2018 alone there were 29.3 million SM users in Nigeria, rising by June 2019 to 123.49 million users, by far the largest number among leading



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African countries, followed by Egypt with 49.23 million users (Clement, 2019), out of the global total of 3.5bn SM users in July 2019 (Afrosages, 2019). Facebook, the source of data for this research, was Nigeria's leading SM platform in 2018, with an 85.82% share, followed by Twitter with 5.24% and others (Stat Counter, 2018). FB is also the world's leading SM platform (see Kemp, 2019), and thus a sizeable amount of political discourse now takes place on this platform where new, creative discursive strategies continue to emerge.

2 Political discourse between manipulation and persuasion

The two concepts of persuasion and manipulation are not particularly new in political discourse. Kassin (2008) defines persuasion as "how people are led to change their attitudes" (Section 3, paragraph 1), and attitudes as "relatively enduring beliefs or opinions that predispose people to respond in a positive, negative, or ambivalent way to a person, object, or idea", and argues that persuasion "is neither inherently good nor bad", but depends on individual (dis)approval of the message (Section 3, paragraph 1). For him, people can change their attitudes in two ways: in response to strong and logical arguments, and by "convincing themselves" through a process known as self-persuasion (Kassin, 2008, Section 3, paragraph 2-3).

Van Dijk (2006) describes manipulation as "...a communicative and interactional practice, in which a manipulator exercises control over other people, usually against their will or...best interests" (2006, 360). He argues further that "in everyday usage, the concept of manipulation has negative associations...because such a practice violates social norms", specifically involving "...*abuse of power, that is, domination*" (2006, 360, italics his). If the negative connotations are removed however, manipulation could be a form of (legitimate) persuasion (Dillard, Pfau, 2002; O'Keefe, 2002).

The difference between persuasion and manipulation, therefore, seems to be that while with the former the addressee is free to accept or reject a proposal, believe or act as they please, and are able to decide whether the idea presented to them is in their best interests, with the latter they seem to feel dictated to, at a loss, and do not seem to have the ability or choice to decide whether or not it is in their best interests to accept the focal message. Thus van Dijk describes recipients of the latter as "victims of manipulation" (2006, 360). Political discourse on SM appears manipulative, as "...the *expectation* of truthful communicative behaviour, and thus the receiving of reasonably accurate and useful information about the social and physical environment, make it possible for individuals to deceive or distort" (Chilton, 2004, 23, italics his). However, domination and the abuse of power do not seem to be regular features on SM, perhaps due to the freedom for personal expression, access to counter information and less face threat in this context (see Apuke, Tunca, 2018, par. 16).





Political discourse on SM does not aggravate social inequality because there is equal access to the platform. It is therefore a “dialogistic” (White, 2015, 6) engagement among equals, possessed of dissimilar political leanings.

3 The concept of delegitimization

The concept of delegitimization is attributable to Chilton and Schäffner (1997, 211-215), and Chilton (2004, 46-47). For Chilton (2004, 46), legitimization is establishing “the right to be obeyed”, which is “communicated linguistically, whether by overt statement or by implication”; while delegitimization is presenting “others...negatively, and the techniques include the use of ideas of difference and boundaries, and speech acts of blaming, accusing, insulting, etc.” (Chilton, 2004, 46). In this paper, delegitimization in political discourse is considered to be an act of linguistic hostility calculated to discredit political opponents and win an election.

An attitude of cooperation or non-cooperation is a necessary feature of political discourse on SM, as users subject one another to public scrutiny and deflect attacks from opponents through counter discrediting. While this is actively going on, political opponents are at the time showcasing their own candidates. Chilton (2004, 47) describes these processes as other-delegitimization, and self-legitimization. It is thus crucial to characterize the specific discursive strategies adopted by these SM players in this context.

4 Theoretical framework

This paper adopts Mey's (2001) pragmatic act theory and Martin and White's (2005) appraisal theory. While the former allows us to clearly establish the general relationship between utterances and context, and identify functionality and pragmatic acts in each post based on explicit expressions or implicit textual or extra-textual context, the latter enables us to evaluate specific attitudes, reactions and emotions leading to ideological stance taking and positioning in the posts. Note, however, that it is outside our focus to label posts as persuasive or manipulative.

According to Mey (2001, 228), pragmatic acts are so called because,

they base themselves on language as constrained by the situation, not as defined by syntactic rules or by semantic selections and conceptual restrictions. Pragmatic acts are situation-derived and situation constrained; in the final analysis, they are determined by the broader social context in which they happen, and they realise their goals in the conditions placed upon human action by that context.





People who post messages on SM are constrained by the context of utterances, finding appropriate meaning within the broader social constraints to design and deliver their messages to carry specific pragmatic acts. Here we do not focus on Austin/Searle's speech act theory, but adopt the general framework of pragmatic interpretation, such as Mey's idea that "a correct pragmatic interpretation...should take into account both the circumstances of use and the way this use has developed" (Mey, *Suntverbarerum*, 2016, 4).

Appraisal theory is "a development of the Hallidayan framework concerned with the language of evaluation, attitude, and emotion used to express (and react to) personal views and ideological positions" (Crespo-Fernandez, 2013, 316). Martin and White (2005, 1) state that the theory "is concerned with how writers/speakers approve and disapprove, enthuse and abhor, applaud and criticise, and with how they position their readers/listeners to do likewise." The theory's key aspects, described as "resources of appraisal" (White, 2015) in interpersonal meaning-making, include three domains of appraisal, namely attitude (affect, judgement – implicit and explicit, and appreciation), graduation (force and focus) and engagement (stance taking). The study focuses on attitudinal expressions, both explicit and implicit. For instance, "there is **cause for alarm**" (Example 8 below) is an explicit judgement, while describing Atiku explicitly as a "**Healthy** President" (Example 19 below) is an implicit judgement on Buhari's frail health condition.

5 Methodology

Forty-two (42) FB political posts, posted between Nov. 2018 and Jan. 2019, a few weeks before the Presidential and National Assembly elections of Feb. 23, 2019, were purposively selected for analysis. They were categorized into 14 discursive strategies, analysed and discussed. The specific names given to these strategies, such as facts and evidence, implicit antithesis, lexical gymnastics, frank issue-based opinion and demonization, are our own original categorizations utilized due to their descriptive suitability. In the presentation of the data, the posters' initials, posting date and time are included at the end of each post. Grammatical mistakes and typos are unaltered, while key words/phrases are marked in bold. Official political party pages were avoided as this research is mainly about the engaged public on FB. Posters consist of Nigerian Facebook subscribers without any status labelling by themselves or the researchers. Only posts in English were selected to avoid translation issues. A post typically consists of two parts: a quote of a statement by a political or important figure, which may or may not be shown by quotation marks, and the poster's comments. Both are analysed as one post/text for pragmatic acts.





6 Delegitimization strategies: Data analysis

The analysis shows that there are a variety of strategies that were adopted by posters to delegitimize their political opponents. The following discursive strategies have been identified in the selected material¹.

6.1 Facts and evidence

This strategy employs a reference to specific events or statistics, together with judgment framing, i.e. implicit and explicit evaluation:

1. **“Too early to abandon me now.”** – Atiku **cries out** to PDP Southern Governors. (posted by ZO, Dec.12, 10.59am)
2. Before you miss it: **“For 16 years, the road** from Anambra to Enugu was **overgrown with weeds** but **within four years, the road** is being **rebuilt**. For remembering us, God will bless him (Buhari) It shall be well with him” – Father Mbaka. (ZA, Jan.2, 8.11pm)
3. “In January 2011, President Goodluck Jonathan...approved Mambila Hydro Power electric construction project at a **whopping \$37 billion USD** to provide **just 26mw**. On Tuesday 28th August 2017, pmb approved the same project at **\$5.7billion USD** to provide **3050 megawatt** and about **100,000 people** in some communities **would be resettled** out of the same \$5.7b USD. Another **unique** aspect of it is that Chinese civil engineering construction company (CCECC), who won the project, **will contribute 85 percent of the fund** while **just 15 percent** will be Nigeria's counterpart funding. The **re-evaluation**...would give Nigeria a **huge difference** of \$30billion USD...(and) additional 450 megawatt **at far less amount**... (including) **compensation** for 100,000 dwellers...from **the new contract** of \$5.7billion USD. Now with the above elementary valuation, it is clear Nigerians made a **good and prudent choice between PMB and GEJ** in the last general election.” – Rotimi Fashakin (posted by GM, Dec. 11, 10:30pm)
4. **Top 2 Nigerians that can never stand by their words.** 1) Atiku Abubakar: I will **never go back to the PDP**. PDP is beyond redemption.” – Atiku Abubakar, today he is PDP Presidential Candidate. 2) Peter Obi: “I will **never quit** APGA. I'd rather quit politics. **PDP is a curse** to the SE” – Peter Obi, Vice Presidential Candidate of the PDP. They **both** have **zero integrity!!!** (posted by PNM, Nov. 8, 7.44am)

These posts compare political opponents with reference to well-known facts, statements and statistics, which are framed by implicit and explicit judgments. The posts thus compare specific political opponents: Buhari and Atiku in [2, 3 and 4], and Buhari

1 The most relevant parts for the categorization are marked in bold.





and the ex-President Jonathan in [1]. The statement in [1] came as a result of the South East PDP Governors' threat not to support Atiku financially, an implicit pointer to the collapse of Atiku's campaign base who complained of being abandoned, indicating mutual mistrust in his camp. In [3], the poster quotes statistics about a project that compares PMB favourably with the previous president, Jonathan, intertwined with attitudinal lexis and intensification. The poster's explicit attitude, force, focus and stance are shown clearly in their choice of words: *whopping* \$37 billion USD; *far less*; *just* 15%, *prudent* choice, *just* 26mw; *unique* aspect, etc. to appreciate PMB on the one hand, and tacitly indict, and strongly delegitimize the PDP candidates' integrity on the other. In [4], the poster implicitly evaluates the actions of Atiku and Obi as hypocritical, unreliable, and lacking political tact, as evident in their choice of absolute negative particle "never", by referring to their changing positions and broken promises.

6.2 Issue-based rhetorical question (RQ)

RQs are used "not to gain information but to assert more emphatically the obvious answer to what is asked" (Figure of Speech, 2008, par. 18), and "to draw a contrast, persuade the audience, make the listener think, or...confront the audience" (Dorwart, 2018: par. 3, 8).

5. 1 Million Dollar Question: If **Atiku** Is Now **The Best To Rule Us**, What **Stop** Obasanjo From **Handing Over** Power **To Him** In 2007? (GM, Nov.26, 1.50pm)
6. Some people think we **hate** buhari that's why we don't want him to come back, or we **belong** to PDP and so on. Common someone should convince me please 'What has really **change** in **the last 4 years**?' (NH, Dec.13, 2.24pm)
7. Hear me, how can I **Support** a Man Whose **Origin** is still a **Matter of Public Debate**? (OCO, Dec.12, 4.42pm)

Invariably, the posters use RQs for negative evaluation. Through RQs, the posters point to the weaknesses and foibles of their political opponents. The poster in [5] criticises ex-President Obasanjo's moral right to foist Atiku, his ex-Vice President, on Nigeria, when he actually prevented Atiku from taking over from him. Delegitimizing APC, the poster in [6] is worried that nothing has really changed in the wider context of complaints of hunger, unemployment, and inadequate amenities by the masses. The poster in [7] claims that Buhari is not worthy of support based on PDP's allegation that Buhari is from Sudan.

6.3 Frank issue-based opinion

In this strategy, issues are presented dispassionately as an informed opinion.

8. "The fact that **new decampees into PDP** appear to be **calling the shot is not sitting well with Majority** that stayed to build the party after 2015 defeat. The SE





PDP governors and legislators also appear to have developed cold feet on Atiku's candidacy as a fall out of the **choice of running mate**. If **the structures** that Atiku's campaign will rely on are **non-comital to his candidacy two months** to the election then there is **cause for alarm**." – Ayantunji Benjamin Gbenro, PhD. (GM, Dec.12, 9.53am)

9. **"The person of Buhari alone** guarantees, at least, **12 million votes** without any campaign in a free and fair election. This **cannot be said of Alhaji Atiku** Abubakar. Either real or imaginary, he has been projected as a **symbol of everything wrong** with our society over the years. This has caused **a lot of loathing for him** among the masses especially from the north, even in his Adamawa State." – Ayantunji Benjamin Gbenro, PhD. (GM, Dec.12, 9.53am)

Although [8] and [9] quote the writer's opinion, the evaluations are careful and balanced, without any direct denigrating expressions. Positive and negative evaluations are attributed to external voices, making its analysis and conclusions appear logical, frank, and compelling. The writer's stance, nevertheless, ends up delegitimizing Atiku candidacy and legitimizing Buhari.

6.4 Contrastive engagement

Contrast is a pragmatic, evaluative strategy where opposing facts are juxtaposed to showcase contradictions and differences as basis for evaluation. It typically involves the logico-semantic relations of contrast and concession. It exposes the stupidity and confusion in one idea while promoting another, leaving the implicit attitudinal meaning to the reader.

10. **All Tinubu's Investments Are Situated In Lagos But Our Acclaimed Son Doesn't Have A Single TAXI In Ilorin** O To Gee! (IBL, Dec.11, 6.45am)
11. Under My Presidency; **I Will Fight Corruption To The Last Corner Of My Room Unlike Buhari Who Is Fighting Corruption Sidedly**; Atiku.(FA, Dec 13, 1.22pm)
12. **My repairer** may be slow but that doesn't mean I should give **my bicycle to its destroyer**. Next level insha Allah (MAR, Jan 1, 9.45pm)

The two clauses in [10] are linked through direct contrast, exposing the difference between the behaviour of two politicians: while Tinubu's (APC leader) investments are in his state, Saraki (PDP) has none in his. The scope of fighting corruption is contrasted between Atiku and Buhari in [11]; while in [12], "destroyer" (ostensibly a metaphor referring to the PDP that has ruled Nigeria for 16 years and is alleged to have destroyed the country) is lexically contrasted with "repairer" (ostensibly referring to the APC that has ruled for only four years and is making efforts to repair what PDP has





destroyed), where “my bicycle” is a metaphor for Nigeria. These contrastive links are clearly delegitimizing.

6.5 Dysphemism

This strategy is based on a deliberate choice of unpleasant, offensive rather than non-offensive references to delegitimize opponents.

13. For 16 years PDP **played politics** with 2nd Niger Bridge, today serious work is going on there courtesy of PMB. It's PMB till 2023 (ORC, Dec.9, 5.01pm)
14. Opposition **Short Of ideas**, Deploying **FAKE NEWS** As Arsenal – Lai Muhammed. Me: Yes They're Acting On Dubai Script! (GM, Dec.11, 11.41pm)
15. I have just read part of the report, especially Pgs 233-242. I **feel ashamed** as a Nigerian that such a report is available in the public domain, yet Mr Atiku is **moving about wanting to be president** of a sovereign country. Visit www.hsgac.senate.gov. (Dr. SA, Dec.7, 9:04am)
16. When you have a Professor of Law and a Senior Advocate as your VP, no **Dubious assembly** can put your fingers inside fire. (AA, Dec.7, 2.09pm)

Instances of dysphemism in the above include *play politics*, *short of ideas*, *fake news* and *dubious*. To “play politics” is to deceive people with fake promises; to be “short of ideas” and promote “fake news” are strong words implying that their targets are bereft of useful intelligence and resort to falsehood. In [15], the phrase “feel ashamed” in this context performs a pragmatic act of casting shamelessness on the target, denigrated as “*moving about wanting to be president*”. The National Assembly is described in [16] as “dubious”, implying a strong lack of integrity. These are all explicitly delegitimizing.

6.6 Implicit antithesis

An antithesis is a rhetorical device where two contrasting ideas are juxtaposed, usually in parallel structures. In these samples, however, the contrast is implicit as the other side of the antithesis is left to the readers to decode.

17. “it is a **thing of joy** that our President, Muhammadu **Buhari is doing a lot** to keep **the country as one indivisible and progressive** nation that can take its pride of place among **comity of nations**.” – Ifeanyi Okowa, Governor, Delta State (GM, Dec.11, 11:10pm)
18. **NOBILITY AND DIGNITY IS MORE THAN MONEY...CHECK PMB FOLLOWING. NOT RENTED! NOT FOR SALE!** (II, Dec.13, 3.49pm)
19. **Healthy** President, **Billionaire** President, President **with WAEC**, President who's **creating Jobs**, President with **NO case with EFCC, ICPC**, etc, President





- who has **invested heavily in EDUCATION and not COWS alone. He's Alhaji Atiku** Abubakar (Wazirin Adamawa). He's my President-in-waiting! (OED, Dec.13, 7.44am)
20. Aftermath of Osinbajo's visit: **20,000 Saraki supporters Dump PDP For APC** (OS, Dec.12, 6.16pm)
21. **FIRS generates N5trn revenue!!!** (AO, Dec.13, 4.53am)

PMB's performance is explicitly praised by a sitting PDP Governor in [17] to implicitly indict the former President Jonathan's performance when the country was dangerously insecure and polarized along ethnic, religious and political lines. The PMB campaign crowd is praised in [18] as genuine to implicitly indict Atiku's as rented and fake, implying that although Atiku has money he lacks dignity and nobility in him. Atiku's good health, enormous wealth and investment drives are compared in [19] with PMB's seeming frail health, modest earnings, and small investments; while in [20] PDP's loss of supporters means APC's gain. In [21] it is implied that such a large amount of tax was never raised in the PDP's entire 16-year rule, supposedly due to corruption and incompetence. These are all implicitly delegitimizing messages.

6.7 Direct verbal attack

A direct verbal attack is where a target's personal name is directly connected to a bad deed which may or may not be true.

22. "I was **not invited**" – Atiku. "You are **a liar. You were invited**" – Bishop Kukah (ZO, Dec.11, 8.25pm)
23. "**The Money Atiku Abubakar Stole when He was My Vice is Enough to Feed 300 Million People for 400 Years**" – Olusegun Obasanjo, *My Watch*, page 31. (OO, Dec.4, 9:51am)

Atiku was publicly accused of lying in [22] for denying that he was invited to a peace accord, and even of theft in [23]. Although Obasanjo has said plenty of negative things about Atiku, the statement in [23] is not true. Yet several people posted and shared it. This strategy on FB shows the extent to which posters spread strongly negative moral evaluations that political opponents then use to delegitimize their opponents.

6.8 Allegations

Allegations by political rivals usually border on calculated attempts to discredit the other but lacking proper facts, especially when they are posted on SM where they appear merely political and thus likely false, unlike in a direct verbal attack, which may be true.





24. Warn APC to **stop** work. **2nd Niger bridge is vote buying** - Uche Secondus (AM, Dec. 13, 10.55am)
25. "APC **won't allow us to win**" ~~ PDP to UN. Exactly, we won't allow thieves to rule us again. (WA, Nov.27, 8.06pm)

The PDP Chairman accuses the APC (i.e. Buhari) in [24] of constructing the 2nd Niger Bridge to win votes, aptly known as "vote buying" in Nigeria. The PDP also alleges in [25] that APC would not allow them to win, which appears to be a tacit acceptance of defeat. When such allegations appear baseless and self-seeking, they seem like a drowning man grasping at straws. However, while this strategy may not influence informed readers, it may sway plenty of casual readers on FB. This, in essence, implies that political opponents use false allegations as a delegitimization strategy.

6.9 Irony

Irony is a discursive strategy where the obvious is put in denial, showing the incongruity between what happens and what is expected to happen. It thus helps to make a strong statement.

26. I know some1. **For 2yrs now, his only means of livelihood is Buhari's 30k Npower**, uses Npower device. **Yet**, Buhari is his problem! (KJ, Dec.13)
27. Last year, the change government **celebrated** it's "Technically defeated" **victory over boko haram**. The Chief of Army Staff and PMB holding the flag of the terrorists group telling us then that the hideout of the group has been destroyed and **blablabla....!** Well done **change government** for **this victory**, at least **now no more boko haram!** (NH, Dec.13, 3.48pm)

In [26] the irony is directed at a beneficiary of APC government policy, who was jobless in the previous PDP government, and yet wants APC removed; while in [27], the APC government is tacitly vilified as the Boko Haram terrorists, who it claims to have defeated, continue the attacks. The idea here is to implicitly delegitimize while appearing to legitimize.

6.10 Demonization

To demonize is "to cause somebody or something to appear evil or threatening in the eyes of others" (World English Dictionary, 2009). Demonizing is used in our context as a strategic pragmatic act where a target is painted as very harmful or evil, one to be avoided in one's own interest. It can also include contrast, as in [31].

28. I and Atiku have been good friends since 1992 but I beg Nigerians. Voting Atiku **will take Nigeria 20years back** – Donald Duke (ISB, Dec.10, 9.17am)





29. "When you **take care** of the **poor people**, only those who are **wicked** and **evil** will **complain**." – Prof Yemi Osinbajo on TraderMoni (AM, Dec. 9, 5.45pm)
30. APC = All Past **Criminals**; APC = association of **political criminals**; APC = association of Past criminals; APC = Asiwaju **Private Company**; APC = Association of Proven Criminals; APC = Atiku Please Come; APC = Accredited Political Criminals; APC = Alliance of Political **Crooks**; APC = All **Promises Cancelled**; APC = Alliance of Perfect Criminals; APC = Association of Prominent Culprits; APC = A Political-movement of Criminals; APC = All Palters Committee; APC = Association of Prominent **Cultists**; APC = Aggrieved People's Congress. (NA, Jan 3, 8.43am)
31. Pls join me in this **prayer**, may Almighty God **Never return PDP in Nigeria** Ameen...(TA, Jan. 28, 7.05am)
32. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ATIKU AND BUHARI: Atiku = **Nationalist**, Buhari = **Regionalist**; Atiku = **Moderate Muslim**, Buhari = **Fanatical Muslim**; Atiku = **Intellectual**, Buhari = **Illiterate**; Atiku = **Investor**, Buhari = **Consumer**; Atiku = **Alive**, Buhari = hmmm ask Trump; Atiku = Bought Nomination Form, Buhari = Can't afford NF; Atiku = **Created 50,000 jobs**, Buhari = **Reared 150 cows in 16 years** of PDP rule. And the cows are still 150. My PVC is intact and well **Atiku-lated**...Gbam (MU, Jan 3, 12.32am)

In [28] the writer shares the statement of ex-Governor Duke, who claims to know Atiku very well because he was Governor when Atiku was Vice President. Duke begs the people never to vote Atiku into power, because he would take the country '20 years back, which can be construed as evil. In [29] Buhari's running mate describes those who criticize him for helping the poor as evil and wicked. In [30] the acronym APC is endowed with 15 different negative definitions which together amount to demonization. People add a spiritual touch in [31] by praying to God to stop the PDP, indicating their level of fear and hatred for the party. In [32], Atiku is beatified while Buhari is demonized in seven fanciful ways, such as being a fanatic, a separatist, illiterate and backward. Thus, supporters call voters' attention to, and seek God's help against, the evils of the other party, with both mutually delegitimizing.

6.11 Self-indictment

This is a strategy primarily intended to self-exonerate or to boost self-esteem, but ends up self-delegitimizing.

33. "Am **the only one sponsoring myself** financially. **No one wants to support me**" – Atiku Abubakar (BE, Jan 2, 10.40pm)
34. "When it comes to politics, I say no, **APC is not doing well**, but when it comes to **good Governance and Accountability, give it to Buhari**." – Governor Nyesom Wike (EO, Jan.4, 1.26pm)





35. “**Nobody forced Atiku to purchase the presidential ticket. Rivers State won’t host PDP South South rally.**” – Wike (RU, Jan.3, 10.05pm)

In [33], the poster shares Atiku’s statement that people are not supporting his campaign financially, which is an inadvertent admission of the internal conflict in his party, and makes him a hard sell to the electorate. However, PDP Governor Wike in [35] does not seem to care about this, as he insists that his State would not host Atiku’s rally due to the expenses, thus undermining his own party’s candidate. Internal sources report that Wike is not in support of Atiku’s candidacy, and so does not care whether he wins or loses. The same PDP Governor in [34] commends Buhari (APC) for “good governance and accountability”, practically delegitimizing his own party candidate by praising the opposition one.

6.12 Lexical gymnastics

Through word-formation processes, words and names are turned around through re-spelling and selective capitalisation of letters into referential and suggestive lexical items calculated to delegitimize.

36. It will take a camel to enter the eye of the needle for that **pATIKUlar** candidate to win presidential election on **FeBuhari** 16, 2019. (AO, Jan.3, 3.10pm)
37. Youths, let’s not forget to collect our voters cards to get **atikulated next month**. Victory is sure Insha Allah! (NA, Jan.3, 8.35am)

The words “particular” and “February” are re-spelt in [36] and given selective cap: “pATIKUlar” in this context is made to point to Atiku as that candidate who cannot win, while “FeBuhari”, the month of the election, is “gymnastized” to point to Buhari and his month to win. In [37], notice the choice of “next month” instead of “February” to avoid calling attention to Buhari, while a brand new word: “atikulate+d” is coined by clipping the words “Atiku” and “articulate”, to give us “atikulate”. Other similar clippings and re-spellings in FB posts not included here are: Atikulooting, PigDP, Thiefnubu, OBItuary, Atikulooters, APigC, ApePC, PDPigs, etc. This lexical delegitimization adds some humour to the whole electioneering process.

6.13 Prophetism

Some people turn themselves into prophets in a bid to delegitimize opponents. Prophetism is a situation in which someone makes a prediction, especially with a claim to certain divine inspiration. However, usually the lie in these prophecies becomes obvious when the predictions fail.

38. Buhari **will die b4 2019** unless I am **not called** by God ~ Prophet Emmanuel Chukwudi. The painful thing is people still worship there. (OAS, Jan.3, 6.34pm)





39. 'I see **Buhari winning** the next Presidential election'- Fr Ejike Mbaka; 'I see **Atiku winning** the next presidential election'- TB Joshua; '2019 Election will be rigged, however, Buhari will win' - @Apostle Suleman. Are they serving **different God's**? (II, Jan 3, 12.24pm)

A "prophet of God" predicts in [38] that Buhari will die before 2019, obviously hinting that people should not "waste" their votes on him. However, we have prophecies and counter prophecies regarding the winner in [39]. It is clear that religiosity is often capitalized upon to defraud the gullible.

6.14 Sarcasm

Sarcasm is the use of language to deride or taunt the opposition with a tone of contempt and ridicule.

40. PDP said **the man in Aso Rock is Jubril** from Sudan. So if he is jubril, then **how is Amina** that is **from Jigawa related to him?**" (KB, Jan.4, 8.18am)
41. Shame on PDP!!! In less than 4yrs, **Someone from SUDAN is fixing** what they **couldn't fix in 16yrs.** (OL, Dec.12, 2.49pm)
42. **Secondus** led Atiku to sign the Peace Accord on **the Second Day**. Nobody loves **the word second** more than Secondus. (ISB2019, Dec 13, 12.51pm). Me: the **signal** that he will **come second** in **2019 presidential election** (SA, Dec.13, 5.14pm).

The PDP insists that PMB, the opposition candidate, is from Sudan, and APC is quoted in [40] pointing out the obvious contradiction: how can the PDP also claim that PMB is related to Amina Zakari from Jigawa State if he is from Sudan? The PDP is also taunted in [41], the poster pointing out that it is a shame that someone who they claim is from Sudan is achieving what they could not achieve in 16 years. Mr Secondus, the PDP National Chairman, is taunted in [42] with a pun on his name, having signed the Peace Accord on the "second" day of the event. It is thus indicated that his party is going to come "second" in the elections.

7 Discussion

This study identifying delegitimizing strategies in Nigerian political discourse on FB has shown that political campaigns could take various dimensions, in particular on SM where language plays a crucial role in the messages that are sent. Posters who engage in political discourse tend to spread statements and quotes by the external voices they are aligned with, or the opponents' statements that are considered to be self-incriminating. The use of political discourse on social media shows how opposing political parties resort to overt and covert linguistic strategies, sometimes even manipulations,





to delegitimize opponents and persuade the electorate to support them. For this purpose they employ language charged with attitudes, implicit and explicit judgements, and political stance taking. At the same time, the SM provides a level playing ground in the Nigerian political sphere, as the face threat or insecurity for users is close to zero. SM has thus become the new voice for the voiceless, and a site for a running, fierce, open political discourse where issues are raised, argued and protested, heralding a new era of easier, unrestricted access to political information that was hitherto hushed up – including the fake, the frank and the twisted. Thus the influence of SM on elections is never in doubt (see Dare 2015; Apuke, Tunca, 2018; Opeibi, 2019; Bello, et al., 2019, on Nigeria's 2011, 2015 and 2019 elections; and Harfoush, 2009; and Ng, 2016, on Obama's and Trump's electoral victories in the US). This is also illustrated by the strategies identified in this study. The influence on the political process continues to grow due to the free, fast and stress-free information sharing mechanism on SM. A successful and concentrated delegitimizing strategy may mean that a seriously delegitimized candidate has no chance at winning an election.

Considering our analysis of the various strategies set out above, political discourse on SM plays a massive role in how elections are won and lost, as prominent views and personalities are capable of swaying voters through these strategies. Our data and the 2019 presidential election results in Nigeria clearly support this observation. Dare (2015) argues that “this (2015 presidential) election was decided, dominated and directed by social media. (It) played a central role as a watchdog in keeping the integrity of the process...” (par. 5); while Bello et al. (2019, 1) claim that “compared to the actual election results, our Twitter analysis correctly predicts the winner in 24 states out of 37.” However, the influence lies mainly in the superior discursive firepower (i.e. argumentative schemes) shared easily and quickly rather than just in the online presence.

8 Conclusion

The study illustrated that words have become weapons on the discursive battlefield of SM. FB users post statements in which supporters go so low as to verbally attack the opposition directly and employ powerful linguistic strategies to project opponents as unworthy of the voters' trust. These strategies are a ploy to sway millions of SM users who feed on whatever words that align with their side.

When a poster launches their attack, it is quickly decoded and shot down or reinforced depending on the responder's attitude to it: whether or not it is read as a threat. A threat is any discourse that seeks to delegitimize political opponents and is perceived as such, while a non-threat seeks to reinforce a politician's political merit and is also read as such. Further analysis might show in more detail how SM users engage in political discourse on such platforms. Emphasis on the types of engagement and the





dialogic aspects of political discourse that occur on SM would give more insight into the observation that most people tend to support a post not necessarily because it is true, but because it strengthens or can improve the chances of their candidate winning.

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Waheed A. Bamigbade, Lawan Dalha

Nigeria's 2019 electioneering discourse: Strategies for delegitimizing political opponents on social media

Keywords: pragmatic acts; political discourse; delegitimization strategies; Facebook; Nigeria's 2019 general elections, words as battlefield.

The paper interrogates the various discourse strategies adopted by the electorate on social media (SM) to delegitimize political opponents and engender rivalry in the build-up to the February 2019 presidential elections in Nigeria. A total of forty-two (42) Facebook (FB) posts on Nigerian political discourse were purposively selected between November 2018 and January 2019, and subjected to pragmatic and evaluative analysis, adopting Mey's (2001) pragmatic acts theory and Martin and White's (2005) appraisal theory.

From our analysis, fourteen (14) different delegitimization strategies were found to have been utilized by the writers to achieve the pragmatic acts of discrediting political opponents as unworthy of being voted into powers, while concurrently persuading the electorate to support their side instead. These strategies include the following categories: facts and evidence, issue-based rhetorical question, frank issue-based opinion, contrastive engagement, and dysphemism. Others are implicit antithesis, direct verbal attack, allegations, irony, demonization, self-indictment, lexical gymnastics, sarcasm, and prophetism.

The findings show overt and covert persuasive strategies and interactivity towards the pragmatic act of delegitimizing political opponents, showing words as the real weapons on the





battlefield of politics. The analysis further reveals that people tend to support a SM post not necessarily because it is true, but because it supports the chances of their candidate or hurts the opposing side. Thus a platform has been provided for implicit and explicit political stance taking, which may be difficult outside SM due to certain insecurity and face threats. SM has become a site for a running, fierce, and open political discourse, the new voice for the voiceless, as well as for issue-based campaigns in Nigeria. It may well become a space where general elections are won and lost even before a vote is cast.

Waheed A. Bamigbade, Lawan Dalha

Diskurz volitev v Nigeriji 2019: Strategije delegitimiziranja političnih nasprotnikov v družbenih medijih

Ključne besede: pragmatična dejanja; politični diskurz; strategije delegitimiziranja; Facebook; splošne volitve v Nigeriji 2019; besede kot bojišče

Prispevek obravnava različne strategije za delegitimiziranje političnih nasprotnikov in krepitev političnega boja v diskurzu, ki so ga širili volivci v družbenih medijih v času nigerijskih predsedniških volitev februarja 2019. Za namen študije je bilo v obdobju med novembrom 2018 in januarjem 2019 zbranih skupno 42 objav na Facebooku, ki so vsebovale politični diskurz. Analiza objav se je osredotočila na pragmatične vidike jezika vrednotenja, pri čemer sta bili za teoretski okvir uporabljeni Meyeva teorija pragmatičnih dejanj (2001) in teorija jezika vrednotenja Martina in Whita (2005).

Analiza kaže, da je bilo uporabljenih 14 različnih strategij delegitimiranja, ki so jih pisci širili za diskreditiranje političnih nasprotnikov kot neprimernih za izvolitev in prepričevanje volivcev v podporo njihove strani. Te strategije vključujejo naslednje kategorije: dejstva in dokazi, retorična vprašanja na določeno temo, odkrito mnenje na določeno temo, izražanje kontrasta, disfemizem, implicitna antiteza, neposredni verbalni napad, obtožbe, ironija, demoniziranje, samoobtožba, leksikalna gimnastika, sarkazem in prerokbe.

Ugotovitve kažejo, da objave vsebujejo implicitne in eksplicitne strategije prepričevanja in interaktivnost v pragmatičnem dejanju delegitimiziranja političnih nasprotnikov, pri čemer besede postanejo arzenal na bojišču politike.

Analiza nadalje nakazuje, da ljudje objav v družbenih medijih običajno ne podpirajo zato, ker bi bile resnične, temveč zato, ker podpirajo izvolitev kandidata njihove strani ali kritizirajo nasprotno stran. Družbeni mediji tako ponujajo platformo za izražanje implicitnih in eksplicitnih političnih stališč, kar je zunaj družbenih medijev zaradi pomanjkanja varnosti in morebitnih groženj lahko težko. Ti mediji so postali mesto za tekoč, bojevit in odprt politični diskurz ter nov glas za tiste, ki so sicer brez glasu, kar odpira novo obdobje v političnih kampanjah v nigerijskih družbenih medijih. Družbeni mediji lahko sčasoma postanejo prostor, kjer se volitve dobijo ali izgubijo še pred dejanskimi volitvami.





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