

Ideological Analysis of Nigerian Ethnic Rivalry and Hate Speech on Social Media, and Implications for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Rivalry between members of Nigerian ethnic groups has been observed to spill on to social media platforms where citizens troll one another attracting ‘likes’ and ‘following’ from hundreds of thousands of other Nigerians. The paper is a socio-cognitive analysis of hate speech on social media platforms frequently used by Nigerians associated with the country’s major ethnic groups, and it draws out implications of such posts for the country’s sustainable development. The data are critically analysed using van Dijk’s (1998) ideological square, which describes how members of opposing groups engage in positive self-representation and negative other-representation in socio-political discourse. The findings reveal that hate speech between members of Nigerian ethnic groups on social media are propelled by breakaway thoughts, economic inclusion/exclusion, socio-political marginalisation, national language question, and social media mischief-making. The paper concludes that it is the duty of humanities scholars to come up with theories and approaches in their different disciplines that will interrogate knowledge and values and enhance Nigeria’s sustainable development as a leading player in Africa and beyond.

Keywords: ethnic rivalry, hate speech, social media, politics, sustainable development

Introduction

Nigeria prides itself as home to more than 300 ethnic groups and over 500 languages (Ethnologue); the country is reputed to be the most populous black nation on earth, and arguably one of the most endowed in many important respects. Social media exchanges that qualify for description as hate speech point to ethnic rivalry as one of the centrifugal forces that is threatening to tear the nation apart. It is interesting to observe that Nigeria’s media-political discourse permits the description of some languages and ethnic groups, *viz.*, Hausa-Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba, as “majority” while the remaining are variously described as regional, local or minority groups. The country’s multi-ethnicity has fuelled unwholesome feelings of dominance by some groups, especially in relation to power distribution and economic privileges on the one hand, and the resistance of dominance and oppression by members of the not so favoured groups, on the other hand.

Ethnic rivalry in Nigeria has been blamed in part on Lord Frederick Lugard for his amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorate of Nigeria into a single nation in 1914. It became even more prominent in the years preceding the country’s independence in 1960, when Nigeria’s three major political parties, the Northern People’s Congress (NPC), National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) and the Action group (AG) were led by Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba leaders, respectively. Predictably, each political party attracted majority of its members from the leader’s ethnic group which earned all of them the stamp of ethnicity. Ethnic rivalry became even more pronounced in the execution of Nigeria’s first military *coup d’état* in January 1966, and the counter *coup* of July 1966, which led to the Nigerian Civil War that lasted three gruesome years between 1967 and 1970. Ethnicity continues to play a major role

in Nigeria's political leadership with members of each ethnic group jostling to make one of their own occupy leadership positions, especially at the federal level; hence the unwritten practice between the North and the South captioned "rotational presidency" in Nigerian political parlance.

The development of telecommunication has brought Nigerians closer as modern telephony enables anyone to post any information that suits their fancy on social media with a potential for such information to become viral and reach millions of Nigerians and non-Nigerians alike in a matter of seconds. In view of this development, Humanities scholars, who include applied linguists, educators, psychologists, philosophers, political scientists, sociolinguists, sociologists, and more, have found the social media a rich mine for raw data on human behaviour, thoughts and interactions. Specifically, the social media in recent times have been agog with manifestations of ethnic rivalry between Nigerians in the form of hate speech on social media sites exemplified by *Facebook*, *Nairaland*, *TikTok*, *WhatsApp*, *X (Twitter)*, and *YouTube*, to mention but a few.

Social media has become established in the last two or more decades as a liberating and empowering fora where Nigerians across generations, gender and other persuasions express themselves without inhibition, fear of molestation or prosecution by the authorities. Many social media aficionados, some of who describe themselves as content creators, write on topics that include entertainment, online business opportunities, gossips, socio-political perspectives and more. Anonymity and spontaneity that the social media promotes have a way of making it possible for Nigerians to throw tantrums, promote breakaway ideologies, and post outright fabrications and misrepresentations. Consequently, too many socio-political posts by Nigerians on social media are reckless at best and potentially divisive at worst. This new found freedom explains why in their attempt to portray targeted individuals and institutions negatively, many social media users throw caution to the wind by publishing unsubstantiated information, libellous details, half-truths and white lies.

The term "politics" is used in this paper to describe the art of making public utterances that promote self or group interests on the one hand, or saying things that portray members of rival groups in a negative light, on the other hand. During Nigeria's 2023 presidential elections, for instance, adherents of rival political parties used social media to promote their preferred candidates and knock their candidates' opponents to score political points. The ensuing altercations that flew about during the season brought to the fore bitter divisions between members of the so-called 'majority' ethnic groups and political power blocs in the country; e.g.: Hausa-Fulani, Igbo, Ijaw, Kanuri, Yoruba, etc. Members of Nigeria's large ethnic groups appear to be in the forefront of ethnic rivalry on social media; hence self-acclaimed ethnic verbal warriors have a tendency to make posts that portray their ethnic groups positively and other ethnic groups negatively.

Hate speech on social media encapsulates all forms of expressions on social media capable of promoting the feeling of ethnic superiority, exacerbating unhealthy ethnic rivalry, and inciting ethnic violence, socio-political unrest or tensions in the country. It also entails the use of violent or manipulative expressions targeted at undermining the significance of one or more specific ethnic groups in the country. Therefore, hate speech can be safely described as the distortion of fact to achieve positive self-representation and negative other-representation (van Dijk, 1998, 2008; Chomsky, 2002). Underlying the manifestation of hate speech on social media are factors that include breakaway thoughts, socio-political and economic

inclusion/exclusion, national language question, and trolls; these and more constitute clogs in the wheel of a developing country's sustainable development.

The term sustainable development, in simple terms, refers to the United Nations' (2015) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), comprising 17 goals, which include poverty reduction, quality education for all citizens, affordable and clean energy, infrastructural development, peace, justice and strong institutions. Sustainable development, as espoused by the United Nations, entails ample evidence of above average intellectual and mental faculties by the citizens of a nation; the application of scientific and technological innovations in most spheres of life in the community; high literacy in the context of an efficient education system; and a democratic and economically stable nation where the essentials of life are accessible to all sections of the community.

According to Sen (1998, p. 3), development is "the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states." In essence, it is the process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy in a modern society. Sustainable development, therefore, refers to the process of economic, social and political transformation that aims to improve the quality of life and wellbeing of a country's citizens. It includes growth in the direction of political stability, justice, eradication of illiteracy, gender equality, protection of women and minors, poverty reduction, minimum standards in education, housing, social welfare, etc. (United Nations, 2015).

The challenges confronting sustainable development in Nigeria can be summarised as: improved quality of life for all citizens; equal rights and justice for all; equal opportunities for education and employment; security of lives and property; and freedom of movement by Nigerian citizens. Sustainable development in the Nigerian context should strike a balance between the present economic, social and environmental needs of the country and projections for its future growth. Key indices of sustainable development in Nigeria are socio-political inclusivity, justice and equity for all citizens irrespective of ethnicity, religion, economic growth, and environmental protection, etc. With the strident exchange of hate speech on social media, many Nigerian citizens and foreign observers express grave doubts about the future of Nigeria as a single and peaceful federation. Indeed, many activists and organisations in some parts of the country have expressed strong desires to break away from the Nigerian federation.

This paper, therefore, undertakes a socio-cognitive analysis of hate speech on social media platforms frequently used by participants associated with Nigeria's three major ethnic groups, Hausa-Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba. Specifically, the paper analyses socio-cognitive perspectives in the discourse with a view to drawing out implications for Nigeria's sustainable development as a leading African nation.

Empirical Review

While examining Sustainable Development Goal 16 as a panacea for combating social media electoral violence, Akinyetun, Odeyemi and Alausa (2021) observe that the use of technology is so widespread that it permeates almost every area of human life. They claim that this widespread use has culminated in the efficacy of social media as a tool of mass communication. With affordability and the pseudonyms it affords users, social media has enabled political

participation and civic engagement in advanced and emerging democracies. Due to its facelessness, lack of censor and uncontrollable influx, social media has become a goldmine for massive dissemination of information, political campaigns and of course, the spread of political hate speech. They note that one of the means through which peace can be attained in the society is by turning social media into a space where information is promptly available, awareness campaigns and knowledge dissemination are undertaken. Furthermore, they note that transparent, accountable, and participatory governance is promoted when a culture of dialogue where aggrieved parties can be allowed fair hearing is entrenched.

As illustration, Akinyetun *et al* allude to Nigeria's 2019 general elections during which social media was used to taunt the opposition and provoke electoral violence. However, they assert that in spite of the negativity attached to social media, it can equally be used to promote peace and compromise in line with the United Nations' sustainable development goals. They claim that for a peaceful and inclusive society, therefore, there is a need to seek alternative means by which electoral violence sparked by social media can be mitigated using sustainable development goals. They conclude that in line with Sustainable Development Goal 16, the 2015 Cybercrime Act should be enforced to combat social media hate speech, disinformation, and propaganda that can provoke electoral violence.

Rufus and Anyanwu (2019) investigate hate speech and disrespect for the opposition drawing out their implications for democratic coalition and national development. According to them, hate speech is the use of language in a manner that could create divisions and incite violence in society. They observe that national development and democratic coalitions are undermined by both legitimate and questionable avenues through which political parties attain power. They aver that Nigeria's 2011, 2015 and 2019 general elections were characterized by hate speech which heated up the polity. The post-election violence in 2011 in particular, showed that hate speech was used to incite people against one another. They finger disrespect for the opposition and political rivals as catalysts for the use of vulgar language among the citizenry. According to them, hate speech is a manifestation of intolerance of the opposition which often results in the breakdown of law and order, mass destruction of property, and loss of lives. Rufus and Anyanwu (2019) conclude that hate speech and disrespect for the opposition constitute real threats to democratic dispensation in the country. They recommend that for the survival of democracy in the country, the Nigerian government must invoke prevailing national and international laws to curb the spread of hate speech and punish perpetrators.

Okpara and Chukwu (2019) posit that hate speech is an aspect of language that reflects its socio-cultural realities. Employing Speech Acts theory, they examine the effect of hate speech on national cohesion. They describe hate speech as a speech act that is "doing something" i.e. has a visible effect on the victims which could be violent or traumatic. In other words, hate speech transcends its linguistic form to become an act which negatively affects people and poses a threat to the unity of any community or nation where it is permitted. They note that the multiethnic nature of Nigeria permits the festering of hate speech because the diverse ethnic groups embrace a culture of "we" versus "them" which is inimical to national cohesion and sustainable development. They further observe that hate speech is as a consequence of marginalisation, economic hardship and power struggles, all of which are clear indicators of disunity among people. The paper establishes the prevalence of hate speech in Nigeria and concludes that factors that give rise to hate speech should be minimized and laws enacted to mitigate its spread.

Adeyeri and Aluede (2021) investigate the trajectory and role of ethnic propaganda and hate speech in Igbo-Hausa/Fulani relations and mass violence during the postcolonial era. Post-independent Nigeria consisted of different regions – the Igbo, Yoruba and other influential ethnic groups like the Ijaw, Efik, Ibibio and Edo constitute the southern part and they are predominantly Christian, while the Hausa/Fulani, Tiv, Jukun, Kanem, Igala occupy the northern part of the country and they are predominantly Muslim. These different ethnic nationalities were independent states before colonization and the British enforced the 1914 amalgamation which forced them together under the name Nigeria. They observe that tactical divide and rule colonial policies were employed such that the north and the south became antagonistic of one another resulting in regional politics and other sectional divisive tendencies which have become endemic till date. The forced marriage of the different regions brought up ethnic and regional issues with each ethnicity promoting its own agenda above others.

Adeyeri and Aluede (2021) claim that ethnic propaganda and hate speech are offshoots of the divisive colonial policies that were employed during the colonial rule which has remained till the contemporary times. Since independence, ethnic propaganda and hate speech have caused pain, misery and even death in the country. They opine that the civil war was incited by hate speech and that the major upheavals in the country including the *coup d'états* were incited by ethnic propaganda. The paper concludes that post-colonial Igbo/Fulani relations have been marred by ethnic propaganda and hate speech which has left violent conflicts, widespread violations of human rights, and attendant mutual suspicion and hatred in its wake. They posit that laws prohibiting hate speech should be implemented and fresh legislation for the mitigation of hate speech should be promulgated.

Akinyelu and Abubakar (2021) investigate the role of hate speech in ethnic/tribal, religious and communal clashes in Nigeria. They opine that negative use of language in the form of hate speech is a veritable tool for the promotion of violence and insecurity especially because of the multi-ethnic nature of the country. They note that since language is a window to the human mind, the use of hate speech across Nigeria exposes people's mind set towards one another, fuels brutality and violence, and promotes economic hardship in the country. They mention reprisal attacks by Fulani herdsmen as a response to old or recent ethnic hate speech. As such, they assert that no nation can achieve socio-economic development where socio and physical insecurity persists. When hate speech thrives, language is used negatively to distort peaceful coexistence thereby disrupting the country's economic development. Very much like most of their contemporaries (e.g.: Okpara & Chukwu, 2019; Rufus & Anyanwu, 2019; Akinyetun, Odeyemi & Alausa, 2021), Akinyelu and Abubakar conclude that government at all levels should come up with laws that prohibit the use of inciting language or hate speech and ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice.

Critical Discourse Analysis

This paper, like many previous studies on power and ideology, fall under the aegis of critical discourse analysis (CDA), which acknowledges that real texts are produced and disseminated in real situational contexts. Consequently, critical discourse analysts are aware of the contribution of scholarly insights to the progress and transformation of society. CDA seeks to forge links between mainstream linguistics and critical social theory in order to comprehend the role played by language use in asymmetrical power relations and social and political identity (Fairclough, 1992). More specifically, it “studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and

inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (van Dijk 2003, p. 352). Such research is undertaken through interdisciplinary techniques of text analysis to portray social identities, social relationships and political ideologies.

Our perception of the notion of ideology in this paper is anchored on Jaworski and Coupland’s (1999, p. 496) definition of the term as “social representations shared by members of a group and used by them to accomplish everyday social practices.” Citing Billig et al (1988), they further describe ideology from the intellectual perspective “as an overall, coherent, system of thought: political programmes or manifestos, philosophical orientations or religious codification.” According to Wodak (2001, p. 6), “dominant structures stabilise conventions and naturalise them, that is, the effects of power and ideology in the production of meaning are obscured and acquire stable and natural forms that are taken as given”. A linguistic study of media-political discourse frequently entails an elicitation of the contending ideological and power strategies that are often manipulated in discourse production by representatives of institutions and groups that are diametrically opposed to each other with the ultimate aim of winning public sympathy.

Contemporary socio-political movements in most parts of the world today is in the direction of participatory ‘democracy’. In the past decade or so, the ideology of capitalism has been adorned with the new garb of ‘globalisation’. The claim that it engenders freedom, equality, prosperity and equal opportunity has made it attractive to many Third World nations, one of which is Nigeria. Even though these two terms appear innocuous and appeal to the common sense, individuals, representing groups and institutions who consider themselves winners or losers, as it were, often disagree on their meaning. While some see the ideas as the avenue to national development and prosperity for all, others view them as weapons of socio-political and economic domination of the world by some industrialised western powers.

Critical discourse analysts are explicitly aware of their role in society by engaging in socio-politically situated linguistic analyses, which aim to offer a different perspective of theorizing analyses and applications. Among others, critical discourse analysis (CDA) focuses primarily on “social problems and political issues [...] and on the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimise, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society” (van Dijk (2003, p. 353). Dominant groups in today’s world use discourse to control or oppress minorities and weaker groups, on the one hand, while dissidents and members of the dominated group equally rely on it to resist domination or oppression, on the other hand. Consequently, the tools of CDA have been found invaluable for insightful interpretation of the meanings and the elicitation of the discursive tendencies and ideologies underlying such texts.

Wodak (2001, p. 9) writes that the term ‘critical’ should be understood as “having distance to the data, embedding the data in the social, taking a political stance explicitly, and a focus on self-reflection as scholars doing research.” It can be deduced from the above summation that the methodology of CDA should be viewed as revelation, self-reflexive and socially transformative (Locke, 2004, p. 26). The French philosopher, Michel Foucault was credited with locating the ‘critical’ in the systematic analytical endeavour to reveal the nature of systems of rules, principles and values as historically situated bases for critique (Foucault, 1980; Kress, 1985). His analysis, which he referred to as ‘archaeology’ and its product which he referred to as ‘genealogy’ could be seen as an attempt at eliciting the origin and development

of ways of thinking which influence more recent attempts to study human beings as objects of scientific enquiry.

It is the duty of the discourse analyst with linguistic background to apply a combination of the analytical tools of linguistics with their knowledge and experience of the world to arrive at an empirical interpretation of a text. CDA is used in this paper to analyse both the textual and the contextual factors that affect both the production and the possible interpretation of social media discourse in the Nigerian socio-political context. Critical discourse analysts, according to van Dijk (1993) “seek to explore the role of formal structures, features, or other properties of text, verbal interaction, or communicative events in the interpretation of power relations.” Critical discourse analysis, according to Fairclough (1992), seeks to forge links between mainstream linguistics and critical social theory in order to comprehend the role played by language use in asymmetrical power relations and social and political identity. It typically seeks to link the formal features of texts with social and political contexts and often broadens out the definition of text to include symbolic representations which may appear alongside the written and spoken word. According to Lakoff (2001), power provides its possessor with language authority and language authority in turn provides its possessors with power. The tools of CDA are used in this paper to make explicit the linguistic choices of social media discourse producers and elicit the *raison d’être* for such choices.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Socio-political posts that qualify for description as hate speech were gathered from social media platforms, viz.: *Facebook*, *Nairaland*, *WhatsApp*, and *X (Twitter)* platforms frequented by Nigerians. Ten data samples were purposively and responsibly selected for socio-cognitive analysis. The adverbial “responsibly” is used here to describe the exclusion of venomous and potentially provocative posts that could detract from the purpose of the paper. The data are critically analysed using van Dijk’s (2008) ideological square, which describes how members of opposing groups engage in positive self-representation and negative other-representation on social media platforms. The findings are summarised under five broad sub-headings: breakaway thoughts, economic inclusion/exclusion, socio-political marginalisation, national language question, and social media mischief-making.

The procedure for data analysis is governed generally by CDA, an interdisciplinary and multimethodological approach that has been found useful for analysing socio-political media discourse. The approach has been found especially useful for the analysis of hate speech on social media because of the complex dimensions of the discourse. Some of the key dimensions in the discourse include the historical, legal, linguistic, philosophical, political, psychological, religious, and sociological. In view of the multidimensionality of the discourse, van Dijk’s (1998) socio-cognitive approach has been adopted specifically for the data analysis because it connects discourse, social cognition and society in a triangular conceptual structure. The structure depicts how group members’ mental representations (cognition) systematically mediate between their everyday practices of interaction (discourse) and social structures (society).

Van Dijk’s Ideological Square is a strategy that combines underlying social beliefs to their expression in discourse. It takes the form of positive self-representation and negative other-representation in the analysis of group conflict and the ways people interact with members of opposing groups (van Dijk, 1998; 2008). Thus, in applying this analytical

approach, socio-political ideologies are articulated by the binary objective of emphasising the positive deeds of the side we belong to and emphasising the negative deeds of our rival(s) in the struggle for socio-political supremacy or relevance. This polarisation is organised by an evaluative framework known as the “ideological square” which is functionally guided by the four strategies listed below (van Dijk, 1998, p. 267):

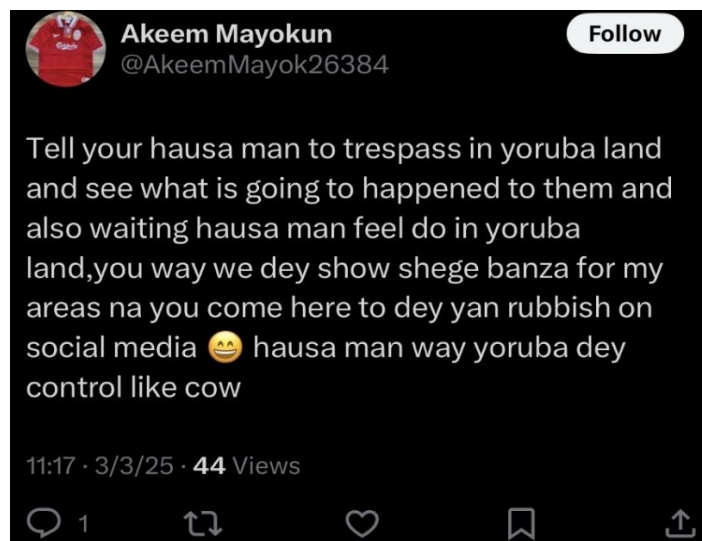
- 1) Express/emphasize information that is ‘positive’ about us.
- 2) Express/emphasize information that is ‘negative’ about them.
- 3) Suppress/de-emphasize information that is ‘positive’ about them.
- 4) Suppress/de-emphasize information that is ‘negative’ about us.

Basically, critical discourse analysis must of necessity engage in ideological analysis; hence the adopted framework effectively analyses and accurately interprets prevailing perspectives and views in social media texts that systematically express ideological polarizations involving rival ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Data Presentation and Analysis

As hinted in the methodology section, data samples had to be carefully selected from an array of hate speech on social media so as not to exacerbate ethnic tension during the presentation of the paper. Sampling had to be done with a high sense of responsibility and academic diligence; hence potentially provocative and divisive texts were stepped down. Ten data samples relating to Nigeria’s three major ethnic groups were purposively selected for socio-cognitive analysis. Data Samples One to Four are critical of the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group; Five to Seven are critical of the Igbo ethnic group; while eight to Ten are critical of the Yoruba ethnic group. However, the samples have been labelled according to the prevailing ideological dimensions of hate speech in Nigerian social media discourse.

Data Sample One (Ethnic Intolerance)



Data Sample Two (Ethno-religious Intolerance)



Data Sample Three (Fear of Socio-political Exclusion)



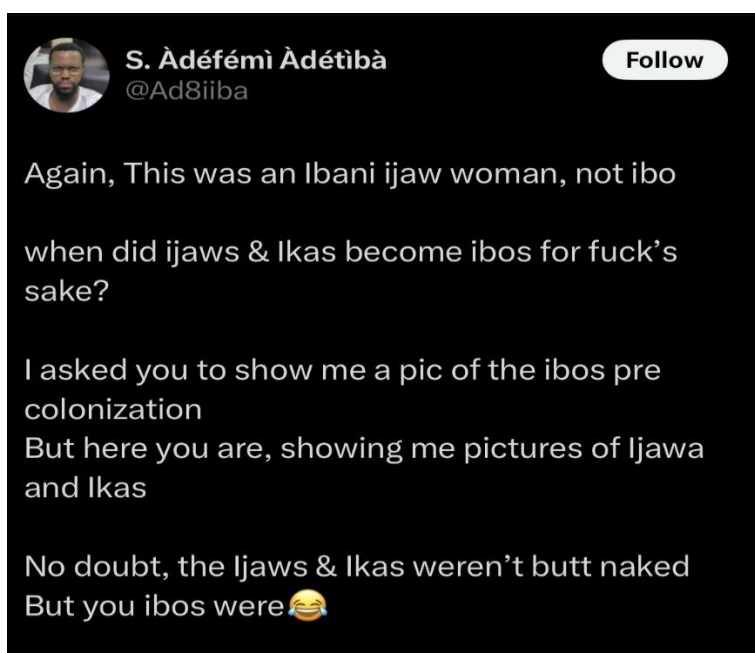
Data Sample Four (Ethno-religious Intolerance)



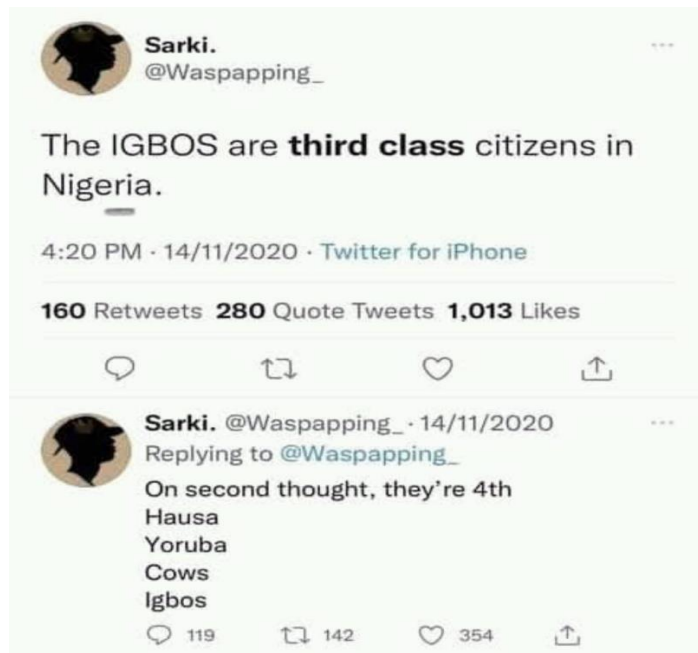
Data Sample Five (Ethnic Intolerance)



Data Sample Six (Ethnic Inclusion/exclusion)



Data Sample Seven (Ethnic Superiority/Inferiority)



Data Sample Eight (Ethno-religious Intolerance)



Data Sample Nine (Sectionalism)



Data Sample Ten (Sectionalism)



Data Analysis and Discussion

The data analysis is done under five captions: breakaway thoughts, economic inclusion/exclusion, socio-political marginalisation, national language question, and social media mischief-making.

1. Breakaway Thoughts

Ethnic rivalry has been fingered in the discordant quest by vocal elements associated with some ethnic groups to break away from the Nigerian federation. Some Hausa-Fulani elements talk of Arewa Republic; the Yoruba talk of Oduduwa Republic; the Igbo talk of the state of Biafra. The minority ethnic groups too are not left out of the clamour for breakaway. Data Samples One, Two, Four and Five, which exhibit ethno-religious intolerance between Nigerian ethnic groups, reveal how members of rival ethnic groups accuse one another of being the ones whose actions and inactions fuel breakaway ideology in the country. Data Sample Two brazenly suggests breakup of the country, while Data Sample Five suggests 'Korofa/NOK Republic' as the name for yet another breakaway republic.

The social media has become a prime forum for talk on breakaway because it permits Nigerians to talk freely on topics that would have been considered treasonable felony if tabled in a physical context. Breakaway thoughts by members of a socio-cultural group is the consequence of unequal distribution of resources, lop-sidedness in civil service appointments, selective justice and oppressive tendencies in the country. This ideology has been robustly articulated in Nigeria by the formation of sociocultural groups like Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Arewa Republic, Oduduwa Republic, etc. Breakaway thoughts or separatist ideologies have serious implications for the sustainable development of Nigeria as a leading economic and political touch bearer in Sub-Saharan Africa.

2. Economic Inclusion/Exclusion

Since crude oil became Nigeria's major source of income in the late 60's, many Nigerians have come to stupendous wealth and prominence through elective positions, public office appointments, and award of lucrative contracts at the federal level. Consequently, election into federal positions and appointment into public offices are associated with economic inclusion, while failure to win elections and appointment into public offices are interpreted as economic exclusion. Quite often, the ethnicity and perhaps political affiliation of Nigerian office holders determine the ultimate beneficiaries of the wealth, influence and economic opportunities that accompany access to Nigeria's seat of government. Van Dijk's ideological square accurately captures the mind set of Nigerians in regard to elective positions at the federal level. This it does by elucidating the binary ideological oppositions in the discourse.

Data Sample Five espouses the ideology that the Yoruba, the assumed indigenes of Lagos city, should enjoy the city's wealth to the exclusion of non-Yoruba, especially the Igbo and arch-rival of the Yoruba. Likewise, Data Sample Ten brazenly states that Nigerian leaders are in power basically to serve the economic interest of members of their ethnic groups. This explains the notion of "rotational presidency" or "*emi lo kan*" [it's my turn] that has prevailed in the country since the reintroduction of democracy in 1979. To achieve a measure of inclusion in the country, the Nigerian electorate has come to terms with the periodic rotation of the country's presidency between the North and the South. With this peculiar dispensation, election

to the office of Nigeria's president is determined more by the criteria of ethnicity and sectionalism, than leadership skills, character and experience. One wonders if a modern country can attain sustainable development in the context of widespread bickering over economic inclusion/exclusion between rival ethnic groups.

3. Socio-political Marginalisation

Members of Nigerian ethnic groups appear to be in morbid fear of socio-political exclusion or marginalisation, especially when it comes to access to socio-political power and relevance in the country. Nigerian ethnic rivalry is often expressed through accusations and counter-accusations against one another on different types of marginalisation such as: educational, economic, linguistic, infrastructural, appointments, citing of industries, location of federal government offices, and more. Following the culture of positive self-representation and negative other-representation in Nigerian polity, Data Sample Three shows members of minority groups in Plateau State expressing the fear that the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group often takes the credit unfairly for the former's contribution to food production in the country.

Likewise, Data Sample Six casts a slur on the Igbo ethnic group as being "butt naked" (uncivilised); hence insinuating that the people are unworthy of benefiting from the perks of civilisation, famously referred to as "National Cake" in Nigerian parlance. For decades, much of Nigerian socio-political discourse centres on bickering on how some regions enjoy federal benefits, while others are marginalised or excluded. Consequently, Nigerians expect their sons and daughters in federal positions to concentrate more on what they can bring home to benefit their people and less on fairness and equitable distribution of opportunities and resources across the country.

4. National Language Question

Nigeria has been grappling with the national language question since its independence in 1960. Nigeria's 1999 *Constitution* accords some measure of recognition to Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, yet Nigerian public officers and civil servants, many of whom hail from minority language groups, made little or no attempt to implement this provision in the country's constitution. In truth, Nigerians have genuine fears about the consequences of choosing any of the three indigenous language as national/official languages because the culture and ways of the people whose language is chosen will ultimately eclipse the language and culture of all other ethnic groups as it happened in Australia, Canada, UK and USA where the English language eclipsed the native languages. Data Sample Nine illustrates the thinking of Nigerians on the dangers inherent in elevating any or all of the three major Nigerian indigenous languages to the status of national/official language. The data sample mischievously places Igbo in the first position, followed by Hausa and Pidgin, and relegates Yoruba, which indisputably enjoys the same status as Hausa and Igbo in the country, to the background.

The ultimate beneficiary of ethno-linguistic rivalry in Nigeria is the English language which continues to grow in leaps and bounds by entrenching itself deeper as the language of administration, business, education, and the default language of communicating with children in elite homes. The pre-eminence of English as official language continues to cast a shadow on the status of Nigeria as an independent country. Likewise the choice of Pidgin (also called *Naija*) is not without many challenges, which include prestige and dependence on English lexis and structures for its development and standardisation. Many questions come to the fore in

regard to sustainable development of Nigerian indigenous languages: when will Nigeria wean itself from the language of her colonial master; for how long will Nigerian indigenous languages remain in the shadow of a foreign language in the education and administration of the country; can an African nation achieve sustainable development on the tombstone of its native languages?

5. Social Media Mischief-making

Social media mischief-making is used in this analysis to capture trolling acts, a prominent feature of ethnic rivalry and hate speech exchange between Nigerians on social media. The term refers to the act of posting an insulting message on social media in order to annoy members of rival groups. Its hallmark is “positive self-representation and negative other-representation” (van Dijk, 1998). Trolls are used to upset people, whip up sentiments and stir up trouble. Data Sample One compares Hausa to cows; Data Sample Eight describes Yoruba people as ‘Islamic Salafist’; while Data Samples Six and Seven describe Igbo people as ‘butt naked’ and third/fourth class’ citizens, respectively. These descriptions are meant to infuriate the members of both ethnic groups and make them respond with equally hurtful trolls. Trolls like these are quite commonplace on *Twitter*, *Facebook*, *Nairaland* and *TikTok*, to mention but a few social media platforms. One wonders how far Nigeria can go on the road to sustainable development in a climate of unhealthy competition, mutual distrust and ethnic hatred.

Summary and Conclusion

Firstly, the paper fingers ethnic rivalry as the root cause of the dissemination of hate speech by Nigerians on social media. This deleterious practice fuels unhealthy ethnic rivalry and bitterness among citizens, which does not augur well for the country’s sustainable development. Secondly, the paper avers that many Nigerians express hatred, not only against rival ethnic groups, but against the Nigerian federation because they feel economically and politically excluded from benefiting from the Nigerian dream. Consequently, not only do such Nigerians nurse the idea of break up, they also dream of relocating to foreign countries to escape the disintegration they imagine will one day befall the nation. Thirdly, the paper establishes that uncontrolled use of violent language and pervasive trolls on social media are manifestations of the mistrust and hatred that Nigerians have for members of rival ethnic groups. It is worrisome how sustainable development can thrive in such toxic environment.

Finally and more importantly, the paper aligns with the truism that multiethnicism, multilingualism and multiculturalism are inseparable from Nigeria’s socio-political reality. Language is central to the three notions of multiethnicism, multilingualism and multiculturalism because it encapsulates the real essence and uniqueness of the Nigerian people, on the one hand, and serves as the driver of progress, enlightenment and inherited values, on the other hand. Ideological analysis reveals that ethnic rivalry between Nigerians on social media platforms suggests that the loyalty of Nigerians is more to their ethnic group than the Nigerian nation. The analysis further reveals that Nigerians have deep fears on the consequences of the possible emergence of any of the country’s indigenous languages as national/official language; hence the denigration of rival languages on social media.

Therefore, Nigerian linguists must of necessity engage in research that addresses issues affecting the continued survival of the country as a multiethnic and multilingual nation. But for countries like India and South Africa that use a combination of indigenous and foreign

languages as national and official languages, most great nations of the world run their countries using their indigenous languages. If Nigeria had had a single dominant language or had agreed to the elevation of one of its major languages to the status of national/official language, it would have been easier for the country to either ease out English or at least pair it up with such indigenous language(s) for governance, education, business and other important functions.

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