



English Modality and Defeatist Ideology in Covid-19 Online News Reports

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify the types of modality used as discourse strategies to advance defeatist ideology in online news reports about COVID-19. The study, therefore, investigated the discourse strategies and defeatist ideology for meaning explication in online COVID-19 news reports in Nigeria. The research was conducted by using descriptive qualitative methods. The data comprising fifteen news reports on COVID-19 were purposively selected from two online national newspapers: The Punch and Sahara Reporters published between 2020 and 2022. The analysis employed the conceptual framework of linguistic modality of epistemic and deontic types following Halliday (2004). It was therefore discovered that online news producers use discourse strategies of epistemic and deontic types and defeatist ideology to show their attitudes, beliefs and stance on bringing COVID-19 crisis to an end in Nigeria.

Keywords: COVID-19, modality, defeatist ideology, online news reports.

Introduction

Language and human cannot be separated, as humans need language, as a medium to express how they feel both in spoken and written forms. Humans can express themselves through spoken communication in speech, sermon, debate and so on. In another way, humans can communicate in writing, as not all are versatile in speaking. Written communication can therefore be categorised as a literary work done through autography and usually found in letter writing, memo, query, poem, newspaper and so on. In short, through language, interpersonal relationship is built by people. Language can as well be deployed as a means of giving influence to people and as a result, it serves as a communication device or the process that affects the human thought and behaviour. Llama and Watt (2010) corroborate the foregoing by positing that language does not only reflect the human person but also whom he is, which defines him both directly and indirectly.

WHO, on the 30th January 2020, declared the Corona Virus Infectious Disease (COVID-19) as a public health emergency concern posing a high risk to the countries that did not have good medical system (WHO, 2020). COVID-19 first occurred in December, 2019 in Wuhan in China and the case was reported to the WHO which eventually declared that the disease was a variant of SARS-CoV virus of 2002. COVID-19 was given as the name by the WHO on the 11th

February, 2020 and it was an acronym which stands for Coronal Virus Disease of 2019. The symptoms are related to common cold, which includes fever, cough, shortness of breath etc. These can lead to pneumonia, viral sepsis and acute upper respiratory infection when they become complicated. The WHO thus recommended that all the people around the world should stay at home in order to prevent the spread. That was how most countries ordered physical and social distancing in order to restrict human social interactions in spoken communication (Rezeki, 2021).

In Nigeria, as well, most states restricted movements which eventually led to a total lockdown. This lasted till May, 2020 when the Federal Government ordered the gradual easing of lockdown in the many states of the federation where restriction was enforced (Amao, 2023c). This has necessitated a lot of news reports as well as comments and opinions in various media outlets in Nigeria and globally. This signifies the intentions of the commentators and other text producers on COVID-19 pandemic (Amao, 2023c). This was possible as many media houses are found in Nigeria. Getting an insight from the foregoing, this study spans through 2020 and 2022; a time of a widespread of COVID-19 in Nigeria.



Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The attentions of many scholars have been caught on COVID-19 pandemic discourse and they have thus employed different theoretical perspectives such as discourse analysis (Bright et al., 2020; Ajadi, 2022), pragmatics (Khotimah et al., 2021; Adeoti, 2023), stylistics (Rezeki 2021), semantics (Kupolati et al., 2021; Mweri, 2021), and sociolinguistics (Obiorah, 2021; Nwosu et al., 2023).

Khotimah et al. (2021), in their study of expression in the COVID-19-related ecolixicons in Indonesia online media coverage, delve into new terms and lexicon related to the COVID-19 pandemic that were found in Indonesia online mass media. The study applies a qualitative descriptive approach and data were collected using the observation method with techniques of reading and note-taking, literature study, documentation method, and screen capture or screenshots. It is found out that the new health eco-lexicons are in the form of English terms, synonym forms, Indonesian abbreviations, English abbreviations, and acronym forms and that using language in the form of lexicons related to COVID-19 shows a process of understanding the health context or domain as opposed to the past when only health workers could understand the lexicons. Thus the register in health domain is now open and used by the general public during the pandemic through the mass media. They concluded that new words that were related to COVID-19 would continue to emerge as long as the pandemic continued. The study, though based on electronic media, did not cover the news on writers' ideologies and discourse strategies employed which our study sets out to embark on.

Obiorah (2021) studies the role of Nigerian indigenous languages in COVID-19 discourse and the need to spread adequate information that will enhance the personal safety of Nigerians which could be done devoid of deploying English language which has hitherto dominated the indigenous languages. As a result, the study investigates the role of the Nigerian indigenous languages in the fight against COVID-19. It is therefore discovered that Nigerian indigenous languages are used in spreading COVID-19 preventive measures, media briefings on national television, health orientation and medical research. He concludes that the Nigerian indigenous languages which

have over the time been dominated by English language could be beneficial at a critical medical crisis. Though Obiorah (2021) is plausible and relevant to the present study as it concerns the electronic media on the discussion of COVID-19 pandemic, it does not account for the core of the present work, which is online news reports.

Nwosu et al's. (2023) study is on the emergence and use of new English forms in the COVID-19 epidemic in Nigeria and speakers' response to the communication needs necessitated by the outbreak. The study adopts the Functionalist Approach to investigate the linguistic impact of COVID-19 discourse on the Nigerian variety of the English language. Data for the study, which include recently coined words, abbreviations, phrasal expressions, syntactic structures, semantically extended and rejuvenated words that are associated with COVID-19 are collected from an online communication platform called *Nairaland*. It is discovered that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the social realities of Nigerians. Part of the alterations can be seen in their language use since the emergence of the pandemic which led to the forming of words such as ascovid 419, covidiot, scamdemic, palliative package, physical distancing, PTF, CACOVID and so on. The relevance of Nwosu et al's. (2023) research to our present study lies in the use of online media in the discussion of COVID-19 pandemic. However, Nwosu et al. (2023) does not align with the present study in respect of the latter's exploration of ideological constructs and discourse strategies.

Adeoti (2023) focuses on how meaning are interpreted in the selected newspapers' coverage of the coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria by exploring pragmatic investigation. The study adopts Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Act Theory to analyse ten (10) data selected purposively from *The Punch* and *The Vanguard* newspapers between February, 2020 and June, 2020. The study finds out that the pragmatic relevance of COVID-19 newspapers' coverage is embedded in its media functions as it serves as an indicator to interpret the messages inherent in the coronavirus newspapers' coverage and a pract of warning to Nigerian citizens to stay safe. The study also reveals that the practs used depend on context, situation and existing shared-knowledge of both the speaker and the reader. It is discovered that journalists use the news headlines to perform several acts of warning, sensitizing, informing,



exposing and so on to achieve different goals and pass numerous messages to their listeners/readers during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Results indicate that the Nigerian media perform well in terms of covering the pandemic, which in turn creates awareness. The fact that Adeoti's (2023) is based on COVID-19 newspaper coverage discourse provides a solid background to our present research. Nevertheless, the study differs from ours because it focuses on pragmatic investigation of newspaper headlines, while ours is based on ideology and discourse strategies in online news reports on COVID-19.

This study is, therefore, designed to investigate the ideological construct through defeatist ideology and the discourse strategies on meaning explication in online COVID-19 news report in Nigeria.

There has been a vast literature on COVID-19 in Nigeria and other parts of the world. Despite this, much attention is yet to be given to the discussion of joint contributions of ideological constructs and discourse strategies to meaning negotiation in COVID-19 news media discourse in Nigeria. This study, therefore, draws understanding from the conceptual framework of Halliday's (2004), and extends scholarship in demystifying discourse strategies and defeatist ideology to establish the joint roles they play in the negotiation of interactional goals in online COVID-19 news reports in Nigeria. Data, comprising fifteen news reports on COVID-19 were collected from two widely read online newspapers: *The Punch* and *Sahara Reporters*.

Linguistic modality, which is our theoretical framework, is a virile tool that can help in unraveling the attitude, belief and stance of the discourse producers of news reports on COVID-19 pandemic. Here, verbal expressions associated with motions as commitments, necessity, compulsion, possibility, commitment are found (Alo, 2013). Linguistic modality is sub-divided into two types: epistemic and deontic. These modality types belong to interpersonal metafunction of language, which has to do with communicating to give information. Being a semantic feature of the verbal group, modality is marked by modal auxiliary verbs, such as *will, would, can, could, may, might, shall, should* and so on as well as modalised adverbs: *in my opinion, possibly, personally* and so on, modalised verbs *seems*

to, have to, permit to and so on (Halliday, 1976; Greenbaum, 1996; Palmer, 2001). The semantic/pragmatic functions these linguistic devices serve are scolding, challenging, praising, informing, warning and so on (Amao, 2023c) while their discourse functions are positive, negative, neutral, sentimental, ambivalent and so on.

Epistemic modality signifies that the discourse producer accesses "the probability that the proposition is in term of the modal certainty, probability or possibility" (Downing and Locke, 1992; 382 cited in Amao, 2018). In epistemic modality, the concern has to do with matters of knowledge, belief or opinion and not facts. The modals in this category include, among others, *must* of certainty or logical thinking, *may* of possibility and *will* of strong possibility. Deontic modality, on the other hand, according to Lyons (1977:283) is essence of being "concerned with the necessity or possibility of an act performed by morally responsible agents". This shows that deontic modality is concerned with permission or obligation placed on discourse producers. It thus denotes desires, wants, obligations, necessity, undertaking and so on, displaying a performative function referring to the present time only (El-Hassan 1990:158). In this category are *must/ought to* of obligation, *may* of permission and *shall* of undertaking.

Analysis and Findings

In the analysis below, and in line with the objectives, our focus is on identification and discussion of the defeatist ideology and discourse strategies that text producers explore in the online news reports of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria through the indices present in the selected extracts. The ideology is marked by the grammatical devices of epistemic modality and deontic modality.

Defeatism has to do with the belief that one would not have a success in a particular situation. When a person is therefore termed a defeatist, it signifies that such a person accepts defeat easily, not even attempting any resistance. He/she will resign to fate due to his/her incapacitation to make any resistance. The defeatist ideology is revealed in the reportage of the writers in online newspapers and linguistically realised in the data through epistemic and deontic modality types as found in the following analysis.



Extract 1

COVID-19 is real, not politically motivated, says Kumuyi

The General Superintendent of the Deeper Christian Life Ministry, Pastor William Kumuyi, has said the COVID-19 pandemic is not politically motivated but real. Kumuyi spoke on Tuesday while fielding questions from journalists during a briefing to mark the commencement of the church's six-day global crusade. The revered cleric, who spoke at the crusade venue, said from his observation, the pandemic was real and not politically motivated in some quarters. He said, "concerning COVID-19, I want to say that from my observations, from looking at things, I know that COVID-19 is real; not fake, it is not a politically arranged thing to do whatever. It's real". We've had people who had real COVID-19 situations and they were in isolation. In fact, one of our men, one of our pastors was about to pass away". According to him, he had said his last prayer because in that isolation, he had seen other people dying, just going like that. The preacher said COVID-19 would not surprise those who knew the Bible well, as Jesus Christ foretold that there would be pestilence (pandemic) in the last days.

The Punch 21st December, 2021

Extract 1 above presents a news narrative of how the General Superintendent of the Deeper Christian Life Ministry, Pastor Williams Kumuyi lends his voice to the raging argument from various quarters that the COVID-19 pandemic is not real. This is sacrosanct as some states in Nigeria have not been following the order of the Federal Government that there should be restrictions in movement, gatherings, and some non-pharmaceutical measures to curb the spread of the pandemic. Thus, they allow their citizens to walk freely and engage in normal activities without the fear of being infected. From the headline and the lead story of the report as seen above, the text is pointing to a defeatist ideology. In its framing, the referent Pastor Kumuyi employs declarative construction to state that COVID-19 is real and not politically motivated. For instance, Pastor Kumuyi says, "We have people who had real COVID-19 situation and they were in isolation" and "In fact, one of our men, one of our pastors was

about to pass away". This statement validates the description of defeatism where he resigns to fate that those who are infected may not survive the fang. The ideology is advanced by the epistemic modality.

Epistemically, the use of *would* is found in the Pastor's statements, which signifies insistence that something is real or will happen as found in, "COVID-19 *would* not surprise those who know their Bible well, Jesus Christ foretold that there *would* be pestilence (pandemic) in the last days". The foregoing explicates insistence drawn from epistemic modality wherein the text producer is reminding those who have the same faith with him that there is no way the world will not experience pandemic/pestilence and that those people should not doubt the realness of COVID-19 menace.

The following extract on defeatist ideology reflects depression and anxiety occasioned by the menace of COVID-19.

Extract 2

Depression, anxiety may become common as COVID-19 enters second year

As the COVID-19 pandemic enters the second year, mental health experts say the pandemic is already fueling a surge in cases of depression, anxiety and other mental health issues. They also warn that except proactive measures are taken, there could be more cases of mental health issues long after the pandemic might have subsided. According to a World Health Organisation survey of the impacts of COVID-19 on 28 African countries, the pandemic has increased the demand for mental health services. The assessment, conducted last August, was part of the first global examination of the devastating impact of COVID-19 on access to mental health services. The survey stressed the urgent need for increased funding... Speaking on the survey, the WHO Regional Director for Africa, Dr. Matshidiso Moeti, had said, "The COVID-19 pandemic has shown, more than ever, how mental health is integral to health and well-being and must be an essential part of



health services during outbreaks and emergencies. Isolation, loss of income, the deaths of loved ones and a barrage of information on the dangers of this new virus stirs up stress levels and trigger mental health conditions or exacerbate existing ones". When asked how real is the fear that COVID-19 *could* fuel more cases of depression and anxiety long after the pandemic might have subsided, Consultant Psychiatrist at the Federal Neuro-Psychiatric Hospital Yaba, Lagos, Dr. Dapo Adegaju, said the fear was real.

The Punch 14th February, 2021

The above extract is an instance of a defeatist ideology put forward by the discourse producer. Here, the report makes known how depression and other forms of mental health have been on increase during the COVID-19 pandemic and will likely continue to surge after the menace. According to the report, the pandemic is said to be fueling the surge, referring to mental health experts' stance on the matter.

The linguistic device used to realise defeatist ideology in the above text is epistemic modality. The use of *could* in, "there *could* be more cases of mental health issues long after the pandemic must have subsided" and "COVID-19 *could* fuel more cases of depression and anxiety long after the pandemic might have subsided" show a strong possibility of mental issues to be widespread, considering how many countries have decided to release funds in order to curb the COVID-19 menace.

The linguistic indices deployed to advance defeatist ideology in the following example is epistemic modality which serves as the discourse strategy.

Extract 3
COVID-19: Kogi Governor, Yahaya Bello, Asked to Apologise for Misleading Residents

National Publicity Secretary of the Peoples Democratic Party, Kola Ologbodiyan, has asked Kogi State governor, Yahaya Bello, to apologise to the people of the state for misleading them on COVID-19. In a statement on Monday, Ologbodiyan said Bello did not show the required seriousness in leadership in the fight against the pandemic in the state. He said the

Kogi governor needed to apologise to the people for also not funding the committee he set up to fight the pandemic and for not providing palliatives to the people like was done in other states. Following a reported case of COVID-19 in Kogi State, Governor Bello on Monday ordered a 14-day lockdown of Kabba-Bunu Local Government Area effective from 12am June 2. He said the lockdown was aimed at identifying those who *may* have had contacts with the alleged index case. The move was in contrast to where the Kogi Government stood a few weeks back when it insisted that there was no case of the virus in the state despite confirmation by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control.

Sahara Reporters June 2, 2020

The above text reflects oppositionist ideology as advanced by the National Publicity Secretary of the People Democratic Party (PDP) Kola Ologbodiyan against the Kogi state Governor, Yahaya Bello. In the text, Ologbodiyan opposes Bello who has just ordered a lockdown in the state after cases of COVID-19 infection are reported. Before then, the Governor had said that no one in the state was infected and as a result, the pandemic was not present there. Due to his order for lockdown now that it is dawn on him that some residents of the state are infected, Ologbodiyan confronts and asks him (the Governor) to apologise to the state for earlier misleading them which makes everyone to relax and this has culminated in many infections.

Epistemic modality is expressed by the Governor in his order that lockdown should be observed as found in, "the lockdown was aimed at identifying those, who *may* have had contacts with the alleged index cases." This is to signify that as the cases of the infection have been established in the state, there are strong possibilities of those who might have had physical affiliation with those already infected. Epistemic modality as a linguistic device is also employed by Ologbodiyan to appease the people not to panic despite the unresponsiveness of the state to care for them. He posits that COVID-19 is not "a death sentence, adding that the disease shall soon be a thing of the past." The use of *shall* here implies insistence and encouragement that the pandemic will soon be forgotten.

The extract below further establishes that the text producers in our study deploy defeatist ideology.



Extract 4

The Nigeria National Polio Plus Committee has said that the country is currently witnessing an outbreak of the vaccine-derived polio virus also known as the CVDPV2 in 22 states of the federation. This was contained in a newsletter made available to our correspondent in Abuja by the Chairman of the committee, Dr Tunji Funso. According to Funso, the outbreak of the CVDPV2 is due to a break in polio vaccination as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. He also called on state governors to realise the need to speed up the rate of routine immunisation. He said, "The COVID-19 pandemic led to the halting of both routine immunisation and mass campaigns and the seeding of the virus into the environment by the use of mOPV2 earlier this year." "Now that we have these outbreaks, the Nigeria Polio Programme has been doing a lot to stem it but there are gaps in the many outbreak responses. The challenge is the quality of the campaign and the timelines; outbreak responses *should* be swift, of high quality and also repeated in a timely manner.

The Punch 25th October, 2021

In furtherance of the use of defeatist ideology by the writers, an example is found in **extract 4**, as reported. In the text, the Nigerian National Polio Plus Committee makes it known that due to COVID-19 pandemic, Nigeria is witnessing an outbreak of vaccine-deprived poliovirus in 22 states. The reason adduced for this is that there has been a stop to administration of polio vaccine since COVID-19 pandemic broke out by many states. This is made known by the Chairman of the Committee, Dr Tunji Funso. The Chairman, therefore, urges the state governors to realise the need to "speed up the rate of routine immunisation".

There is a deployment of deontic modality in the text on what the obligation of the states should be if the polio virus will not be allowed to spread further. This is explicated as, "Outbreak responses *should* be swift, of high quality and also repeated in a timely manner". This also signals a kind of compulsion laid on the states to be more proactive and see that polio is totally stamped out of the country. Another text producer expresses defeatist ideology and this is found in the following extract.

Extract 5

It's Laughable That Nigerian Government Makes COVID-19 Vaccine Compulsory – Pastor Adeboye

The General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Pastor Enoch Adeboye, has said it was to make Nigerians laugh that the government made COVID-19 vaccination compulsory for civil servants and other categories. Adeboye added that the number of doses of the vaccines was presently inadequate which made the compulsory vaccination a laughable policy. He said, "The number of doses available in the country is not even enough for 10 per cent of the total population of the nation. How do you then say whoever does not take the vaccine will not be able to go to bank and church? It means 90 percent of the population will not be able to access their money. We *will* need to go back to the olden days of keeping money, I hope you know. Well, I believe they just want to make us laugh and you know in Nigeria, we need things to make us laugh." Adeboye advised members of his church willing to take the COVID-19 vaccine to go ahead. He said, "I never said to you don't get vaccinated, you have never heard that from me. Rather than living in fear or doubt, get vaccinated. If you believe that getting vaccinated would put your mind at rest, then go ahead. Daddy, are you saying that you too could be vaccinated? If there are nations in the world that say I can't visit to preach the gospel there because of vaccination, I will do anything for Jesus Christ".

Sahara Reporters October 2nd, 2021

Defeatist ideology is also found in our data as reflected in the above text. The above text is about a report of one of the preachings of the General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Pastor E. A. Adeboye. In the sermon, he lampoons the government in its efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19 pandemic through ordering of a compulsory vaccination which is inadequate. He makes a joke of the government's step and calls it laughable. This defeatist stance is expressed by



deontic and epistemic modality which are deployed as the linguistic devices supporting the ideology.

Found in the text are epistemic modality and deontic modality through the use of *will*, *can*, *would* and *could*. These are exemplified from the text as, "*will* not be able to go to bank and church", "*will* not be able to access their money" to mean that the possibility of those that are not vaccinated to get money and worship God is very narrow. This is a clear indication that many will be deprived of their rights to some legal privileges. Another epistemic modality example is, "I *will* do anything for Christ" which signifies intention and insistence by the General Overseer to do anything it calls for, to fulfill his mandate as a minister of the gospel.

Conclusions

Defeatist ideology and discourse strategies (epistemic and deontic modality types) are considered in this study as important tools in the online news reports which assist the ideological orientations the discourse producers wish to demonstrate. A study of ideological constructs and discourse strategies in online news reports of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria is therefore expected to help in positioning the stance of the discourse participants in online news and their tendencies to sensitise the text consumers and raise their consciousness of the efforts of the governments at every level to safeguard the health of the nation. This helps the generality of discourse consumers to understand better the psychological orientations of the text producers on the pandemic. This will as well, educationally, benefit in teaching of online news discourse in language based classes as well as giving insights to scholars in language, political science, media studies and interested persons to work together in online news reports as it concerns the health security of the nation. In summary, this study will be highly relevant as the findings are useful to linguists, media practitioners, historians, political scientists and medical practitioners.

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