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# Socio-Semiotic Analysis of Newspaper Cartoons on COVID-19

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## Abstract

This work investigated socio-semiotic analysis of newspaper cartoons on COVID-19. This study was borne out of the need to understand how different layers of meanings are enacted in COVID-19 cartoons. Specifically, this study sought to understand the socio-semiotic features embedded newspaper cartoons on COVID-19. This study took a critical look at the degree of abstraction and vocabulary affected the readability of newspaper cartoons on COVID-19. Also, the messages and the ideologies embedded in cartoons on COVID-19 as well as the socio-semiotic relevance of the selected COVID-19 cartoons towards the discourse of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria were thoroughly investigated. Kress and van Leewan Visual Social Semiotics Theory and cooperative Principle Theory formed the theoretical framework of this study. The textual data for this study were drawn from selected newspapers. The choice of these cartoons was based on the simplicity of the message embedded in the cartoons. This study discovered that newspaper cartoons on COVID-19 used multimodal used include texts, icons, and symbols to enact meaning in their campaign against the spread of COVID-19. The cartoons used caricature and satire to lampoon

and criticize the government on their uncoordinated and corrupt oriented response towards the management of COVID-19 pandemic. It was also discovered that cartoonist used short sentences in the framing of their messages which were apt and straight-to-the-point.
**Keyword:** COVID-19, socio-semiotic, cartoons, multimodality, socio-semiotic relevance, readability

## Introduction

The Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has presented a wide range of opportunities for socio semiotic and pragmatic inquiry. Since its emergence on the global stage, experts in different areas of linguistic studies have been examining the use and practice related to COVID-19 from various perspectives. OPe-Davies and Adedeji (2020) argue that the concept of socio-semiotics underpins how language use acquires meaning and social significance as a result of the interaction between text and other semiotic items, such as icons, indexes, and symbols, within the discourse environment.

May (2001) posits that communication in society primarily occurs through language. However, as social beings, language users communicate and use language within the context of society. These contexts, which can be social, cultural, physical, cognitive, or even virtual, influence the choices, meanings, and intentions in communication. May (2001) further argues that socio-semiotic linguistic inquiry looks at how language use is determined by the conditions of society.

Zamanian and Heydari (2012) observe that meaning-making in a text is dependent on all the linguistic and non-linguistic elements within that text. These authors also point out that factors such as the degree of abstraction, vocabulary, the number of pronouns and prepositions, affixes, the number of difficult words, and sentence length all contribute to meaning-making within a text.

According to Van Leeuwen (2005), multimodality refers to the combination of different semiotic modes in a communicative artifact or event. The construal of meaning through a communicative signifier, both verbal and non-verbal, is what is understood as "mode." Kress (2009) states that mode is understood as a socially shaped and culturally given resource for making meanings. During the COVID-19 pandemic, language embedded in cartoons was used to educate the public about the dangers of the virus and the efforts of the Nigerian government to address it. Another factor that contributes to the understanding of the speaker's message is context. Context plays a crucial role in the communication process because most words can only be understood in association with the words surrounding them. Cartoonists manipulate language in various ways to convey their messages, using verbal language and some paralinguistic features to create a sort of reality that can be compared to real-life situations. Such non-linguistic features include the use of kinesics (body movement), proxemics (use of space), icons (symbols and objects), and panels (the frame that houses the images and words).

**Statement of Problem**

Studies have shown that many students and readers struggle to understand and appreciate the themes, morals, and aesthetics of cartoons due to a lack of knowledge about the language used in them (Hasanah & Hidayat, 2020). As communication can be hindered or lost when this occurs, it is important to understand how cartoons convey meaning through images, which can serve as a form of one-way communication. The use of cartoons in Nigerian media has been studied before (Alabi, 2020; Tunde & Bello, 2021), but this study will specifically focus on using semiotic theory and cooperative principles to analyze the relevance of cartoonish representations of COVID-19 related issues in the Nigerian media.

**Purpose of the Study**

The broad purpose of this study is to undertake a socio-semiotic analysis of newspaper cartoons on COVID-19. Specifically, this study seeks to:

1) Examine the socio-semiotic features embedded newspaper cartoons on COVID-19.
2) Highlight on the degree of abstraction and vocabulary affected the readability of newspaper cartoons on COVID-19.
3) Examine how messages and the ideologies that the newspaper cartoons on COVID-19 seek to project.
4) Highlight the socio-semiotic relevance of the selected COVID-19 cartoons towards the discourse of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

**Significance of the Study**

This research is significant to a wide range of individuals and groups, including future researchers, social crusaders, readers, cartoonists, and others. For future researchers, the findings of this study provide an important framework for understanding the ways in which language and visual representation shape our understanding of the world. This research can inform future studies in fields such as linguistics, sociology, and communication, helping researchers to better understand the complex ways in which language, communication, and visual representation influence our perceptions of reality.

For social crusaders, the findings of this study is particularly important, as it can help to reveal the ways in which language and visual representation can be used to perpetuate social injustice. For example, research in this field can uncover the ways in which racist or sexist language and imagery can reinforce oppressive social structures. This knowledge can be used to inform social justice campaigns and advocacy efforts, helping to create a more equitable and just society.

For readers and cartoonists, the findings of this study can provide valuable insights into the ways in which language and visual representation shape our understanding of the world. Understanding the ways in which language and imagery can be used to create meaning can help readers to better analyze and interpret the texts they encounter and can help cartoonists to create more nuanced and impactful visual narratives.

In conclusion, the findings of this study when published will have significant implications for a wide range of individuals and groups. For future researchers, it provides an important framework for understanding the ways in which language and visual representation shape our understanding of the world. For social crusaders, it can reveal the ways in which language and visual representation can be used to perpetuate social injustice. For readers and cartoonists, it can provide valuable insights into the ways in which language and visual representation shape our understanding of the world. Overall, socio-semiotic analysis undertaken in this study is an essential tool for understanding the complex ways in which language, communication, and visual representation shape our perceptions of reality.

**Research Questions**

In line with the objectives, this study seeks to:

1) What are the socio-semiotic features embedded in newspaper cartoons on COVID-19?
2) How does the degree of abstraction and vocabulary used in newspaper cartoons on COVID-19 affect their readability?
3) What messages and ideologies do newspaper cartoons on COVID-19 seek to project?
4) What is the socio-semiotic relevance of the selected COVID-19 cartoons towards the discourse of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria?

## Conceptual Review

### Cartoon

The use of cartoons as a form of social commentary and critique is well-established in literature (Mateus, 2016). Cartoons, through the use of caricature, analogy, and comical juxtaposition, offer a unique perspective on current events and societal trends. The effectiveness of a cartoon is dependent on the audience's familiarity with the subject matter, as well as the cartoonist's understanding of it (Onakpa, 2014). Cartoonists use their medium to inform and educate the public on important social issues (Tyumbu, 2018).

In a semiotic study of cartoons, the graphic elements of the image play a crucial role in facilitating meaning (Burset, Bosch, & Pujolà, 2016). The graphic components of a cartoon can be divided into four main categories: shape, color, size, and resolution. The typographic elements, such as font and text size, are also analyzed for their impact on meaning. Additionally, the composition and placement of the graphic and typographic elements within the image is considered, as well as any interactive elements, such as buttons or sound effects. For a cartoon to be effective, it must be functional, logical, and consistent in its use of these various elements.

### Social Semiotics

According to Hodge and Kress (1988), social semiotics is focused on understanding how human communication is shaped by social factors, including the sources, functions, contexts, and effects of semiosis. Social semiotics also examines how people create and interpret meanings, analyze texts, and understand how semiotic systems are influenced by social interests and ideologies. Van Leeuwen (2005) defines semiotic resources as the actions and artifacts that individuals use to communicate, such as vocalizations, facial expressions, gestures, as well as tools like

pens, paper, and technology. These resources are used to create meaning in communication.

**Empirical Studies**

Hameed and Afzal (2021) studied the ways Arab media (newspapers) has presented the pandemic issues in the form of cartoons. These issues provide a gist to what the world needs to focus on during such gloomy times. The study uses a semiotic theory lens to analyze the selected cartoons from the two popular Middle Eastern newspapers. An insight into the newspaper's cartoons reveals that the corona pandemic has gravely affected the world from many perspectives. The major issues exposed are the regular interruption of normal human life activities, the nippy collapse of the world economies, the glum miseries of the working class, the duple downfall of the terror-struck countries, the unfair hold of the COVID-19 vaccine, the capitalistic issues with vaccine supply, and the deplorable botch of the world advancement. The findings reveal how caricatures become a social discourse when a cartoonist focuses on social and political realities around him.

Hussain & Aljamili (2020) carried out a study in the field of social semiotics. The focus on social media contribution was given. For analysis the researcher asked 1274 people from public to give their impressions on role of social media in pandemic awareness. The theory of social semiotics proposed by Kress and Leeuwen was used as theoretical framework for the study. The objective of the study was to identify and analyze special semiotic patterns related to Covid19. They concluded that the semiotics did a great deal of work and people responded to these symbols positively.

Azam, Baig & Azam (2020) analyzed the impact of Covid 19 on economy and its fear. The researchers analyzed the political cartoons on the subject of Covid 19. The data for analysis was collected from the newspaper Dawn, based in Pakistan. The researchers utilized the multimodel research method given by

Machin. Their study revealed that the selected cartoons disseminated fear and mental illness in the public. However, they also criticised and mocked the higher official authorities for the economic crisis by highlighting the financial problems of people, as these people did not make decisions on time to prevent the pandemic.

Alkhresheh (2020) analyzed the semiotics of two international newspapers on the subject of Covid19. The researcher collected the data from newspapers as Dawn and The Economist. A blended model of analysis was used by incorporating the critical discourse analysis given by Fairclough and semiotic analysis model proposed by Barthes. The researcher concluded that the semiotics of the selected newspapers presented the situation of COVID-19 and its long-term impacts have been discussed in the context of culture and social practice. The researcher concluded that both The Economist and Dawn positively tried to convince people to take precautionery measures.

## Theoretical Framework

### Kress and van Leewan Visual Social Semiotics Theory

Visual social semiotics is based on Halliday's theory of metafunctions (1994; 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen 2004), which posits that language serves three metafunctions simultaneously, namely ideational, interpersonal and textual. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) have extended this theory to visual social semiotic resources, renaming them as representational, interactive and compositional. The first metafunction, representational, deals with the ways in which experience is encoded visually. This can be done through narrative and/or conceptual structures.

Narrative structures present unfolding actions, events, and processes of change, while conceptual structures convey information about the spatial arrangements. The interactive metafunction focuses on the patterns of interactions between

participants. Different types of participants are involved in visual communication, including represented (depicted) and interactive (real) participants. These participants can lead to various relationships within the same types and between different types (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). The compositional metafunction refers to the way in which representations and communicative acts cohere into a meaningful whole, called "text" (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996).

This theory is built on the assumption that representation and communication always draw on multiple modes to add meaning. It pays attention to analyzing and describing the full range of meaning-making resources that people use (spoken, visual, written, gestural, three-dimensional, and others) in different contexts, and how they are organized to create meaning. Additionally, it assumes that semiotic resources are shaped by society to become meaning-making resources, and that these meanings, whether social, individual, or affective, are further articulated according to the requirements of the social groups or communities in the environment.

**Cooperative Principle Theory**

The Cooperative Principle (CP) is a fundamental concept in Gricean pragmatics, which is the study of how people use language in conversation. The CP consists of four maxims that are not prescriptive but rather descriptive of effective communication. These maxims include:

1. The Maxim of Quantity, which states that interlocutors should only provide the necessary information and avoid providing excessive unnecessary information.
2. The Maxim of Quality, which requires interlocutors to only say what they know to be true.
3. The Maxim of Relation, which states that speech participants should ensure that the information they provide is relevant to the conversation.

4. The Maxim of Manner, which requires speech participants to be brief, clear, and unambiguous.

These maxims are not prescriptive and CP recognizes that not all contributions may conform to all the maxims. However, for any contribution to be meaningful in communication, it must abide by the maxim of relation, even if it is not overtly obvious. In this light, when an interlocutor's contribution is unclear, ambiguous, untrue, and not an expected contribution, other interlocutors have to ask themselves how it could be relevant to the conversation and what interpretation is available and potentially appropriate (Jagoe & Smith, 2016).

**Research Methodology**

This study adopted descriptive research design because it intends to analyze the various socio-semiotic features inherent in COVID-19 cartoons. This study is hinged on the assumption that behind each utterance in the cartoons is an intention or a network of intentions. From the cartoonist's point of view, each text within the cartoon has a function of either imparting a particular piece of information, describing a state of affairs or commenting on a situation. There is no single utterance in the cartoon that might be construed redundant. In this regard, 5 COVID-19 cartoons as found in the Punch, Vanguard, Champion, and Daily Sun newspapers of 2019-2020 were selected through purposive sampling technique. The study is restricted to cartoons found in the Nigerian newspapers (disregarding those in foreign newspapers) because the research is about Nigeria and Nigerians, because of the limited time stipulated to carry out the research because it tends to lend a voice to the general admonition given to Nigerians against the dreaded COVID-19 pandemic and the effort of the government towards managing the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. The data collected were selected using the purposive random sampling. The selected data were analyzed using Kress and van Leewan Visual Social Semiotics Theory and Cooperative Principle Theory.

## Analysis and Discussion of Findings

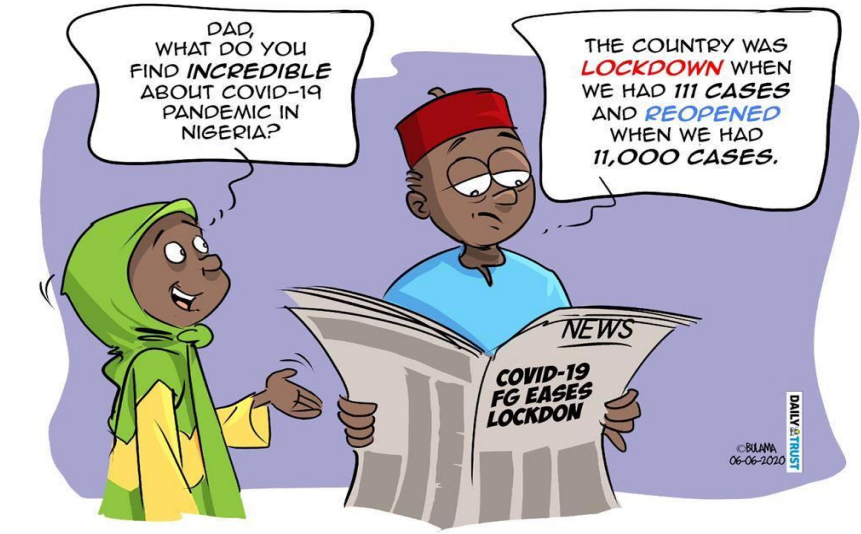


Figure **1**

In line with the basic tenet of Visual Grammar theory which seeks to emphasis the role of multimodality in creating meaning shows that there are socio-semiotic modes that are embedded in the cartoon marked as Data 1. For instance, the word "LOCKDOWN" was written in red to amplify the socio significance of the word during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of the colour red signified danger and the bitter experiences people went through during the COVID-19 pandemic when everywhere was on lock down. Also, the word reopened written in blue colour was deliberately used by the cartoonist to lay emphasis that there is hope for the masses after the lockdown. Furthermore, the cartoon is easy to understand because the cartoonist used words that the masses are conversant with during the period of the pandemic. The message embedded in the cartoon shows that the Nigerian government is corrupt, insincere in the handling of all issues related to COVID-19. The cartoonist pointed out in the caricature

embedded in data 1 that it is a social crime that the Nigerian government declared lockdown when there are few cases and reopened when there were thousands of cases.

Also, applying Cooperative Principle (CP) in understanding data 1 shows that the cartoonist applied maxim of quality to use apt and straight forward information about the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. To achieve this objective, the cartoonist deployed sarcasm to mock the actions and inaction of the government during the pandemic. The response of speaker B "**THE COUNTRY WAS LOCKDOWN WHEN WE HAD 111 CASES AND REOPENED WHEN WE HAD 11,000 CASES** shows the social reality evidenced in the way that the COVID-19 pandemic without any form of sincerity and prudence.

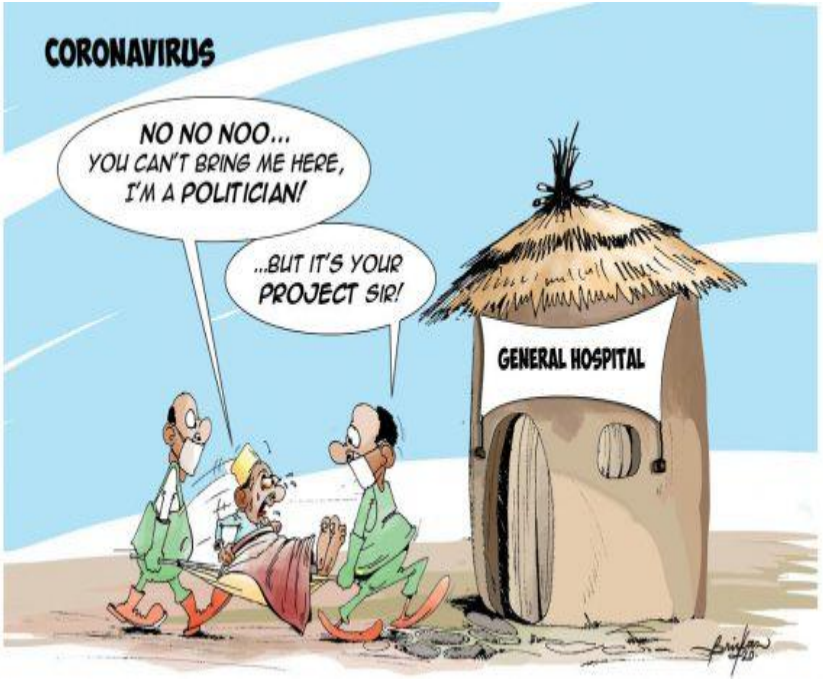


Figure 2

Figure 2 is a clear depiction of the use of multimodality to recreate the social experience of the people. The cartoon pointed out that lockdown in Nigeria have exposed the role of Nigerian politicians in embezzlement and underdevelopment. In the cartoon, two social workers were seen carrying a politician into a mud house with a thatch roof but the health workers reminded him that the hospital is his project. In Data 2 all the texts in the cartoon, the mud house with a thatch roof, the posture and gaze of the health workers were semiotic modes that passed a clear message of high-level corruption and under development.

The cartoon depicts a regretful state of the health institution, symbolized by the general hospital, which is supposed to be a center of healing and restoration. It shows medical actors using a provisional or 'traditional' stretcher to convey a patient, who is a politician, to the general hospital. This representation speaks to the low level of development in the country's health facilities compared to other developing countries and even some private facilities. The dialogue in the cartoon also supports the mocking of the health facility and corrupt practices of politicians. The cartoon also highlights the attitudes and beliefs of Nigerian politicians, who see the general hospital as only for the poor masses, while they go abroad for treatment or to privately owned hospitals. This attitude of medical tourism is common among Nigeria's public officials, who mismanage funds meant for developing the health sector and other basic infrastructure.




Figure 3

Figure 3 is a cartoon that illustrates the social reality of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The artist has used humor to present the reality in Nigeria, where the COVID-19 virus has become a business opportunity with the purchase of a COVID-19 certificate. This cartoon highlights the corrupt practices that have emerged during the pandemic, with some individuals and organizations taking advantage of the situation for their own financial gain.




Figure 4

The cartoon in Figure 4 suggests that cartoons on COVID-19 were used as a tool to criticize politicians. The use of cartoons as a means to gain attention and target politicians in Nigeria is evident. For example, this cartoon specifically criticized politicians for only distributing rice and oil during their campaign period, neglecting the needs of the people during the COVID-19 pandemic. It implies that these politicians embezzled funds intended for the purchase and distribution of essential materials during the pandemic. The cartoon suggests that people expected politicians to provide materials like hand sanitizers and facemasks during this difficult time.




Figure 5

The cartoon in Figure 5 presents a parody of the way Nigerian leaders have surrendered to the virus. The leaders are portrayed wearing traditional regalia characteristic of different ethnic groups in the nation. The first leader is shown wearing a red cap typical of the South-eastern region, the second leader represents the South-western region, the third leader with a multi-coloured upright cap represents the Northern region, and the last leader is wearing a typical Ijaw round hat. They are depicted as sharing greed and stashing their regalia with money. The leaders are also shown as remorseful, kneeling and crying with their hands raised in a typical punishment style for pupils in the nation. The cartoonist is mocking the incapacity of the Nigerian leaders to provide solutions and their failure to fix the healthcare system before the COVID-19 pandemic. The image of a dilapidated hospital is shown in the background to reveal the poor condition of the healthcare system. The cartoonist is suggesting that the problem with the healthcare

sector is caused by the leaders in the country and alluding to the shared knowledge of corrupt leadership in the country.

**Discussion of Findings**

The study shows that most of the images used in the data are not intended to simply document, but rather to symbolize a specific type of behavior. Both language and images are utilized as part of wider media discourse on COVID-19, highlighting the importance of understanding how and why certain communicative choices are made. The study found that cartoons provide a valuable resource for representing common features in face-to-face interactions, utilizing various linguistic and non-linguistic codes such as auditory, gestural, and visual elements. The written text is combined with visual elements such as repetition of characters, capitalization, and the use of punctuation marks, emoticons and abbreviations, which adds emphasis and interest for the readers. These visual elements perform communicative functions beyond just adding meaning to the words in the cartoons.

**Conclusion**

This work has examined the crucial role that the contextual use of language plays in generating meaning. By analyzing language use in cartoons, it has identified how words, gestures, symbols, icons, and objects can be utilized to inform, criticize, advise, admonish, and approve certain behaviors for the public. The study examined 5 cartoons related to the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria and found that the cartoonists employed various comical images and relied on shared socio-cultural and economic knowledge to convey their messages about the state of the pandemic in the country. The cartoons revealed different attitudes and beliefs that the Nigerian people have about the pandemic, as well as the level of preparedness in the country to slow the spread of the virus. The study also observed that some Nigerians remain skeptical about the reality of the pandemic, which leads them to defy government orders. The poor state of the Nigerian public health system and the

medical tourism that Nigerian politicians and the elite engage in in Europe is also satirized. The images expose corrupt practices and bribery prevalent among the Nigerian police force, the poor state of the economy, hunger, and other realities in the fight against the pandemic. These revelations are presented in structures and couched in verbal and non-verbal incongruity to create humor while also exposing certain realities in the nation. Like comedy, cartoons are not just designed for humor's sake; they reveal certain truths about the people. They often highlight serious political issues and place them on a higher pedestal, prompting people to examine their conscience.

**Recommendations**

In line with the findings of this study, it is recommended that cartoonist should:

1. Use humor to make the message more accessible and relatable to the audience. This will help to grab people's attention and make them more likely to engage with the message.
2. Share socio-cultural and economic knowledge with the audience to help them understand the underlying message of the cartoon. This will make the message more relevant and relatable to the audience.
3. Use cartoons to highlight social issues and problems in society, such as corruption and lack of resources in the healthcare system. This will help to draw attention to these issues and make people more aware of the problems that need to be addressed.
4. Use cartoons to call for more accountability and transparency in government and other organizations. This will help to bring attention to corrupt practices and help to promote a more open and transparent society.
5. Use cartoons to promote positive social change and encourage people to take action to combat societal ills. This can be done by highlighting the benefits of certain actions

or policies, or by encouraging people to take personal responsibility for making positive changes in their community.

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