

# A Critical Discourse Analysis of Metaphor in the Conceptualisation of Nigerian Hate Speech in Some Online Platforms

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## Abstract

Previous scholarly works on metaphor have conscientiously focused on literary and stylistic analysis of texts with limited efforts on the role language plays in the conceptualisation of metaphor that underpins different manifestations of hate speech in online platforms in Nigeria. This study, therefore, aims to account for linguistic and ideological analyses of the concept of metaphor in hate speech discourse in select online platforms in Nigeria. The study is anchored on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) and Transitivity System (Halliday, 1985) as theoretical framework. The insights from these theories explain how speakers in online platforms use language in their concrete domain to map into abstract domain of existence through the grammar of a clause. It is a descriptive and qualitative research with data purposively selected from three online platforms: one social media platform (*Facebook*) and two online newspapers (*Daily Post* and *Sahara Reporters*) in Nigeria. The data were coded and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to unravel discourse issues in metaphor discussion of hate speech. The findings reveal that online language users (netizens) employ different types of metaphors such as: dehumanising metaphor, disease metaphor, animal metaphor, threat metaphor and ideological metaphor to delegitimise the out-group 'Them' and legitimise the in-group 'Us' in discourse situations. The study concludes that the use of metaphors is significant in hate speech discourse because it helps discussants to convey their intentions with implicitness in order to avoid threatening the positive face of interlocutors in discourses.

**Keywords:** Critical discourse analysis, hate speech, metaphor, ideological analysis, Nigeria

## Introduction

The background of hate speech in Nigeria is deeply rooted in the historical, ethnic, religious and political diversities of the country. The British colonial administration that amalgamated the northern and southern protectorate in 1914, thus, brought over two hundred and fifty (250) ethnic groups, languages and cultures together and strengthens group solidarity (Adediran et al. 2021). In other words, the colonial administration policy of divide and rule deepens ethnic cleavages and lays groundwork for intergroup mistrust that continues to fuel hate speech in Nigeria. In a similar manner, the post-independence divisive politics of the political elite was also a source of division that contributes to the spread of hate speech in Nigeria together with other factors that culminate to the ill-fated Nigerian civil war from 1967–1970 which have continued to generate hatred among the ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. However, in recent times, hate speech emerged as one of the most disruptive elements in public discourses, especially during electioneering with reference to 2015, 2019 and 2023 general elections in Nigeria where hate speech targeting candidate's ethnic and religious identities dominated discussions online and offline contributing to polarisation and mistrust among Nigerians.

Therefore, hate speech in Nigeria's socio-political discourse is the reflection of the fragile unity, ethnic diversity, religious divisions, persistent identity-based politics and the overall complexities that surround Nigeria's socio-political experiences. As a result of the foregoing, Nigerians have been speaking on national issues from ideological perception of group members, socially representing their groups' interest at the expense of national interest (Nwugo, 2025). These underlying factors constitute division, blame game, group solidarity and counter accusation that polarise Nigeria into north and south, Christian and Muslim, in-group and out-group and Us versus Them dichotomies which project positive self-representation and negative other-representation. However, the motivation for this study arises from the increasing prevalence of divisive language in the country's public space and the need to understand how hate speech is constructed, spread and resisted by group members with the view to promoting peaceful co-existence and national unity. The study therefore investigates these factors and their intricate linguistic mapping of one domain of experience into another and the role language play as a medium of communication in public discourses.

In cognitive linguistics, metaphor is referred to as a cross-domain mapping that conceptualises one domain of experience (source) into another domain of experience (target). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) opine that metaphor is not just a figurative device but a cognitive frame that structures how we understand abstract concepts from the concrete existence in our environments. In the context of hate speech, metaphors shape how groups are perceived by reinforcing ideologies that legitimise marginalisation, dehumanisation and social exclusion. It is a linguistic mapping that enables language users to construct 'Us' versus 'Them' dichotomy which is the overall strategy of positive self-representation and negative other-representation. These linguistic mapping reinforce hostility by framing the out-group as less human worthy of extermination.

Thus, hate speech is not just an expression of hatred, offensive or negative speech against an individual or group but a mode of thought and representation that shapes how individuals and groups are perceived and projected within the society (Nwugo, 2025). In ideological discourse such as hate speech, language users observe systematic metaphorical mapping that construct in-group favouritism and out-group derogation, a construct that polarises the country into 'Us' versus 'Them'. In Nigeria for instance, the major means of polarisation centres on the categorisation between the south and north, east and west, Igbo and Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo/Hausa, Christian and Muslim and so forth (Nwugo, 2025). These categorisation strategies put a strain on our existence as a nation and implicitly employs metaphor to foreground hatred against the out-groups without obviously threaten the positive face of interlocutors in discourse or attract government scrutiny.

However, this study deploys two complementary frameworks to analyse metaphor in the context of hate speech. They are Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) and Halliday's (1985) Transitivity System. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) discusses how metaphor structures thought and language (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) and Halliday's (1985, 2014) Transitivity System explains how the grammar of a clause represents experiences, participants and ideological underpinning in discourse. The combination of these analytical approaches enables us to examine both cognitive underpinning and grammatical realisation of metaphor in hate speech discourse to construct ideologies. This study therefore, attempts to provide answer to different

types of metaphors in hate speech discourse and the role of transitivity in constructing ideological polarisation in discourses of hate speech.

### **Discourse of Hate Speech**

Studies on hate speech in Nigeria appear to focus largely on explicating the legal (Brown, 2017), sociological and literal manifestations of hate speech and not necessarily involving the philosophical or mental mapping that underscores linguistics interpretation of metaphor in discourses generally and hate speech discourse in particular. However, language as an instrument in discourse has a strong influence on the beliefs, perceptions and the entirety of the people by constructing their worldviews based on the concrete objects or phenomenon that exist in the environments to better understand the physical world. Thus, language is phenomenal in discourse because there is hardly any society without a functional language. Halliday (1985) states that language perform three different kinds of function simultaneously, which are ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions of language. Beyond these metafunctions of language, it is also used to entertain, educate, inform, teach moral lessons and build a society but when language intends to demean, incite, maliciously malign, offensive and hurtful with the aim of stereotyping, profiling or stigmatising a group of people on the basis of religion, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and other protected characteristics, it is known as hate speech (Nwugo, 2025).

Hate speech is often rooted in and generates intolerance and hatred in many contexts, it can be demeaning and divisive. Cohen-Almagor (2013) defines hate speech as: a bias-motivated, hostile, malicious speech aimed at a person or a group of people because of some of their actual or perceived innate characteristics (p. 43). It expresses discriminatory, intimidating, disapproving, antagonistic and/or prejudicial attitudes toward those characteristics; which include gender, race, religion, ethnicity, colour, national origin, disability, or sexual orientation. Hate speech is aimed to injure, dehumanise, harass, intimidate, debase, degrade and victimise the targeted groups and to foment insensitivity and brutality against them. Ayodele (2020) investigates the lexicogrammatical features and their logogenetic patterns as carriers of discourse structure that produce hateful emotions relating group inter and intra-interpretation of social exclusion and marginalisation in Nigeria. The concept was investigated from the theoretical prisms of van Dijk's (2014) social-cognitive theory and Halliday's (2004) lexicogrammatical model. The study reveals that hate discourse thrives on the basis of in-group positive self-representation and out-group negative other-representation. The paper concludes that beyond legislation, good government policies will stem the tide of disintegration that hate discourse is capable of bringing. Despite the merits of this study to scholarship, it did not reveal, in categorical term, the constituents of hate speech or various manifestations of hate speech in Nigeria. This becomes a gap in knowledge that this study sets to fill.

Iroka (2013) explores the level of prominence in the use of abusive language in four Nigerian newspapers namely: *The Nation*, *Daily Sun*, *Daily Trust* and *Guardian News*. She adopts Dell Hymes's (1962) *Ethnography of speaking* and Brown and Levinson's (1987) *Face Threatening Acts* as theoretical framework. The study finds out that when individuals are faced with unfavourable or unpleasant conditions, most resort to abusive language/hate speech as escape or reprisal route. She concludes that most people spent time on abusing other people instead of

addressing issues and she recommends constructive criticism as a means of addressing issues of public interest. This study fails to differentiate between abusive languages and hate speech. Ezeibe (2015) studies the role of hate speech in electoral violence in Nigeria. The study emphasises the negative consequences of hate discourse before, during and after the build-up of 2015 election. The research data were gathered from interviews of religious leaders, traditional leaders and leaders of civil society groups in the six (6) geopolitical zones in Nigeria. The study adopts discourse analysis as theoretical framework and it was discovered that hate contents are spread by some politicians in Nigeria as campaign strategy. He opines that print and non-print media play a pivotal role in propagating anti-democratic stance during electioneering in Nigeria. Though, the study sampled opinion from the six geo-political zones in Nigeria, however, the sample size was not clearly stated thereby limiting the generalisability of the research findings.

Sopuruchi and Bestman (2021) explore discourse structures of hate discourse in Nigeria. The study examines twenty-one (21) excerpts by selected political actors in Nigeria. The data were obtained from online newspapers and twitter handles of political actors. The paper was anchored on van Dijk's (1997) Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) and the research design was emergent. The findings reveal that selected hate discourses manifest the semantic structure of local coherence where negative action of in-group members was treated as an exception whereas those of the out-group are over generalised, and it also reveals that syntactic-related structure of hate discourses reveal speakers' use of pronouns to emphasis their bad deeds and emphasis our good deeds. They conclude that hate speech affects national integration and development as a result of suspicion and lack of trust among ethnic groups. The paucity of the gap in this study was based on the fact that the identity of the political actors whose opinions were sampled were not revealed. This, however, may affect the validity of the research findings.

Taofoek and Adewale (2020) explore hate speech and violence by studying the perlocutionary thrusts of select utterances on RUGA settlement initiative in Nigeria. The study was interrogated from pragmatics point of view using Speech Acts Theory, Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) as theoretical framework. The data were purposively selected from online news publications between January 2018 and August 2019. The findings show the use of assertive, verdictives, commissives, expressives, and declarations to probe into pragmatic conditions and made the speeches qualify for hate speech in Nigerian context. The tone in most of the speeches is attacking tilting towards ethno-religious and regional affiliations of the speakers' groups. They find that the utterances exhibit strong illocutionary force indexical of inciting one group against another. The paper concludes by advising social commentators, leaders of professional bodies and religious leaders to be mindful of their use of language to foster unity rather than incitement to violence. The conceptualisation of hate speech in Nigeria is problematic and unraveling its manifestations is quite challenging. However, the study's use of limited time for data collection into a phenomenon such as hate speech, may query the reliability of the research findings thereby creating a gap for further studies to ensure a robust analysis of hate speech in Nigeria.

Ayansola and Oamen (2018) study online hate speeches: legitimisation processes by Nigerian political actors. The objective is to highlight the discursive legitimisation strategies that are employed to legitimise hate speech as part of the processes of political institutionalisation. The study adapts legitimisation theory as applicable in marketing and competitive business organisation, considering the fact that politicians deploy hate speech as strategies for having

political edge (Lavrusheva, 2013; Goessens, 2015). It is a descriptive study examining excerpts from political gladiators randomly selected from ethno-social and political groups across Nigeria's political divide. The study reveals that any particular hate speech of political gladiators is a cultural product marketed by the politicians through the legitimisation process of innovation, local validation, diffusion and generalisation with its negative influence on Nigeria's political institutionalisation process (Ayansola and Oamen, 2018). Charteris-Black (2004) investigates Metaphor through his Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) where he argues that metaphor is not just a linguistic device but also a tool for persuasion and ideological discourse. He triangulated insights from Cognitive Linguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics to uncover how metaphors persuade, legitimate and reinforce dominant ideologies in discourses. The study finds that metaphor is a rhetorical strategy and not just cognitive mappings. He concludes that CMA is highly relevant in the analysis of political discourse, advertising and media framing. Despite the study's relevance in metaphor discourse, it was criticised for its methodological ambiguity in the identification and interpretation of texts.

In all of the studies above (Charteris-Black, 2004; Iroka, 2013; Ezeibe, 2015; Ayansola and Oamen, 2018; Ayodele, 2020; Taofeek and Adewale, 2020; Sopuruchi and Bestman, 2021) hardly had I find anyone scholarly work that discusses hate speech using Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Transitivity System of the System Functional Linguistics (SFL) to unravel discourse issues in hate ideology. This study seeks to unveil different types of metaphors in the discourse of hate speech in select online platforms in Nigeria. Thus, creating research window for this present study.

### **Conceptual Metaphor Theory**

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (henceforth, CMT) opines that metaphor is not merely a linguistic device but a fundamental aspect of human cognition, where one domain of existence is conceptualised in terms of another to structure abstract ideas (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). CMT claims that metaphor can be explicated in terms of mapping between abstract concept in the target domain and concrete objects in the source domain (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1989; Glucksberg and Keysar, 1990; Kovecses, 2002, 2012 and Diegnan, 2005).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) aver that our ordinary conceptual system in terms of our cognitive processes and action are fundamentally metaphorical in nature (p. 3). This suggests that the way we think, what we experience and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 3). The cognitive approach to metaphor is not a matter of language, but a matter of thought as well (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Lakoff and Turner, 1989; Gibbs, 1994; Dobrovol'Skij and Purainen, 2005; Kovecses, 2010). Cognitive theory of metaphor is viewed as a vital tool by means of which we conceptualise reality. This is because human beings rely on their cultural and cognitive abilities to understand and to make sense of abstract concepts and entities in the natural and social world (Kamalu, 2020). Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Kovecses (2010) opine that language serves as the evidence for the existence of conceptual metaphor since it is through daily linguistic expressions that conceptual metaphors are realised.

## CDA in Hate Speech Discourse

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary area of research in linguistics that seeks to solve social problems. It studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by social group members in text and talk. Wodak (2001) opines that CDA is fundamentally concerned with analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language. While Bastone (1995) argues that CDA is a modal of linguistic analysis that seeks to unravel the ideological constructions that are covert in texts. Mayer (2001) states that the goal of CDA is to expose the discursive aspect of social disparities and inequalities within the society. Van Dijk (2014) in his socio-cognitive approach states that CDA interprets discourse structures in relation to social structures and concentrates on social cognition as a mediating link between discourse and society. He argues that CDA account for various forms of social cognition that are shared by social collectivities. These social collectivities reinforce in-group favouritism and out-group derogation which are the basis of ideological discourse such as hate speech (van Dijk, 1998, 2012, 2014; Nwugo, 2025).

In this study for instance, the use of CDA in analysing hate speech is vital because CDA goes beyond grammatical expressions or surface meaning of words as implicit in metaphor to unravel power relations, ideologies, dominance and social inequalities embedded in discourses especially ideological discourse such as hate speech. Hate speech in Nigeria is driven by underlying ideologies, perceptions and mental mapping that reveal ethnocentrism, stigmatisation, religious intolerance, marginalisation, discrimination, political dominance and so forth and CDA helps to unravel implicit assumptions, stereotypes, labeling, profiling, and ideologies that are embedded in hate speech discourse but indirectly communicated to avoid face threatening acts in social interactions.

## Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach. The data were purposively selected from three online platforms (*Daily Post*, *Sahara Reporters* and *Facebook*) in Nigeria. The data comprise twenty-one (21) excerpts purposively selected to unravel different types of metaphors that express hate speech in online platforms in Nigeria. The study employs insights from CMT and SFL's System of Transitivity as theoretical framework while Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis was used as analytical framework to examine the discourse and ideological issues in the study. The choice of both online newspapers (*Daily Post* and *Sahara Reporters*) and *Facebook* (comments and feeds) allows for triangulations, thereby increasing the reliability of the research findings. We selected online newspapers and Facebook because they are easily accessible to wider audience and as well helps language users to ventilate their views without rigour of censorship occasioned by traditional media. The data collection covers newspaper publications and Facebook comments between 2015 and 2024 and twenty-one excerpts were chosen to give a robust analysis of the mental mapping involved in the discourse of hate speech in Nigeria.

## Metaphors in Hate Speech Discourse

Metaphor as a rhetorical strategy in hate speech discourse deals with cross-domain mapping that reveals implicitly hateful intentions based on the cultural backgrounds of the interlocutors.

Kamalu et al. (2022) state that culture and social experiences shape the type of language speakers use to conceptualise activities in their natural and social worlds. The use of metaphor is significant in hate speech discourse because as a result of government scrutiny on conversations in online platforms, interlocutors convey their speeches with implicitness in order to avoid clampdown. Thus, I have grouped metaphors in hate speech discourse into: dehumanising metaphors, animal metaphors, disease metaphors, threat metaphors and ideological metaphor. These will be discussed in turn:

### **Dehumanising Metaphors in Hate Speech Discourse**

Dehumanising metaphor is the depersonalisation or stripping of a victim (target) of his/her humanity, dignity and worth (Haslam and Murphy, 2022). Like generalisation, depersonalisation strips the victim of his/her humanity and dignity; facilitates hate speech and charge the threshold for incitement to violence. Such dehumanising effect can be achieved in the social media by employing dehumanising metaphors such as comparing people to animal, objects, or diseases, implying that they are less than human (Demjen and Hardaker, 2017). This type of metaphor aims to debase, demonise, degrade and objectify the victims and justify discrimination, violence, oppression against them and create a sense of otherness (Haslam and Murphy, 2020). Let's look at the excerpts below:

**Excerpt 1:** Yoruba people are **trash**, they are collaborating with Hausa/Fulani to keep Nigeria in poverty. God will judge them. (Facebook, 2018)

**Excerpt 2:** IPOB like a **dot in a circle**, has nowhere to go - Buhari (Daily post, 12<sup>th</sup> March, 2022)

The highlighted metaphors in the excerpts above are basically structural and communicate rhetoric that contain dehumanising epithet. Structural metaphors occur where one concept is metaphorically structured in terms of another (Kamalu, 2024). Excerpt 1 for instance, likened the Yoruba people to '**trash**'. 'Trash' is a derogatory hate epithet used to dehumanise and degrade individuals or groups as filth, worthless and devoid of dignity. The underlying metaphor implies that the Yoruba people (concrete) are objectified as having no worth and dignity just as '**trash**' (abstract) is useless, disposable and of no value. In excerpt 2, the metaphor is drawn from the domain of shapes such as '**dot**' and '**circle**', implying objects that are insignificant in adding value or achieving their purpose in a diverse country like Nigeria. In the excerpt above, the readers use their knowledge of '**shapes**' to understand how significant or otherwise the target is presented to be in the larger entity, Nigeria. Here, the speaker uses the inherent idea of orientational metaphor of BIG and SMALL to delve into the important/need/usefulness of the group to Nigerian state. From the pragmatic point of view, the two excerpts objectified their targets and present them as worthless, disposable and lacking value or dignity to the corporate existence of Nigeria. To this end, the context upon which metaphor of dehumanisation is perceived, instantiated and justified is made prominent.

### Animal Metaphor in Hate Speech Discourse

Bick (2023) states that animal metaphors are common in ordinary language and often used in hate speech discourse to dehumanise and demean individuals and groups, likening them to animals perceived as dirty (filthy), threatening, dangerous and inferior. Lexicalised expressions in dehumanising animal metaphor target victims based on group membership, often using animals that are perceived as unclean, pests, or parasites (Bick, 2023, p.182). Animal Metaphors in hate speech discourse are exemplified in the following excerpts:

**Excerpt 3:** Dirty Muslim vermin, your father is a product of baby factory. Muslim pig!!! (Facebook comment, 2016)

**Excerpt 4:** Any man that can successfully make a short woman to be submissive is capable of training a lion (Facebook comment, 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2024)

**Excerpt 5:** The federal government is giving us some support, but there's a rat in the house that's eating up the bag of garri, but we have set Otapiapia for them (Facebook comment, 2024).

**Excerpt 6:** Rhino Omokri is a social media mad dog, Name dey follow person, Mockery and Omokri na the same (Facebook comment, 28<sup>th</sup> April, 2024)

**Excerpt 7:** The north is a parasite sucking Nigeria dry without contributing to the growth of the country. Why are we even together with these animals in human flesh? (Facebook comment, 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2018)

**Excerpt 8:** These Fulani herdsmen have become pests to our nation. They are like the East African tse-tse fly; wherever they go, they suck the life blood out of their hosts and locusts; they destroy everything in their path. They are leeches. They indulge in a parasitic mode of nutrition and they suck the blood of the carcass until their victim is left dead (Facebook comment, 2016)

The metaphors in excerpts 3 - 8 are structural and make direct reference to words and expressions from the domain of animal such as **vermin**, **lion**, **rat**, **dog**, **rhino**, **parasite** and **pests** respectively. It is also interesting to note that in framing containing animal metaphors in hate discourse, speakers depict the characteristics of the targets using pejorative lexicalisation such as '**eating up**', **parasite**, '**sucking**', '**locusts**', '**mockery**', **mad dog** and '**leeches**' in making the individuals or groups look dangerous or filthy. In excerpt 3 for instance, Muslim is derogatively referred to as '**vermin**'. Vermin is a lexical item (noun) that refers to pests or animals considered to be troublesome, harmful or nuisances to the hosts and deserve to be eliminated or eradicated. The excerpt also depicts Muslim as '**pig**'. It directly likens the group to a filthy animal (pig) which is often used as both a common insult word and especially offensive as a taboo animal in Islam (Bick, 2023). Ontological metaphor is visible in excerpt 4. The speaker likened short women to a dangerous animal (lion). Lion is a wild animal that is very difficult to tame. Thus, any man who is

capable of making a '**short woman**' submissive can successfully train a lion. The speaker is a man drawing categorisation between men and women, short women to be precise. He picturesque '**short women**' as difficult to handle thereby metaphorically equate them to a difficult and dangerous animal such as '**lion**'. This categorisation and profiling of '**short women**' as dangerous provokes hateful intent against feminine gender from masculine perspective.

In a similar manner, excerpts 7 and 8 are also ontologically metaphoric. The speaker is a southerner who personified Hausa/Fulani (north) in excerpt 7 as parasite which have the capacity to suck Nigeria dry without contributing anything to her growth. The writer uses the scary attribute of an insect (parasite) that feeds on the host without any benefit in return. Whereas, excerpt 8 personifies Fulani herdsman as East-African tse-tse fly (pest) that suck life out of the hosts (victims) until they are left dead. East-African tse-tse fly is a dangerous tse-tse fly that transmits trypanosomiasis which causes sleeping sickness to animals. The use of this animal metaphor (tse-tse fly), therefore, is the attribution of negative traits to the target thereby presenting them (target) as sickness (problem) to the host, Nigeria. In all, this dangerous dehumanising lexicalisation-**parasite, pest, tse-tse fly, parasitic mode of nutrition, suck, leeches, mockery and carcass** presents how useless and unprofitable the speakers viewed their targets to be in Nigerian developmental project. He sees them as dangerous and life threatening to peace and progress of Nigeria.

### **Disease Metaphors in Hate Speech Discourse**

The disease metaphor is a variant of the natural disaster metaphor (Bick, 2023, p. 187). It raises the spectra of a blind threat arising of its own accord, but it suggests more of a process than a one-time event (Bick, 2023). In disease metaphor, the disease is conceptualised to be in progression, gets worse and may or may not be cured. A common example of disease metaphor as presented in the data set is exemplified below:

**Excerpt 9:** Buhari and his Islamisation virus is a northern agenda and it is spreading like cancer (Facebook comment, 2016)

The excerpt above presents structural metaphor. It depicts Islam as a viral infection. Virus is a harmful and contagious disease that when contracted by an individual or animal, damages the immune system of the victim and gradually erodes the body defence mechanism. The scope of the damage is unknown which is emphasised by the verbal process '**spread**' and reveals the devastating effect of the virus on the victim (Nigeria). Another image created in the excerpt is that of **cancer** which is slowly spreading to all parts of the body (country) so much so that it demands urgent solution in order to preserve the corporate existence of the country. Cancer is a viral disease that results in continuous mutation of cells and the speaker sees Islam as an ideology spreading across the nation with a multiplying effect of a '**virus**', needing sense of urgency to control its devastating effect on the unity and peace of the nation.

### **Threat Metaphor in Hate Speech Discourse**

Threat metaphor as a rhetorical strategy in hate speech discourse is a socially, politically and culturally grounded expressions through which discourse participants articulate threats. Semino

(2008) states that threat metaphors are often used in political discourse to strengthen divisions between groups and countries. Threat metaphors are used to convey ideas about an unknown problematic future, and to evoke fear. The following excerpts exemplify threat metaphor as a strategy in hate speech discourse:

- Excerpt 10:** If they fail to give us Biafra, Somalia will look like a paradise compared to what will happen to that zoo (Nigeria). It is a promise; it is a pledge and it is also a threat to them –NMK (Facebook, 27<sup>th</sup> August, 2017)
- Excerpt 11:** Nigeria should prepare for war, we are battle ready to annihilate you, my secret service is already studying the zoo and strategising; Nigeria is a zoo (Sahara Reporter, 27<sup>th</sup> August, 2017).
- Excerpt 12:** That Zoo – the kingdom created by white people adopted by black fools and slaves, those that their brains do not function-the zoo called Nigeria will not exist by December this year (Facebook, 27<sup>th</sup> August, 2017).
- Excerpt 13:** The forces are fighting but we are assembling weapons and we need some money to thoroughly equip our military to enable us deal with them and unleash mayhem on the zoo (Facebook, 2017).
- Excerpt 14:** Anyone that does not vote Ambode will be thrown into the lagoon – Oba of Lagos warns Igbos (Daily post 6<sup>th</sup> April, 2015)

Excerpts 10-14 apparently deploy threat mechanism as a discourse strategy. The excerpts mainly are structural and clearly demonstrate some socio-cultural phenomena in Nigeria. For instance, excerpt 10 structures Nigeria to be like Somalia if Biafran secession was not granted. Somalia is a war-torn country in the east of Africa. The country in the early 1990s was enmeshed in civil war that affected the people and the economy of the nation for many years and the speaker, a Biafran agitator threatened that Somalia will be a paradise if Nigerian government fails to let Biafra secede from Nigeria. In other word, the speaker maps Nigeria to be Somalia using structural metaphor.

Thus, following Lakoff and Johnson' (1980) formula A is B, where B (the source domain) is mapped into the domain of A (the target domain), it therefore means that Somalia is the source domain, often experiential while Nigeria is the target domain often abstract. By likening Nigeria to Somalia, the domain of crisis/war is transferred to Nigeria. The speaker by interpreting Nigeria as Somalia, he highlights series of imaginaries that could be seen with our mind eyes such as **paradise** and its opposite '**hell**'. Paradise is a place of bliss, happiness and natural beauty, while hell is a place of agony and suffering. However, the speaker conceptualising Somalia to be paradise, if Biafran secession is not actualised, evoke powerful emotions and a compelling way to describe the speakers intended action/attack which could be likened to '**hell fire**' against Nigeria perhaps Biafra did not secede.

The speaker used anaphorism, "it is a promise", "it is a pledge" and "it is also a threat" as a strategy to demonstrate his intention of warfare against Nigerian state. The underlying metaphor implies that those who would fail to let Biafra secede should get ready for a war-like situation such as they had in the Federal Republic of Somalia during the 1991 civil war. In excerpt 11, the

metaphors from the domain of conflict such as ‘war’, ‘battle ready’ and ‘annihilate’ imply the use of force to achieve Biafran succession. The two groups involved in the struggle are Nigerian group (out-group) and Biafran group (in-group). In the excerpt, the speaker deploys his knowledge of war to understand the struggle between himself and the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The metaphor of ‘battle ready’ and ‘annihilate’ imply that the war of Biafran secession from Nigeria is an intense and protracted war against Nigeria.

The speaker also structures Nigeria as zoo. Tudge (1992) defined zoo as a place where animals live in a protected state and are made accessible to human observations. But in the context of hate speech, zoo is used to portray a chaotic situation, wild, anarchy and lawlessness. The speaker structuring Nigeria as zoo implies the fact that situations in Nigeria are animalistic and citizens behave like animals (lawlessness). The speaker adopts the inherent strategy in orientational metaphor that demonstrates GOOD versus EVIL. ‘Good is up’; ‘Evil is down’ to show the dichotomy that exist between the speaker’s group and the other. It implies that the speaker evaluates his group as law abiding (up) who wants to separate by all means from the lawless, chaotic and dehumanising Nigeria (down) with oppressive tendency to subjugate the speaker and his group into confinement.

In excerpt 12, the speaker used different dehumanising metaphors to present his feelings and perceptions about the out-group, Nigeria. He likens Nigeria to a zoo and profiles Nigerian as fools and slaves whose brain do not function. ‘Zoo’ symbolically represents lawlessness and chaotic situation while ‘fools’ and ‘slaves’ are pejorative slurs that imply intellectual and moral inferiority. The metaphors in the excerpt are structural and make reference to words and expressions from the domain of animal (zoo), domain of oppression, servitude (slaves) and domain of irrationality and absurdity (fools...that their brain do not function). The threat metaphor in this excerpt is a common device used in framing the out-group as a menace with the complexities of wisdom, foolishness and social dynamics that are not in tandem with the speaker’s group who were ready to exterminate the out-group by December that year (2017) if their plans for secession was not granted. The ideological roles of the metaphor used in the excerpt are those of strong evaluative and persuasive power to force or persuade the out-group into granting their wish (secession). Lastly, the speaker employs distancing strategy using demonstrative pronouns ‘that’ in “**that zoo, the kingdom created by white people adopted by black fools**” and ‘those’ in “**those that their brains do not function**” to present knowledge and psychological distance between the in-group and the out-group, creating US versus THEM dichotomy in the country.

Excerpt 13 presents US versus THEM using ontological metaphor to personify the forces against the speaker and his group in their warfare for the actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafran. The speaker used scary lexical choices ‘fighting’, ‘assembling weapons’, ‘deals with them’ and ‘unleash mayhem’ to show his preparedness in actualising his goals. The deployment of metaphor from the domain of war such as fighting, weapon and military depict the enormity of the battle ahead of the speaker. But the big question is, would the Nigerian government allow such a threat to stand against the wheel of progress in a Federal Republic? The answer would confirm semino’s (2008) position that threat metaphors are used to convey ideas about an unknown, problematic future and to evoke fear. The speakers use of certain lexical items that personify ‘force’ as capable of ‘dealing’, ‘fighting’ and ‘unleashing’ mayhem corroborate Lakoff and Johnson (1980) ontological metaphor that talk about how we conceptualise thing that are not

bounded as entities and substance so that we can refer to them in an attempt to better comprehend them. The speaker's personification of '**forces**' as human capable of fighting against his successful actualisation of Biafra is ontologically metaphoric, visibly depicting the danger ahead when the two opposing groups clash.

In excerpt 14, the Oba of Lagos issued a threat against the Igbos living in Lagos during the 2015 gubernatorial election in the state. The excerpt opens with the non-assertive '**anyone**' referring to no one in particular. The lack of specific referent creates anonymity to the identity of '**anyone**' and consequently robs the target of any importance. The excerpt presents anonymity of the referent '**anyone**' but using cataphoric referencing technique creates a conditional clause that if 'an Igbo man' fails to vote for Ambode, such a person will be thrown into the Lagoon. The speaker used Orientational metaphor to present that voting Ambode is good, virtue (up) while failure to vote him is evil, vice (down). However, this threat is a legitimisation of evil in the society because a personality such as Oba of Lagos, the custodian of peace and symbol of virtue issuing death threat to visitors is a departure from norm expression (van Dijk, 2012).

### **Ideological Metaphors in Hate Speech Discourse**

Ideological metaphor is based on the supposition that metaphor reflects deep-rooted feelings and experiences of members of a particular group. Deigman (2005) avers that metaphor presents the interpretations of a particular situation or event in a society. Thus, the excerpts below illustrate ideological metaphor.

**Excerpt 15:** Igbos are a dot in a circle, they have nowhere to go – Buhari (Facebook, 2018)

**Excerpt 16:** It is a sin to marry a Christian, they are infidel- cleric tells Muslim (Facebook, 1<sup>st</sup> May, 2024)

The excerpts 15 and 16 above demonstrate ideologies that project in-group favouritism and out-group derogation. The speakers present the beliefs of the in-group members towards the out-group members. In excerpt 15 for instance, the speaker is a northerner and he presents his group's views about the Igbos in Nigeria. The metaphor in the text influenced thought and created inferences of the perception of Igbos in social and political equation in Nigeria. In the same manner, excerpt 16 presents deep-rooted thought ingrained in religious dichotomy in Nigeria. In the text, however, the meaning of the lexis '**infidel**' suggests the ideology of the majority of Muslims towards Christians in Nigeria.

### **Transitivity and CMT in Hate Speech Discourse**

Halliday (1985) refers to transitivity as a means by which processes, participants and circumstances in discourse are expressed through the grammar of the clause. It captures how language is used to express situations and events in the real world (Egins, 2004). There are six process-types (material, relational, verbal, mental, behavioural and existential) but this study captures four of the process-types to provide framework for understanding hate speech in online platforms in Nigeria. By combining Transitivity and CMT, discourse participants align the cognitive processes of their discourse with its grammatical expression.

- Excerpt 17:** Islamic terrorists kill Christians and kidnap nuns in northern Nigeria (Facebook, 2020)
- Excerpt 18:** Islam is a disease, they are like a plague (Facebook, 2024)
- Excerpt 19:** Almajiris are flooding major cities in Nigeria and destroying our descent lives (Facebook, 2024)
- Excerpt 19:** All Muslim are terrorists (Facebook, 2021)
- Excerpt 20:** Sheikh Abubakar Gumi said that soldiers involved in criminality in Nigeria are all Christians (Sahara Reporters, 9<sup>th</sup> March, 2021)
- Excerpt 21:** Islamic cleric tells Muslims not marry Christian because they are infidel (Facebook, 1<sup>st</sup> May, 2024)
- Excerpt 22:** Those useless Yoruba who hate peter obi are like the devil (Facebook, 12 March, 2024)

In the excerpts above, metaphor in hate speech manifest through material process ‘**kill**’ and ‘**kidnap**’ in excerpt 17 and relational process which implicitly derogate the identity of the target group using metaphorical expression captured in excerpts 18, 19 and 20 (Nwugo, 2025). In excerpt 18 for instance, the speaker relates ‘**Islam**’ to disease through relational process-verb ‘**is**’ and subsequently presents the group as ‘**spreading like a plague**’ through relational process verb ‘**are**’. The producer of the text constructs the out-group as a treat, gradually taking over the country which reinforces negative attribution and project hate ideology. The verbal processes ‘**said**’ and ‘**tell**’ in excerpts 20 and 21 project the out-group as dangerous while the mental process ‘**hate**’ in excerpt 22 presents the feeling of fear of the out-group thereby justifying hostility against them. This study having its root in critical discourse analysis (CDA), process that the understanding of metaphor and transitivity patterns help to reveal the hidden ideologies behind discourses in an ethnophaulic and ethno-religious society such as Nigeria.

## Discussion

This study is a critical discourse analysis of the conceptualisation of metaphor in hate speech discourse in select online platforms in Nigeria. It uses combinatorial insights from CMT tools and SFL’s grammatical paradigm to investigate metaphor in hate speech discourse. Thus, the integration of approaches from conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) and system of transitivity (Halliday, 1985, 2014) provides a veritable framework for understanding the linguistic and conceptual mechanics of hate speech in online discourses. While CMT exposes the cognitive structures underpinning hate speech, system of transitivity reveals how these structures are instantiated in the grammar of the clause. The deployment of metaphor rhetoric in the discourse of hate speech in Nigeria is significant because it clearly portrays the inextricable link between language, cognition and ideation in the creation of social meaning. As shown in the data set, the speakers using structural, orientational and ontological metaphors to frame their targets with inter-textual coherence that invites the readers to use their knowledge of animals, pests and disease to understand the facts that rhetorics, as conceptualised in the study can perpetuate harmful

stereotypes, discrimination and violence capable of jeopardising the corporate existence of Nigeria. In the context of hate speech, lexical expressions such as **pests, parasite, Islamisation virus, cancer, carcas, Muslim pig, trash, rat, rhino, cockroaches, vermin** drawn from the domain of animal and disease respectively are used in diverse contexts to metaphorically foreground dehumanising and disease metaphors, objectifying the victims as dangerous, harmful, worthless and undesirable elements deserving of elimination and eradication.

At the cognitive level, metaphors view social realities by conceptualising the out-group 'Them' as dangerous, inhuman and invasive capable of causing harm to the in-group while the in-group 'Us' is conceptualised as victims of intimidation and attack (van Dijk, 2012). At the grammatical level, the grammar of a clause is allocated with the role of patterning agencies and identities, showing the depiction of in-group and out-group dichotomy. In discussing the process-types for instance, the material processes '**kill**' and '**kidnap**' in excerpt 17, frame the out-group as dangerous and threat to the in-group, thus, suggesting fear and aggression while the relational, verbal and mental processes verbs – **is, are, said, tells** and **hate** respectively project the perception of one group by another in Nigeria.

## Conclusion

Metaphors in hate speech are not ideological or value free but ideologically laden to shape perception, legitimise discrimination, and encourage hostility against the targeted group (van Dijk, 2012). The study examines the conceptualisation of different types of metaphors and the ideological underpinning that inform hate speech discourses in an ethnophaulic nation such as Nigeria. It adopts CMT and SFL's paradigm of the system functional linguistics to demonstrate how ideologies, perceptions and beliefs of the people are expressed through the grammar of a clause by reinforcing dominant ideologies in discourse. The study employs metaphor as a strategy in hate speech discourse to enable language users conceptualise abstract ideas in concrete forms to enhance clarity and understanding of hate phenomenon. Thus, metaphors construct cognitive frames that project the out-groups as inhuman, deserving of extermination. The study concludes that the use of metaphors is significant in hate speech discourse because it conveys the intentions of the discussants with implicitness, perhaps to avoid threatening the positive face of interlocutors in social interactions.

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