

A Speech Act Analysis of Selected Facebook Covid-19 Memes in Nigeria

UDUK, Happiness, Ph.D.

University of Uyo, Uyo

Department of English

+23480130797264

Email: happinessuduk@uniuyo.edu.ng

&

GUNN, Michael

University of Uyo, Uyo

Department of English

+2348066095327

Email: gunnmichael99@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper is a pragmatic study of internet-based entertainment contents by Nigerian social media users (netizens) to create awareness on Covid-19 that ravaged Nigeria and her households in 2020. The study which covers only Covid-19-motivated internet memes on facebook adopted John Searle's (1969) Speech Acts Theory as its theoretical framework. Fourteen (14) purposively selected Facebook memes were collected through internet-enabled personal computers (PC) and screenshots from mobile phones. The study found that the Covid-19 memes were characterized by the following speech acts: representative (assertion), directive, expressive and commissive while declarative was not accounted for. The study reveals that Covid-19 memes creators employed a total of 29 speech acts, with the preponderant use of representative speech act type which accounted for (44.8 %), to assert and make statements about the virus. Representative speech act also indicated that creators of memes were keen on informing Nigerians on the need to keep to Covid-19 rules; Directives - accounted for (31.0%); Expressive (13.8%) to scold and rebuke politicians toying with the lives of Nigerians while Commissive accounted for (10.3 %). Empirical evidence from the study showed that internet

memes were used by Nigerians to express their grievances towards the manner the government of the day was handling the Covid-19 situation. The study concluded that the evolution of social media has no doubt enhanced digital communication in today's technologically advanced world.

Keywords: Pragmatic, Memes, Speech Acts, Covid-19 and Nigerian Netizens

Introduction

Social media is a term that has been described as interactive digitally-mediated technologies that facilitate the creation or sharing/exchange of information, ideas, career interests and other forms of expression via virtual communities and networks (Wikiversity, n.d). It is a conglomeration of new digital media channels through which people get connected and share information on personal, general as well as global issues. Since the advent of digital communication methods and its attendant increase in social interaction, a good number of social media platforms have evolved. Some of these include WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google+, Pinterest, Snapchat and Youtube (Owojecho, 2021). Social media is one of the major digital tools responsible for the dissemination of information and other social activities by social media users and in this case (netizens). Social media has been instrumental to the creation of awareness on several diseases (Malaria, HIV, Ebola, Coronavirus and so on) in Nigeria (Msughter, 2020).

The Coronavirus (Covid-19) is an infectious disease that causes respiratory infections ranging from common cold to more severe respiratory difficulties (WHO, 2020). According to Ogunbeand Omolabi (2020), it is believed that the virus originated from the "Hunan seafood market at Wuhan, China, where bats, snakes, dogs, wild animals among others were sold in December 2019" (p.5), and the virus was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on the 11th of March, 2020 (WHO, 2020). Since its identification, the virus is said to have accounted for over 3,435,134 deaths globally out of a swooping statistics of 165,747,744 positive cases which sadly increased exponentially with 144,839,298 recovered cases (WHO, 2021). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020), the Corona viruses:

...are a large family, from viruses, several of which cause respiratory diseases in humans from the common cold to more rare and serious diseases such as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the

Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), both of which have high mortality rates and were detected for the first time in 2003 and 2012, respectively (pp.1-2).

The Corona Virus disease later became known with the acronym “Covid-19”, 2019 being the year that the disease came into existence. With the spread of the disease across the nations of the world, many governments began to take measures to stop or curtail its spread. Some of the measures which were taken included inter- national travel restrictions. Others were ban on large gatherings including, cinema houses, restaurants, theatres as well as barbing and hair dressing saloons in some countries. There was a total lockdown of activities and restriction of both pedestri- an and vehicular movements for number of weeks and months in a bid to halt the spread of the disease in many countries.

In Nigeria, Facebook has been a major platform for people to express their opinions on various issues and concerns. For instance, during the period of total lockdown when Nigerians could no longer visit their loved ones, they turned to Facebook to express their reactions towards the pandemic precautions. Facebook posts not only included texts but also pictures that reflected their varied reactions towards the government interventions on the situation. The reaction of Nigerians in the virtual world calls for speech act analysis. From this background, the paper examined Facebook texts and the pictures associated with the pandemic. The present study evaluates the importance of memes as a tool for creating awareness on Covid-19 in Nigeria drawing insight from Searle’s (1969) Speech Act Theory. The main objective of the study is to identify types and functions of speech acts in Facebook posts in relation to Covid-19.

Statement of Research Problem

Pragmatics studies the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society (Mey, 2007, p. 6). Mey’s view of pragmatics is also succinctly captured by Aboh and Uduk (2017) which argues that pragmatics “Is primarily concerned with the relationship between language and its context of use; it studies the way language is used in human communication as a reflection of the conditions of society” (p 74). Memes are internet-based entertainment contents used to satirise serious societal problems by netizens. Because memes are anonymous, Nigerians used them in the social media to create comic relief from the socio-economic difficulties occasioned by the Covid-19 lockdown of 2020.

Nigerians tended to ease the situation through these comic posts on different social media platforms without fear of any sanction from the law enforcement apparatus. This study is informed by the citizens' reaction to the untold hardship meted on Nigerians in the period of the Covid-19 lockdown. The scope of the study covers only Covid-19-motivated-internet-memes with particular focus on Facebook social media platform.

Empirical Studies on Covid-19 Memes

Scholars such as Ogungbe and Omolabi, (2020); Hussein and Aljamili, (2020); Idegbekwe and Ambrose, (2020); Msughter (2020); Dynel, (2021); Ajayi and Akinrinlola, (2021) and Predia, (2021) have worked on different areas of Covid-19 pandemic using diverse linguistic parameters. From the pragmatic perspective, Ogungbe and Omolabi (2020) investigate the pragmatics of coronavirus motivated humour on two social media platforms aimed at investigating humour that reflects socio-economic and health challenges in Nigeria. The study adopts Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Acts Theory to analyse a total of seven (7) purposively selected humour on Coronavirus on social media, using actual data obtained from Facebook and WhatsApp. The study found that the pragmatic relevance of Coronavirus-motivated-meme is embedded in its social functions as it serves as an indicator of the sense of citizens' freedom and warning to the corrupt and inefficient leaders in Nigeria, particularly on health facilities in the country. The study concludes that humours do not only make people laugh but also comment on certain societal maladies that finger the minds of Nigerian citizens. The work is significant to this present study because its method of data collection is through Facebook and WhatsApp which is also this present study's mode of data collection. However, Ogungbe and Omolabi's (2020) work is inadequate because it only considers few data while the present study purposively selected fourteen (14) Facebook memes.

In addition, Hussein and Aljamili (2020) conduct a study on covid-19 humour in Jordanian social media using Kress and Leeuwen's approach. The objective of the study is to identify and analyse specific semiotic patterns in Covid-19 related memes in Jordanian social media in order to demonstrate how humour can be used as means of softening the grim situation created by the pandemic through examining the data from a socio-semiotic perspective. As part of its methodology the study designed a questionnaire which was given to selected Jordanians who surf the internet and also purposively selected 20 memes from their popular social

media platforms.

Hussein and Aljamili's study found that Jordanian social media is contributing in overcoming pandemic anxiety, burdens and offering relief to Jordanians. Their findings correlate with Ogungbe and Omolabi (2020) on the fact that Covid-19-motivated-humours brought succour to humanity in the face of the pandemic. Hussein and Aljamili's study is significant to this study because their study used internet memes as its basis for data collection and analysis. However, Hussein and Aljamili's study differs in theoretical framework (socio-semiotic) while the present study draws its framework from John Searle's Speech Acts.

On their part, Idegbekwe and Ambrose (2020) explore Covid-19 memes in Nigeria's social media space. The study aims to show how memes have hidden meanings that can only be re-echoed through a careful examination of the language use. As a theoretical framework, the study adopts Sperber and Wilson's (1986) Relevance Theory and qualitatively analysed ten (10) purposively selected memes from Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. The study found that interpretation of memes is significantly linked with the shared cognitive background knowledge which the speaker/meme creator and the hearer/reader have. More so, the study concludes that memes could echo the attitude of concern, disdain and fear while also harbouring deeper meanings that are contextually relevant and implicit. It is observed that the study does not consider any pragmatic tools in the course of analysis.

Msughter (2020) conducts a study on internet memes as a campaign tool to fight against Covid-19 in Nigeria. The study examines internet memes as a unique form of narratives to help avert the wide spread of the virus. The study employs semiotic and qualitative content analysis methods. The study found that the social media serve as an avenue to campaign against Covid-19 in Nigeria. It is also revealed in the study that internet memes on Covid-19 explore issues that contain visual metaphors aimed at establishing what Nigerians are passing through as well as stimulating government's participation. The study concludes that internet memes serve as an avenue for direct communication, which contributes to creating awareness on Covid-19 in Nigeria. Msughter's study is significant to this study because it adopts a qualitative research design. Although the study differs in its theoretical framework, it is also important to this study as its data were purposively selected from the social media.

Furthermore, Ajayi and Akinrinlola (2021) in their study on Pragma-Multimodal

functions of Covid-19 memes in the Nigerian context investigates memes posted by Nigerians on different social media platforms in reaction to the pandemic and analysed ten (10) internet - memes. It was discovered that the texts and images in the memes combined with the prevailing socio-political and religious contexts in Nigeria to evoke the message of warning, admonition, mockery, condemnation, labelling, commendation and sermon. The study reveals that sensitization memes on Covid-19 is an integral aspect of medical communication that enables language scholars to gain insights into how language functions as an act of social behaviour and action. Ajayi and Akinrinlola's study is relevant to this present study because of the source of data collection. However, Ajayi and Akinrinlola's study did not account for the quantitative aspect of the data analysed to show the frequency.

Dynel (2021) investigates voices behind face mask. It is a study on humorous Covid-19 face masks memes. The corpus of the study is drawn from four popular social media platforms 9-gag, Reddit, Imgur and Twitter. The study uses multimodal discourse analytic lens as its theoretical framework. This shows the notions of the usefulness of multimodal voicing, intertextuality and echoing as research apparatus and brings to light the epistemological ambiguity and academic understudy of memes. The findings show that in order for people to comply with government policy of wearing of face mask, creators of memes made parody of the mask to entice the population. Although Dynel's study did not focus on other areas of Covid-19 related memes, the present study therefore, considers this as a research gap that should be filled.

In a similar vein, Predia (2021) analysed some humorous Covid-19 memes amidst the Covid-19 pandemic and how these help to ameliorate the hardships suffered by the citizens. Data were drawn from the social media and in particular, WhatsApp platforms using the multimodal discourse analytic lens. The mimetic modes show pragmatically that they are nested on voices (multimodal) that are compatible or divergent as can be seen in the dissociative echoing of individuals on distancing, lockdown and quarantine as expressing their collective reactions to governments' policies on measures to contain the spread of Covid-19.

Theoretical framework

Many scholars such as Ishaya (2018), Gunn and Ekoru (2018), Gunn and Ishaya (2020) and Ekoru and Gunn (2021) have adopted speech acts theory in various pragmatic analyses. This study is grounded on Searle's (1969) Speech Acts

Theory.

Ogbulogo (2005) says, “Speech Act Theory explains the roles of utterances in shaping the attitudes of participants in interpersonal communication. It reflects the intentions of the speaker and the effect the speaker’s expression has on the hearer” (p.67). This theory is adopted because it asserts that language is used to perform actions, and that these actions can only be identified when utterances are contextually appropriate. Searle (1969) classifies speech acts (locutions and illocutions) into five as we see below:

Representatives: Shardama (2015) citing Searle (1969) explains representatives as speech acts that tell when the speaker asserts a proposition to be true. Representatives comprise statements of facts, conclusions, descriptions which demonstrate the speaker’s belief in whatever he is saying (Sharndama, 2015). Verbs which express representations include: affirm, believe, conclude, deny, report. An example of representative speech act is shown below:

- a. Covid-19 lockdown: 14 days after
- b. Quarantine is in the Bible
- c. Isaiah 26:20
(Covid-19 meme from Facebook April, 2020).

Directives: These verbs of speech acts are used to make the addressee or hearer do something particularly what the speaker wants. Directives show command, order, request, and suggestion. Examples include;

- Please, go out
- One sneeze from this man we are finished (indirect speech act, warning)
- Covid-19 medicine please take frequently (advising)
- Stay at home! No going out! Stay indoor (warning)

Expressives: These are speech acts in which a particular speaker expresses feelings and attitude to or about a situation or circumstance. Expressives show apology, appreciation, congratulatory remark, complaint, as in regret, welcome.

- No NoNoo... u can’t bring me here, I’m a politician!

Commissives: These speech acts commit the speaker to doing something in the future, such as a vow or a threat, as in:

- With Covid-19 I closed your churches! (threat and mockery)
- Stay at home or die with us. (threat)

Declaratives: These are speech acts which alter the state of affairs in the world. They are normally performed by someone in position of authority within an institution (Sharndama, 2015). They are associated with acts such as baptizing, naming, marriage, judging as in:

- I hereby pronounce you husband and wife
- I hereby sentence you to three years imprisonment without an option of fine.

From the discussions above, we deduce that speech act theory is about using language to accomplish a certain goal depending on context. Besides, netizens always post comments in a particular context/setting which in the context of this research is the Covid-19.

John Searle’s (1969) classification of speech act theory is the aspect adopted for this study. The study, therefore, embarks on the speech act analysis of selected Facebook Covid-19 related memes and how they are used to create awareness on Covid-19 in Nigeria.

Research Methodology

The study adopted quantitative research format to analyse data relevant to this research. The speech act type found in the study were analysed using simple percentage. To determine the total percentage of each speech act type, the study used the formula below:

$$\frac{\sum fe}{\sum T} \times 100$$

Where, $\sum fe$ = summation of the frequency of each speech act type.

$\sum T$ = summation of the total speech act type.

The data were purposively sourced from Facebook. The Covid-19-related social media memes numbering about fifty (50) capture different aspects of Nigeria’s social space. However, due to the similarity among some of these samples, fourteen (14) are purposively selected for analysis, numbered Figure 1- 14. They were

gathered between March – June, 2020. This process of data collection was done through internet-enabled personal computers (PC) and screenshots from mobile telephones.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Sampled Covid-19 related memes generated by Nigerian users of Facebook are classified under four acts, namely: Representative Act, Directive Act, Expressive Act and Commissive Act. These are referred to as acts because it is perceived that the creators of the memes are performing certain acts with the memes. Below are the categorisations of sampled memes collected from Facebook on the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria:



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 1



Figure 8



Figure 3



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13

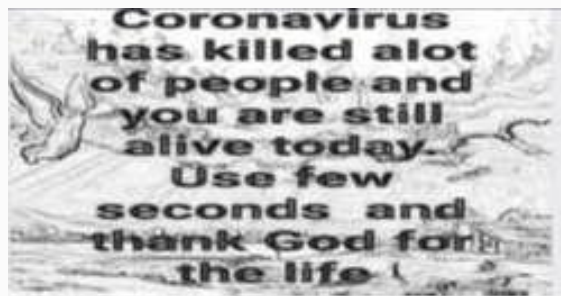


Figure 14

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Figure 1

Utterance: I promise...(sic) as soon as this is over, I will buy for myself a private hospital

Type of speech act: Commissives and Representatives

Interpretation

The caption above is an indictment on political leaders who neglected the health facilities in the country, thereby making many hospitals across the country to be redundant with broken walls and at the verge of collapse. The meme portrays their regret and in the same way a politician is stating and promising himself a private hospital that will yield more money for him when the scourge is over.

Furthermore, the text, I promise...(sic) as soon as this is over, I will buy for myself a private hospital, together with the pictorial sketch is satirical. This is because the caption is an indictment on the Nigerian ruling class for their failure to invest in the healthcare sector of the country, thereby leaving the few healthcare facilities available dilapidated and outdated. This satirical text is understood as a statement (Representative speech act) which is inextricably bound up with context of situation: the Covid-19 pandemic. The characters in the pictorial strip are recognisable based on their outfits and demeanours. Top right, deducing from his regalia and poise, is a top notch Nigerian politician, beside him is a middle class woman straddling a baby in her arms. She is followed by two middle class looking men who are stooping. Then there is a policeman with a rifle, and on uniform. After the police is another politician straddling a sack loaded with cash. Beside him is a criminal, half-hooded and with a weapon bigger than the policeman's. The last man in French suit and tie looks like a business man or a contractor. All of them covered

in fear of the Covid-19, leaving the health care worker above with his special syringe to battle with the virus, alone. It also reinforces the fact that everyone is susceptible to the virus, whether rich or poor, young or old, strong or weak and so on. This is foregrounded in the blue sky depicting that the entire universe is infested with the Covid-19. The healthcare worker, solely battling with the virus with a big syringe and needle, is putting on white (the regular uniform for healthcare workers). The other characters in the pictorial strip are dressed to reflect their societal status. This particular meme is driven by the exigencies of the pandemic which undergrid its relevance.

FIGURE 2

Utterance: a. With Covid-19 I closed your churches!

b. On the contrary I just opened one in every home!

Type of speech act: a. Commissive

b. Representative/directive

Interpretation

The locution ‘a’ above, is a commissive speech act, the devil is threatening and mocking the Christian faith. God responded through a Representative speech act (locution ‘b’); assertive/stating and informing Satan that something good can come out of a bad situation. And at the same time daring the devil that the work of God must continue “on the contrary I just opened one in every home” (Directives, an act of daring). The captions: “Satan” and “God” are used to identify them though readers can effortlessly figure out who they are by their looks. These symbolises evil and danger and wickedness. On the other hand, God is portrayed as “white” with white attractive beards which is symbol of purity and wisdom. He also puts on a grey outfit which is a symbol of love and sacrifice. The devil’s hand is pressed on the map of the world: this implies that the devil was the one that sent the plague to oppress and to torment the world. On the other hand, God’s hands are outstretched and wide open: this symbolises safety and salvation. The devil is further portrayed with a grim-sarcastic laughter, while God is depicted with a friendly warm-welcoming laughter.

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, people were warned to desist from congregating and maintain social distance; as a result, they could not go to church worship God. Hence, the meme is a discernible way of telling people that they can wor-

ship God in spirit and in truth in their various homes. Thus, the constrained caused by the pandemic that made people not to go to churches or mosques is defeated by individuals hooking up to various social media platforms to stream church programmes and activities in their various homes.

FIGURE 3

Utterance: a Covid-19 lockdown: 14 days after

Type of speech act: Representative

Interpretation

The locution has an assertivespeech act stating the implication of the lockdown, especially in the long run. There are two images in the sketch with the first depicting a beautiful coloured home stocked with food items and a big refrigerator. There are three people in the sketch: a man, a woman and young man. From their resemblance (between the man and the boy) and from their carriage, one can deduce that they are family: the man is the husband, the woman is the wife, while the young man is their son. They look plump, robust, well-fed and well-dressed. The husband is holding them in a proud and self-confident manner. There is a caption on the top left of the sketch with the word: “up town”. Meanwhile, on the second sketch, the same sets of people are depicted after a time span of about 14 days. This time, they look lean, scrawny, hungry and poorly dressed. Their home is no longer regaled with colour, rather it looks dilapidated. The refrigerator and the stocked food items have disappeared, and in its stead, there is an open window. The man is no longer holding them assertively; rather, he is holding them dejectedly. This time, the caption on the top right says “down town”. This pictorial sketch as well as the complementary caption is used to depict Corona virus-related-meme on economic effects on families across the country.

Netizens can effortlessly infer the point being made as well as the characters (that is a family) in the sketch. The reader can also deduce that things may get pretty worse before they can get better. And from the caption and pictorial sketch, it can also be inferred that we should hope for the best but expect the worse during the lockdown. The relevancy of this meme is predisposed to the fact that the meme was created when it became imperative for the country to be on lockdown in order to curtail the spread of the virus. The two images of the same family are juxtaposed in comparison, to show the aftermath of the lockdown on them. This is really

important because readers will then be able to comprehend the physical, economic and mental long term effect of the lockdown.

FIGURE 4

Utterance: One sneeze (emoji) from this man (sic) we are finished (emoji)

Type of speech act: Directives

Interpretation

This meme with the speech act of directive is warning citizens to take precaution. In between the text there is an emoji with a runny nose (catarrh). It is believed that one can contract the virus when the fluid of an infected person touches another. This emoji is instantiated to instil fear on people to always keep a safe distance from one another. At the end of the text, there is another emoji of laughter, laughing at the nature of the man's nose if he sneezes. The visual act is used to warn the citizens about the potential danger involved in sneezing during the Covid-19 pandemic. To buttress the point being made, the pictorial sketch contains a man (who is the referent) whose nose is somewhat distorted by the meme creator. The nose was flattened and enlarged to make it look extraordinarily weird. This is intended to arouse fear in the minds of the citizens. The implication of this meme is for Nigerians to keep social distance and always wear their facemask.

FIGURE 5

Utterance: a. No NoNoo... u can't bring me here, I'm a politician!

b. ...but it's your project sir!

Type of speech act: a. Representative/Expressive

b. Expressive

Interpretation

The pictorial sketch in figure 5 has three referents or characters; two health workers identified by their dressing codes, and a politician who is being carried to a thatched roofed mud-like structure with an inscription "General Hospital". The politician is seen shouting "No NoNoo... u can't bring me here, I'm a politician!" the speech act of the politician's utterance is both assertive and expressive; informing and complaining respectively to the health workers that he is a politician. The health workers response to the politician is an expressive speech act of scolding the politician. This meme is used to demonstrate how Nigerian politicians are not

putting in place good hospitals in the country; rather, they prefer to travel abroad for treatment. It is common knowledge that rich people, especially politicians, do not believe in Nigerian healthcare system and that could be the reason why they are always travelling abroad to seek medical attention. Now that the Covid-19 is here in Nigeria, and there is no way for them to travel out, they will attend the same local hospitals that the commoners or poor people are attending.

FIGURE 6

Utterance: a Quarantine is in the Bible Isaiah 26:20

b. Go home! My people! And lock your doors! For a little while until the Lord's (sic) anger has passed.

Type of speech act: a. Representative

b. Directive

The meme creator through the use of text and image, displayed two speech acts here: representative and directive. This is seen by stating the fact that Nigerians should know that quarantine is also found in the Bible in Isaiah 26:20. More so, with the use of directive speech act, the meme creator admonishes readers or citizens to remain indoor pending when the Covid-19 rescinds. Furthermore, as evident in the meme, individuals, group(s) and the government reinforce some of the precautionary measures suggested by WHO as part of the strategies to contain the widespread of the pandemic.

A careful look at the memereveals a black background, the map of the world partly covered with a face/nose mask and the superimposed text are quite instructive and relevant to the pandemic situation witnessed globally. The black background symbolises the sad and gloomy experience the emergence of the pandemic has brought all over the world, given the number of casualties recorded so far. This is forcefully reinforced by the atlas of the world with maps of different continents, showing that the pandemic is a universal phenomenon. The combination of the two elements depicts the meme as carrying a message of subtle warning. Ultimately, the meme warns that, since there has not been any known vaccine for the globally, making personal efforts to contain its spread is very key and important. This implies that individuals should protect themselves against the virus with the wearing of nose mask. Furthermore, the white text on the atlas with a nose mask,

making reference to the Bible, emphatically admonishes the Nigerian populace on the need to practise quarantine at this point in time. The author/creator of the meme makes recourse to the Bible where the Israelites were admonished to practice quarantine in the face of a ravaging plague witnessed at a time. The message in the meme is germane to the Nigerian society, especially among Christians, some of whom might want to defy the “stay home” directive of the government because they believe that they are “covered with the blood of Jesus”, and thus they are immune against Covid-19.

The implication here is that, if God could warn and admonish the Israelites, believed by the Christians to be God’s own people, the “stay at home” order is not out of place for Nigerian Christians and as such should be considered as one of the strategies to ensure the containment of the Covid-19 pandemic in the country.

FIGURE 7

Utterance: a. Na China chop meat but na we dey wash hand.

b. I don wash hand tire for meat wen I no chop

Type of speech act: a. Representative

b. Expressive

Interpretation

The first utterance above performs a representative speech act of asserting and informing. In other words, the locution informs the citizens about the undesirable prevailing situation of regular hand washing in Nigeria since the outbreak of the pandemic. On the other hand, the second utterance ‘b’ performs an expressive speech act of complaint. China created the virus but other countries, such as Nigeria, are bearing the brunt of the monster she introduced, hence the complaint by Nigerians. The meme is also used to satirise the progenitor of the virus is - China. The virus originated from China but other countries, such as Nigeria, are bearing the brunt of the effect of the virus. Though the utterances preach safety, they also condemn and lament in a mocking-tone the cumbersome and tiresome exercise of washing hands regularly.

Specific reference is made to China, a country in East Asia, the largest in the world by population and the third largest by area. The reference to China is imperative because the outbreak originated from China in November 2019. Another ostentatious reference was made to steak. This reference is as a result of the popular belief that the Chinese consume “unclean” meats such as bat, which are the

carriers of the virus. These two references are synecdochical. China as a country is used to represent inhabitants of China, while meat is used to represent bat. Hence, this meme was driven by the exigencies of the pandemic, and as such the reader can relate to it seamlessly.

More so, another pragmatic strategy used in the meme for witty effect is the use of Pidgin English: a Pidgin based loose-English muddled with local colour which is a lingua franca in Nigeria. The use of Pidgin makes the meme catchy, witty and widely intelligible in the Nigerian context. Apart from these, there is also the use of dysphemism: the deliberate substitution of an offensive expression for a neutral one. The word “meat” is “dysphemistically” substituted for the relatively more offensive word bat. Most Nigerians see Bat meat as a disgusting and taboo that is not meant to be touched. So using a neutral word like meat in lieu of bat is an attempt to cushion the intended perlocutionary effect on the mind of the reader.

FIGURE 8

Utterance: Federal Medical Centre (FMC) Bida Niger State. Are really prepared for Covid-19. Kudos to my Nupe people (emojis) (sic)

Type of speech act: Representative/Assertive

Interpretation

This meme is performing an act of assertiveness and satirising as indicated with the three laughing emoji's. The implication of this meme is intended to make a mockery of the state of health facilities of Niger state in particular but Nigeria in general. In the image, we see a gas cylinder and a water dispenser being infused to the body of the supposed Covid-19 patient with another supposed health worker wearing a somewhat helmet (depicting battle-ready) with a stethoscope hung over his ears as well as the pictorial caption to back it up is a subtle way of not just making a mockery of the dilapidated state of medical facilities in the country, but also to inform the reader that Nigeria is not ready to battle the Covid-19 pandemic.

The reader can infer that the image above together with its inherent caption is intended to induce laughter. The humour is achieved because the mental picture the image triggered is farfetched and it is not obtainable in any medical centre in the country. However, the meme is intended to amuse the readers/citizens and mitigate the tension instigated by the pandemic. This caption contains some nominal referents which are “Bida”, Niger State and Nupe people. Niger state is a state in North

Central Nigeria and the largest in the country in terms of land mass. The state capital is Minna, but Bida is a local government and also one of the major cities in the state. Nupe people are one of the indigenous people in Niger State, and they speak Nupe language. Knowledge of these referents makes it seamlessly possible not just to comprehend the coronavirus-related-meme but also to situate the caption in the proper context.

The use of laughing emojis is to illustrate the intended humorous effect associated with internet memes. Also, the caption is complemented with a parody image of a caricature doctor and a patient. The doctor, patient and the supposed hospital equipment are parodies of what is obtainable in ideal situations.

FIGURE 9

Utterance: Stay at home or dance with us

Type of speech act: Directive

Interpretation

The speech act in this meme is directive, giving instruction of warning. The meme is metaphorical with figurative expression that requires shared background knowledge. Undertakers are those who carry the dead and perform acrobatic dance with the casket. The image portrays the dressing pattern of undertakers in Nigeria during burial processions and their performances could be dramatic. The undertakers in Nigeria are different, adding pomp and pageantry to the burial procession itself. They usually toss the casket around performing different acrobatic styles to the spectators' delight, who are usually thrilled at the ease with which the casket is thrown from side to side. The speaker/meme creator, through the undertakers warns Nigerians to stay at home to avoid contacting the virus. The use of 'us' suggests that the undertakers themselves are ready to dance with those who choose to die (through the virus).

The only way one can be part of this performance 'dance with us' is in the coffin as a dead body. It is on that basis that directive speech act of warning in the meme becomes relevant. The use of 'us' suggests that the undertakers themselves are speaking and ready to dance with those who choose to die. If the reader decides not to stay at home, he or she is toying with death. In terms of perlocutionary effect, the meme shows that the speaker and the addressees fear death, and it is a strong appeal for the enforcement of the stay at home order in Nigeria. So, the fear of

dying becomes an instrument to adhere strictly to Covid-19 rules. The use of ‘or’ subordinating conjunction is used to present an option for the citizens, but in the real sense, that is an option which the people would not want to choose ordinarily because it would be difficult to see a Nigerian in the right frame of mind choosing to die instead of staying at home.

FIGURE 10

Utterance: No place for you in Nigeria

Type of speech act: Expressive

Interpretation

This meme has two characters (referents): Jesus and devil giving the picture of their dressing as seen in the meme. Jesus is holding a whip that has fire at the tip. The fire on the whip represents the power of Jesus that consumes every opposing forces. The speech act type is expressive with the function of scolding and rebuking the devil who is represented in an ugly-looking skeletal sketch with an inscription that reads “Corona”. The locution “No place for you in Nigeria” is written in red which indicates danger on the part of the virus. The Covid-19 represented with a devil’s sketch cannot dwell in Nigeria. People believe that the Covid-19 will not succeed in Nigeria just the way Ebola was completely defeated. Many people also believe that the virus was created, which is an evil act to destroy or shake other countries’ economies. Some people also see it from the political point of view, that the government is only increasing the figure of Covid-19 in the country to enrich themselves. The implication of this meme is to portray that Nigerians believe in the efficacy of the power of God to destroy anything inimical to His children’s well-being.

FIGURE 11

Utterance: a. US releases \$2 trillion to fight covid19, Germany \$600 Billion, UK \$330, Canada \$20 Billion, Italy \$20 Billion & Somalia \$5 million, Dubai \$500 Billion. Saudi Arabia \$1 trillion.

b. NIGERIA stay at home & wash your hands.

Type of speech act: a. Representative

b. Directive

Interpretation

The locution of this meme performs the speech act of both representative and directive with the function of reporting what other countries have contributed so far to the fight against the virus. It also advises Nigerians on the importance of staying at home and washing their hands and at the same time, mocking the Nigerian government respectively. In the pictorial sketch, how other countries are releasing huge amount of money to fight Covid-19 is on display. However, in the same image which portrays Nigerian environment evidenced in the potholes on the road, a man in green uniform with a raffle port across his shoulder is seen chasing a man who is shabbily dressed to stay at home amidst the hunger in the country as evidenced in the man's lean stomach and haggard looks.

The implication of this meme is to show how Nigerian law enforcement agents were chasing Nigerian citizens who flout the stay at home order. This depict a scenario of a lack of appropriate measure in handling the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. It is apparent in the picture that, instead of the Nigerian government providing palliative just the way other countries are doing to fight the virus, the government is busy using uniform men to force people to stay at home.

FIGURE 12

- Utterance:**
- a. As I say “extra two weeks” dem begin grumble
 - b. But the Lagos area boysdey worry oh
 - c. I go soon nack Lagos 2 months

- Type of speech act:**
- a. Representative
 - b. Representative
 - c. Commissive

Interpretation

This meme has two characters; President Muhammadu Buhari and Vice President Yemi Osinbajo in a mocking conversation. The duo are seen making jest of Lagosians and Lagos State amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. There is an incongruous inscription on the image that reads “corvid 19” as against ‘Covid-19’ to depict the inappropriateness and disorderliness of things the virus has brought to the Nigerian economy.

Their utterances perform three speech act types; two representative acts and one commissive act. The first utterance mark as ‘a’ by the researcher, is coming

from President Buhari stating that there will be another lockdown in Lagos. The second utterance mark as ‘b’ is coming from the Vice President, stating how difficult life has been with Lagosians as a result of the first two weeks lockdown; “But the Lagos area boys dey worry oh”. The lexical item ‘worry’ as rendered in pidgin English does not carry the meaning of being ‘anxious or bothered’ but ‘worry’ in this sense is the nuisance that will be constituted by recalcitrant Lagosians if another lockdown is imposed on them. This shows that Lagos area boys were complaining over the first two weeks lockdown in the state without knowing that an extra two months will soon be added. The response of the President which is the ‘c’ part of the conversation is a commissive speech act type threatening Lagosians to expect a fresh lockdown of 2 months. It shows that Lagos State will be shocked when extra two months will be added instead of two weeks. The implication is that instead of the President and the Vice to be remorseful over the plight of Lagosians, they decided to turn the scenario to a joke so as not to have serious effect on the psyche of Lagosians.

FIGURE 13

Utterance: a. Covid-19 special medicine
b. Please take frequently
c. Stay home, no going out, stay indoor

Type of speech act: a. Representatives
b. Directives
c. Directives

Interpretation

This meme carries three types of speech acts. One representative speech act used in informing Nigerians that there is a special medicine for Covid-19. And two directive speech acts type; the first is used to advise Nigerians to take the special medicine regularly. While the third directive speech act type is used for warning/admonition; it warns Nigerians on the need to take precautionary measures that could combat the continual spread of the pandemic “Stay home, no going out, stay indoor”.

The texts used in the meme are used to negotiate meaning between the creator of the meme and the Nigerian audience. The meme resources cut across the use of colour, image and lexical choices. These resources interact with the prevailing

context to signal meaning. In sensitising Nigerians about the Covid-19 virus, the meme warns Nigerians on the need to take precautionary measures that could combat the continual spread of the pandemic. The meme negotiates warning/admonition via the use of colour to enact a problem-solution approach to the pandemic. The “Covid-19” rendered in red, strongly establishes the narrative of fear around the pandemic. The locution import of red, with which Covid-19 is rendered, interacts with the prevailing context of the discourse to evoke the speech act of warning. The blue background of the meme pragmatically indexicates the atmosphere of depression, melancholy and sadness in the Nigerian context as a result of the emergence of Covid-19 in the country. The adoption of black to create inscriptions on the text also evokes the act of warning. The meme’s adoption of inscriptions rendered in black: “special medicine, please take frequently”, “Stay Home”, “No going out” and “stay indoor” reinforces intention in the meme.

The precautionary measures in the meme are consciously rendered in black so as to portray the pandemic as an ill-omen. The white background on the bottle adds to the degree of warning to stay at home. The use of white background on the bottle creates measures that could be adopted to “cure”, not the virus, but its spread. This is so because the “cure” as captured by the text, goes beyond the pedestrian inscriptions on the bottle; the bottle contains ‘vaccine’ that can “cure” the infection. The text also features an interesting engagement of lexical choices in signalling the act of warning. The use of “Special Medicine” metaphorically interacts with the prevailing context of the pandemic to evoke warning. The “Special Medicine” is not a vaccine but a demonstration of the right attitude to safety measures in the face of the lingering health crisis. The use of “please take frequently” implores the audience to “take” a non-existent drug by staying at home. In negotiating the act of warning, the text uses an imperative sentence, “Stay Home” to reinforce and add pungency to the need to be personally involved in curtailing the spread of the deadly virus.

FIGURE 14

Utterance: Corona virus has killed a lot people and you are still alive today use few seconds and thank God for the life

Type of speech act: a. Directives
b. Expressive

Interpretation

This meme is fraught with inscriptions, no visuals. The text performs two speech acts: directive and expressive. The speaker is warning the Nigerian populace of the reality and the destructive nature of the pandemic and it subtly admonishes them to appreciate God's kind gesture and mercy towards them by sparing their lives. The creator of the meme strategically draws on the shared situational knowledge of the global casualties of the pandemic and the use of indirect speech act to warn the Nigerian populace against its lethality, while at the same time admonishing them to thank God for life. As deduced from the text in the meme, the pandemic is such that has claimed the lives of a lot of people; hence it should not be treated with levity. The general tone of the meme acts is that of warning and admonition. This further reinforces the degree to which the average Nigerian believes that their existence/living is designed by God: who shows His kindness and mercy to them (the reason they are still alive). The relevance of the meme is further appreciated in the socio-religious context in Nigeria where Christian and Islamic faithful often reiterate God's kindness by making reference to those who have died, hospitalised, or facing one form of misfortune or another to spur themselves up to appreciate God's gift of life and good health.

DISCUSSION OF RESULT AND FINDINGS IN THE MEMES

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Acts

Speech Act	Frequency of occurrence	Percentage (%)
Representatives	13	44.8%
Directives	9	31.0%
Commissives	3	10.3%
Declaratives	-	-
Expressives	4	13.8%
Total	29	100%

Source: Research work 2022

Table 1 above shows the frequency of acts performed by the memes. Representative acts are the most frequently used, with 44.8% frequency. The result shows the efforts made by Netizens to create awareness on the scourge through the social media, also informing and warning Nigerians of the dangers of the virus. This is revealed in the Overall Relative Frequency Percentages (ORFPs) table 2 where some memes displayed high number of utterances categorized as Representatives 44.8% to assert, state and informing Nigerians about the dangers of the Covid-19 situation in the country; Directives 31.0% which is majorly to advise, admonish, pleading and warning everyone to keep out of the streets and stay at home; Expressive 13.8% to scold politicians toying with the lives of Nigerians and also to rebuke the devil (figures 5 and 11 respectively [appendix]); and Commissives as the occurrence of 3 with 10.3%. to threaten or instigate fear in the minds of Nigerians and also used to promise a better infrastructure by the politician, see figure 1 [appendix]. This study is in tandem with Msughter's (2020) study which captures and highlights how the social networking sites serve as an avenue that contributed to the citizen's engagement as well as the application of unhindered freedom of expression, via the use of photographs, vanishing of authorship about the creation, distribution, and consumption of internet memes to create awareness on Covid-19.

Conclusion

The evolution of social media today has no doubt enhanced digital communication in our technologically advanced world. It has been discovered that Facebook, an aspect of social media, served as a powerful medium through which memes on Covid-19 circulated across Nigeria. This study analysed internet memes which were circulated on Facebook across Nigeria during the pandemic. Data were analysed using Searle's Speech Acts Theory. It has been discovered that the creators of memes carefully manipulate some linguistic features to make such messages perform some illocutionary acts as well as trigger some perlocutionary moves in the minds of the readers. It is, no doubt, an established fact that language is not just for communication but a tool used to achieve certain aims by certain users.

The study captures and highlights how the social networking site (Facebook) serves as an avenue that contributed to the citizens' engagement as well as the application of unhindered freedom of expression, via the use of photographs, texts, vanishing of authorship about the creation, distribution, and consumption of

internet memes to create awareness on Covid-19. Empirical evidence from the study shows that Internet memes were used as a tool for conveying messages to the general public. As a digital tool for the fight against Covid-19, the study found that Internet memes were used by netizens through the adopted theoretical framework to display different speech acts such as informing, stating (implicit) satirising, warning, promising, mocking and relieving (of tension) to drive home their messages to the government and the entire citizens of the country. In other words, it reveals the socio-economic and political realities in a particular historical period of the nation.

The pragmatic implication is that at the covert level, the meme serves as a coping strategy, providing a prag-memic voice of invective, approval, support and/or protest against inept attitudes of government towards Covid-19 pandemic. It is also revealed that the speech act relevance of Covid-19 induced-memes are embedded in their social functions as they serves as an indicator of the sense of citizens' freedom and a note of warning to the corrupt and inefficient leaders in Nigeria, particularly on health facilities in the country. In conclusion, the analysis carried out in this research will further enable other language researchers and individuals who are not linguists to pay much attention to the role of language in every communicative encounter.

References

- Aboh, R. and Uduk, H. (2017). *Meaning in Discourse: An Introduction to Discourse Analysis*. Kraft Books Ltd, Ibadan.
- Ajayi, T. M. and Akinrinlola, T. (2021). Pragma-multimodal functions of Covid-19 memes in the Nigerian context. *Journal of Applied Language and Culture Studies*, 4:77-102.
- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do Things with Words*. Clarendon Press, London.
- Dynel, M. (2021). Covid-19 memes going viral: On the multiple multimodal voices behind face masks. *Discourse and Society*, 32(2):175–195.
- Ekoru, D. E. and Gunn, M. (2021). Speech Act Theory and Gricean Pragmatics: A Review. *LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research*, 18 (4): 130-143
- Gunn, M. and Ekoru, D. E. (2018). Analysis of President Muhammadu Buhari’s Inaugural Speech “The Die is Cast”: H. P. Grice Co-operative Principles Perspective. *TAJEL: Taraba Journal of English and Literature*, 1(1):109-118.
- Gunn, M. and Ishaya, Y. T. (2020). Speech Acts Analysis of Selected Speeches of President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan. *ANSU: Journal of Language and Literary Studies (AJLLS)*, 2(1):17-28. ISSN: 24657352.
- Horn, R. and Ward, G. (2006). *Pragmatics*. University of Northwestern, Yale. https://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/Internet_Fundamentals/Social_Media. Accessed April, 25th 2022.
- Hussein, A. T. and Aljamili, L. N. (2020). Covid-19 humour in Jordanian social media: A semiotic approach. *Heliyon*, 6:1-12.
- Idegbekwe, D. and Ambrose, L. C. (2020). Echoic communications and pragmatic relevance of covid-19 memes in Nigeria’s social media space. *Indian Journal of Language and Linguistics*, 1(1):19-30.
- Ishaya, Y. T. (2018). *A Pragmatic Analysis of Language of Sermons in Selected Pentecostal Churches in Jalingo*. Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, University of Calabar.
- Msughter, A. E. (2020). Internet Meme as a Campaign Tool to the Fight Against Covid-19 in Nigeria. *Global Journal of Human-Social Science: Arts & Humanities – Psychology*, 20 (6):26-39.
- Ogbulogo, C. (2005). *Concepts in Semantics*. Sanon Iroamusi, Lagos.
- Ogungbe, E. O. and Omolabi, I. (2020). The pragmatics of coronavirus motivated humour on the social media. *All Nations University Journal of Applied*

- Thought (ANUJAT), 8(1):1-20.
- Owojecho, G. A. (2021). Social Media and Fake News in Nigeria: A Speech Act Analysis of WhatsApp Messages on Coronavirus
- Predia, K. C. (2021). The Place of Humorous Memes Amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic and how these help to Ameliorate the Hardships Suffered by Citizens. Paper Presented at the 4th International Conference/Workshop Pragmatics Association of Nigeria in conjunction with the Department of English and Literature, University of Benin on the theme: Pragmatics and Global Conflicts, 8th-11th February, 2021.
- Searle, J. (1969). Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language. Cambridge: University Press, London.
- Sharndama, C.E. (2015). Pragmatics of Political Discourse: A Speech Act Analysis of the Manifests of the People's Democratic Party pp. 105-120.
In: O. Ayodabo, & N. Butari, (eds) Issues in Language and Linguistic Perspectives from Nigeria. Hartee Press, Iorin.
- Syal, P. and Jindal, D.V. (2014). An Introduction to Linguistics: Language, Grammar and Semantics (2nd edition). Asoke, K. Ghosh, PHI, New Delhi.
- World Health Organisation. (2020). Coronavirus.
Retrieved from https://www.who.int/healthtopics/Coronavirus#tab=tab_1.