

## A Stylo-Semantic Analysis of the Depiction of COVID-19 in Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari's March 29, 2020 Address

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### Abstract

Emerging researches on COVID-19 are in large volumes but have been limited to medical and scientific orientations. These research efforts have also been replete with its causes, spread, and possible prevention. The aim of this research is to study the responses of world leaders to the deadly virus using a stylo-semantic approach. The data for the study is Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari's national broadcast of Sunday March 29, 2020. After a close reading of the address, the prominent stylo-semantic features are identified and then analysed using Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar. It is discovered that President Buhari subtly deploys fear-gripping but illustrative lexical constructions and vivid semantic items to depict COVID-19 as a pandemic requiring urgent, individual and collective proactive responses. It is also discovered that such portrayal is deliberate in order to instill fear in the people towards the virus and its devastating effects. The study provides useful insights on the perceptions of world leaders regarding the virus. The study concludes that fear-laced lexical items can be employed as tools for reinforcing caution in people, particularly in the period of a pandemic. It is hoped that this research will fill a need for a linguistic exploration into the global health challenge.

**Keywords:** Depiction, economic semantic field, medical semantic field, military semantic field, sense relation, stylo-semantics.

### Introduction

COVID-19 is a trending pandemic of death-tolling magnitude. It has ravaged the global populace with determined virility, posed serious health hazards, paralysed the entire national and international economic activities, and yet has riddled all frantic and conscious medical interventions. The WHO Director-General, in his opening remarks at the medical briefing on COVID-19 on March 11, 2020, tagged the outbreak of COVID-19 as a pandemic which calls for urgent and aggressive response by world leaders. Since its first outbreak in Wuhan, China, in December

2019, it has had serious negative impacts on lives, economies and ways of life on a global scale. Consequently, different nations of the world through their leadership have shown complementary responses towards the containment of the pandemics by delivering speeches to their citizens to prepare and warn them of its severity.

In Nigeria, since the first case of the virus was reported on the 27th February, 2020 in an Italian citizen who returned from Milan, Italy to Lagos on 25th February, 2020, President Buhari has delivered several national broadcasts as a fraction of the frantic efforts to sensitise the people and to particularly launch a campaign for its outbreak, control and containment. The March 29, 2020 happens to be his COVID-19 maiden address and therefore sets the stage for the level of government's preparedness to wage war against the spread of the disease.

The importance of speech making cannot be overemphasized for the President of a country, especially during an emergency. Speeches are means of reaching out to their target audience, especially to disseminate vital information. Bradford (1997) describes speech making as an art that is concerned with the use of public speaking as a means of persuasion. Apart from persuasion, speech can reflect the speaker's mind and seriousness about an issue. Political speeches, especially speeches delivered by Presidents are, therefore, powerful in shaping citizen's opinions, beliefs and values. Speeches are vital to governance, as they provide the platform for government to keep the populace informed about policies and programmes around an impending development.

At the centre of a well delivered speech by any president is language. Fromkin et al (2007) assert that "... language is the source of human life and power" (p. 3). Vincent (1990) sees language as a method, means or system of sharing ideas, thoughts, feelings, experiences and so on, using signs and symbols. This agrees with Russell (1971) that "language can be used to express emotions and influence the behaviour of others" (p. 137, 139). This opinion agrees with Fromkin et al (2007) that "we use language to convey information to others..., ask questions... give command..., and express wishes" (p. 137). This means that language can be used as a manipulative tool to condition people's thoughts. Leaders use language to connect with their audience for political negotiations and persuasions. No wonder Tough (1977) notes that: "language is a medium for the expression and reception of meanings..." (p. 31).

Considering the preceding arguments on language, it becomes clear that language serves as the link to people's hearts. Akinkuolere (2011) says that the citizens will support a leader based on what the leader says and how he says it. Thus, language can be used to achieve a motivated function, for instance, to warn, scare, convince, persuade, enlighten or inform the people about a development; it all depends on how it is presented. This will take us to the main questions to be addressed in this research: What is President Buhari saying in his March 29, 2020 address to the people? How has he said what he said? Why has he presented it the way he did? What linguistic resources are at his disposal for achieving his intended purpose? By answering these questions through a stylo-semantic study of the COVID-19 maiden address of President Muhammadu Buhari, we hope to gain useful insights into the minds of world leaders to this dangerous pandemic.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study is stylo-semantics, which is a combination of two linguistic apparatuses; stylistics and semantics. In the first instance, stylistics, according to McIntyre and Busse (2010), is the study of style in language and how this results from intra-linguistic features of a text in relation to non-linguistic factors, such as author, genre, historical period and so on. It is also about making meaning inferences based on the linguistic framework of the text. The chief concern of stylistics is style in language, which is the consistent appearance of certain structures, items, and elements in a speech or written text. Leech and Short (1981) explain stylistics in terms of “the relationship between the significance of a text and the linguistic characteristics in which they are manifest” (p. 69). This definition is actually talking about the relationship which exists between the meanings of a text and the linguistic choices which a writer makes to express the meaning. Crystal's (1999) explains it more succinctly when he says that “stylistics studies any situational distinctive use of language and of choice made by individuals... in their usage in all linguistic domains” (p. 323).

Semantics, on the other hand, is the science of meaning. According to Ogbulogo (2005), “Semantics is that branch of linguistics in which the meaning of words and sentences of language is studied” (p. 4). The conventionalists believe that words/sentences may or may not have any

direct link. They opine that whatever connection exists between a word/sentence and meaning is through a concept formed in the minds of the users of the language. Saeed (2009) summarises it by saying “semantics is the study of meaning communicated through language” (p. 3). Meaning can be thematic when it derives from the organisation of the message presented in a language. It can be conceptual when it is not affected by the context or emotional overtones in the act of communication. Meaning can also be associative when it is influenced by the context, the time, the background of speakers or hearers. This position of meaning is in line with Odeunmi (2001) who notes that “context is the spine of meaning” (p. 1). However, meaning can be affective when it is related to feelings and attitudes of the speaker towards the subject or the audience.

A stylo-semantic analysis considers the style of a text viz-a-viz the meaning derived from the writer's choice of words and sentences. In other words, stylo-semantics deals with analysis of all structural meaning making resources (e.g. morphemes, words, phrases, sentences and larger expressions) in any given language), which produce style. The writer's choice of words or registers, sentences, figures of speech, colloquialism and connotation are all within the purview of stylo-semantics to unravel the meaning of a text. It is the aspect of register or semantic field as a concept in the Systemic Functional Linguistics and as evident in President Buhari's COVID-19 maiden address examined in this study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research is premised on the concept of register as recognised within the Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) framework which was developed by MAK Halliday (1989). This is in line with Hassan (2004) who argues that “providing definitions of a theoretical term ... requires that it be positioned vis-à-vis other concepts in the theory” (p. 16). It is a grammar that conceives language as a 'network of systems', not just as rules. The SFL itself places importance on the function which language performs in social settings. The system makes it possible for a user to make choices while the functional aspect of language also allows people to carry out critical functions in their relationship with other people in any linguistic environment. Moreover, the Grammar sees meaning as a necessary aspect of language which serves as links or means of connecting

with the people in any context or situation. Since meaning is the centre of language, it makes communication possible and constitutes the core of language existence and a vital social tool.

In the Systemic Functional Grammatical theory, register as a concept is key. Halliday first made use of the term 'register' in a paper titled 'The user and uses of language'. He differentiated his approach from general move by stating that language varies according to situation type, Halliday (1978) suggests that what “register does is to attempt to uncover the general principles which govern this variation, so that we can begin to understand what situational factors determine what linguistic features” (p. 32). Register is viewed by Halliday (2002) as a semantic configuration. It therefore means that register is a semantic phenomenon. Register allows clustering of semantic features according to situation type. Since language is conceived as having stratification in Systemic Functional Linguistics, semantics stratum is therefore for interface, while register is “the necessary mediating concept that enables us to establish the continuity between a text and its socio semiotic environment”(Halliday 2002 p. 58).

### **Data Analysis**

President Muhammadu Buhari's national broadcast of Sunday March 29, 2020 happened to be his maiden response to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria. The speech is made up of sixty-five short paragraphs. Each paragraph ranges from one to three sentences, which all together sum up to ninety-three sentences. This is a brief and concise speech as it appears, and this can be predicted to be deliberate. The emergency situation in which the nation found itself at that time did not require lengthy rhetoric but rather an occasion for serious business and urgent dispatch of information to the citizens on the critical health issue of global concerns, COVID-19.

Consequently, the import of the address to promptly respond to the ravaging pandemic was the main motive of the speech and it becomes necessary from the first line of the speech, which contains two socio-deictic elements to alert the citizens to the downing reality of the spread of the pandemic in the country and also warn about its deadly nature. The speech further seeks to canvas for maximum cooperation of the people in taking personal and collective responsibility to contain its spread by issuing strict warnings to the people or scaring them that the disease has no known cure or vaccine. The address also informs the people about the

different measures which the government has taken or is taking as well as reeling out specific instructions and guidelines which the people must follow in a frantic bid to stem the imminent and obvious vicious trend. President Muhammadu Buhari, combined the richness of style and semantics (i.e. stylo-semantic devices), in order to quickly arrest the attention of the citizens to the importance of the content of the speech. Two main stylo-semantic features were therefore at his disposal in the speech and these include; the semantic field and an aspect of sense relation.

### **Semantic Fields/Registers**

Brinton (2000) sees semantic field as being related to the concept of hyponymy when he says “related to the concept of hyponymy, but more loosely defined, is the notion of semantic field or domain” (p. 112). Semantic fields can be loosely seen as specialised terms or words for expressing concepts or ideas in different disciplines, occupations, fields of specialisations and areas of human endeavours. The collection of these words or terms or expressions is what is known as registers or semantic fields. For example, registers from Agriculture could include manure, harrowing, tractors, harvesting, ridging, plowing, planting; while words like court, accused, defender, plaintiff, advocate, lawyer can be pinned down to the semantic field of Law. In the same vein, President Muhammadu Buhari's maiden broadcast on COVID-19 displays an admixture of at least three semantic fields. These registers are Medicine, Economics/Commerce and Administration.

### **Medical Semantic Field**

The short speech enjoys a preponderance of medical registers which are used to draw attention to the veracity of the pandemic. It is to such an extent that there is hardly a paragraph or sentence right from the opening of the speech to the end, where at least a word from the medical field is not mentioned. In the first instance, the health issue which is the main subject of the address, has been referred to using different terrible and fearful medical names or descriptions, which range from “Coronavirus”, “COVID-19”, “epidemic”, “virus”, “health emergency”, “cases”, “disease”, “outbreak”. These terms have been deployed interchangeably throughout the address to reinforce the imminent spread of the disease. All these terms, including “COVID-19”, which is a relatively new expression

and which shows the currency in the year-tag, evoke serious fear in the people. “Epidemic” shows the speed and wide coverage of the spread, “virus” shows potency, “health emergency” reveals the urgency it requires in responding to it, “cases” as a plural word shows the multiplicity of the disease in the patients, while “outbreak” shows its uncontrollable nature and the fact that it is getting out of hands. The profound thing this reveals about the President is that, even though he is not a medical practitioner, his conversance with the different names of the deadly disease cannot be impugned.

In addition, there are various responses which have been initiated or being expected from either the government or from the citizens that find expressions through consistent medical actions in the speech. For example, patients are to be “screened” by the government in order to “detect” those who are “infected”. The idea of people being *screened* to *detect* those *infected* makes everyone a potential carrier of the disease and hangs their hope in the balance. It means no one is free until medically certified. Without any doubt, this can send fear into everybody. The people are also to carry out “disinfecting”, “preventive”, “containment”, and “curative” measures, while individuals must avoid getting “infected” through regular “hygienic” and “sanitary practices” by “washing hands regularly”, “coughing into a tissue or elbow” and supporting those who are “vulnerable”. Again, the thought by people of having to adhere strictly to certain obligatory routine practices which will definitely constrain their secular carefree/careless lifestyles can cause a lot of worry. As if that was not enough, the address hands out a staunch warning to the people to keep to the guidelines, as COVID-19 has “no cure” and that “scientists” around the world are only working rigorously to develop a “vaccine”.

This appears to be the scariest aspect of the message because the idea of “no cure” is enough to puncture the hope of the people for any remedy or cure. What the President achieved by this directive is to make the people take responsibility by force. Of course, no one who hears that “medical representatives” like “Doctors” and “Nurses”, “Public health workforce”, “health care workers” and “other essential staff on the frontlines of the response” are just being made to “undergo trainings in order to handle the health challenge” and will not take responsibility. That expression carries a semantic undertone. It implies that the medical officers have no experience, are incompetent and unprepared to handle the

pandemic as they are *just* being presented for necessary trainings.

In spite of the President's seemingly display of different lexical items to interrogate the health hazard, useful terms describing its symptoms are conspicuously missing in the address. This may be because the disease was just emerging and adequate information about it was still scanty. Nevertheless, the obvious omission was either to deliberately or stylistically heighten the anxiety and apprehension of the people who could not be sure of the specific indications of the disease.

### **Military/Administrative Semantic Field**

Another prominent semantic field in the address is the military/administrative register. There are in fact more words from the field of military than words from other fields to achieve different stylistic purposes by President Muhammadu Buhari. Many of such military lexical items are deliberately laced with fear to scare the people about the pandemic. For example, the way the President sees and declares the pandemic situation as a “war” or “...security issue”, as soon as it recorded its first “fatality” in Nigeria on 23rd March, 2020 has a lot of psychological implications for the people. The terms such as “war”, “security issue” and “fatality” depict a scenario of lives-on-the-line, and consequently, an emergency. In fact, the fact that all “weapons” and “strategies” must now be “recruited”, “mobilized”, “redeployed” and engaged to “fight” against the pandemic as in a typical war situation is not only fear gripping but calls for serious concerns and worry. Those listed registers stylistically enlist everybody as an army, both old and young, in an inclusive and decisive war against the invisible enemy, in a country where the terrible memory of the previous civil war still lingers.

To worsen the situation, the President affirms that “sacrifices” will be made in order to “control” the “emergency” situation and “protect” or “safeguard” the populace. These “sacrifices” which are not definite in the context may be monetary, materials or even lives as it were. The thought of this unsure situation is enough to put the populace in the dark and total trepidation. Meanwhile, “relief materials” will also be distributed to cushion the effect of the onslaught of the deadly disease. This is admitting in a way that casualties are imminent in the struggle, and that survivors would need succors. Thus, the spread of COVID-19 has been perceived as a serious battle where people should be prepared either to lose or to win.



Those military lexical items are live-metaphors which are deployed to present COVID-19 not only as invisible but also as invincible force. All military tactics will be engaged to “identify” or “trace” it through “adequate monitoring” and then, it will be “confronted”. Those quoted expressions are subtle military/administrative words which point at the readiness of the government to respond appropriately to the pandemic. “Identify” has to do with military intelligence suspecting an enemy, “trace” is connected with secret investigations by the military while “monitoring” depicts another military intelligence operation. The President emphasising that all these moves are necessary as the pandemic situation has become a matter of “life or death” is an expression that somehow puts a death knell on people's apprehension.

Generally speaking, the propensity of the militarised expressions in the speech achieved one thing; it readily gives out President Muhammadu Buhari as a former military man who is a war veteran but who gained power through the civilian process. However, civilianisation has not done much to erode his military tendencies.

### **Economic/Commercial Semantic Field**

Another semantic field which is of paramount importance in the speech is that of economic or commercial terms. Perhaps, one of the reasons for a fair display of these lexical items is to prepare or warn the people about the recessionary effects which COVID-19 and its different responses, whether positive or negative, would exert on the commercial activities of the nation. Accordingly, the main effect as it can be read between the lines of the address is that of “hardship”. “Hardship” is an economic term which points to a situation of financial difficulties, scarcity of food, shortage of supplies and recession. This will be precipitated by the lockdown and general restrictions not only on human services but also on vehicular means of transportations of essential foods and materials. The knowledge of this obvious downtrend in the economy by the people can cause a subtle trepidation. Although, some economic registers are also deliberately employed by President Buhari to highlight the 'economic measures' which his administration will put in place to 'minimise' the vulnerability of the people to the pandemic situation, like giving room for 'unconditional cash transfer', 'on-lending facilities' and 'capitals' from 'international partners', and by 'negotiate(ing) concessions to ease the pains of borrowers', issuing

'Trader Moni', 'Market Moni' and 'Farmer Moni Loans', giving 'moratorium' to relief loan debts from 'banking institutions' and '... introducing fiscal and monetary policies', the terms do more to portend situations of economic struggle and uncertainty. It shows that people may have to brace up for the worst economic crises which will be characterised by hunger, starvation, job loss and financial meltdown that will beg for government's assistance.

### **Aspect of Sense Relations**

Sense relations have to do with the affinity which words maintain with other words in a text. The relationship may be that of similarities, nearness of meaning, oppositeness or repetitions. In the speech under consideration, President Buhari has deliberately featured an important aspect of sense relations which is that of synonyms.

### **Synonyms**

The term, 'synonyms', is used to describe the relationship of similarity or nearness in meaning of words. The use of synonyms in texts can go a long way to help the readers to decode meaning or message in a discourse. In the COVID-19 maiden speech of President Buhari, the use of synonyms have been deployed at two levels; between lexical items and across sentences. Copious examples run through the speech as presented below, starting with those between lexical items within the same sentences.

- i) From the first signs that **Coronavirus**, or **COVID-19** was turning into an **epidemic**...
- ii) the **best** and most **efficient** way to avoid getting infected is through regular **hygienic** and **sanitary** practices...
- iii) washing of hands **regularly**... disinfecting **frequently**...
- iv) First, to **protect** the lives of ... Nigerians ..., second, to **preserve** the livelihoods of workers ...
  
- v) But these are sacrifices we should be **willing** and **ready** to make...

In the above excerpts from the address, it is apparent by the use of those foregrounded synonyms that President Buhari stylishly allows his messages to distill with fluid subtlety. Example (i) alternates nomenclatures for the disease (*Coronavirus/COVID-19/epidemic*), and

these have been interchangeably used in the speech with others such as pandemic and virus. There is a subtle fear in the inexactness of the name of the disease and the nature of the disease. The fact that it is an epidemic means that it has the potency for affecting a disproportionate large number of individuals within a population, community or region at the same time. Moreover, it is contagious. The multi-various nomenclatures assumed by the virus are indicative of the several avenues through which the disease can be contracted. In excerpt (ii), two sets of synonyms are displayed. The first, (*best/efficient*), reiterates the appropriate way of avoiding the killer disease, while the second, (*hygienic/sanitary*), underscores the importance of maintaining cleanliness as a way to prevent the disease. The third examples of synonyms, (*regularly/frequently*) enjoin the people to make washing of hands and disinfecting a constant practice. The fourth examples, (*protect/preserve*), emphasise the security of lives and livelihood, while the last examples, (*willing/ready*), touch on the right attitude people should express towards making sacrifices in the fight against the pandemic.

However, there are other examples of synonyms which can be noticed across sentences in the speech. Some of them are presented for analysis as follows:

Table 1:

... studying the various	responses	adopted by other countries...
... the NCDC has been implementing numerous	strategies	...
Some of these	measures	will surely cause major inconveniences

In the above table, three synonyms have been noticed in three different expressions. Each expression has been excerpted in a cell in the above table. The words in the middle columns; 'responses', 'strategies' and 'measures', which are used interchangeably to mean the various efforts that are geared towards stemming the tide of the virus can replace one another in the structure. The plural sense of these words is significant. By this, the pandemic, which requires a multiplicity of actions to conquer, is also being seen as notorious and as such, a hard-nut-to-crack issue.

Table 2:

... COVID-19 has no	Cure	
Scientists ... working ... to develop	vaccine	

'Cure' and 'vaccine' as the second set of synonyms refers to the antidotes for the disease, which incidentally still remains elusive.

Table 3:

Our focus ... remains to	urgently	contain these ...
... have the right support ... to respond	Immediately	

In table 3 above, both 'urgently' and 'immediately' are adverbs deployed to reiterate the expediency of action in the fight against the deadly disease. The usage of the adverbs exerts mandatory pressure on the people as any delay can be dangerous.

Table 4:

... I am directing the	cessation	of all movements in Lagos...
This	restriction	will apply to Ogun State...

In the above table, 'cessation of movement' also means the same thing as 'restriction of movement'. These two nominal groups are used to momentarily withdraw and infringe upon people's right to freedom of movement. This stylishly paints a picture of an enemy lurking around for which people must learn to stay indoors in order to escape.

Table 5:

... Minister of the FCT has been	notified	t t
... intelligence agencies have been	briefed	

In the same vein, 'notified' means the same thing as 'briefed' to reiterate the importance of information dissemination in such an emergency situation.

Table 6:

... to	Fight	this pandemic ...
... to	confront	COVID-19...

Likewise, the penultimate pair, 'fight' and 'confront' mean combat, and are used to paint a picture of real war situation.

Table 7:

Travel to or from other states...	postponed.	
... movements ... hereby	suspended.	

The verbs in the last two parallel structures, 'postponed' and 'suspended' put a compulsory interruption on travels and movements. In all, the usage of the various synonyms have lent weight to the exemplification of the meaning which President Buhari is trying to present in his speech that the virus is an invincible disease.

### Conclusion

The paper has carried out a stylo-semantic analysis of the depiction of COVID-19 in Muhammadu Buhari's address of March 29, 2020 using the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics. The analysis has, so far, depicted two important aspects of Buhari's message in the address. One is to create awareness on the outbreak of Coronavirus in Nigeria while the other is to reinforce compliance to the guidelines set out for containing the deadly disease. This has, however, been achieved by creating serious tension, fear and apprehension in the citizenry through the usage of fear-gripping lexical items that are carefully selected from three semantic fields of military, economics and medicine. The foregrounded sense relation of synonymy, which cuts across the speech, has also constituted an effective tool in the hand of Buhari for achieving deliberate reiteration of his intended purpose in the address.

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