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Language, Electioneering, and Social Media Contestations in Nigeria: The 'Obidients' and Their Opponents

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Abstract

This paper explores the nexus between language and a pattern of conflict in the context of social media electioneering in Nigeria. Focusing on the 2022/2023 presidential election campaign, the paper examines how the electioneering contestations between the followers of the 'Obidient Movement' (Obidients) and their opponents played out within the social media space and how that adds to what is known regarding the language-conflict problematique. Relying on a conversational analysis of select narratives, the paper posits that the Obidients and their adversaries engaged in a conflictive virtual interaction wherein language played a powerful role in aggravating a rancorous electioneering discourse. The paper problematizes some of the narratives that defined the discourse and submits that those narratives carry critical implications for both democratic sustainability and national cohesion in Nigeria.

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1. Introduction

Language, in all its conceivable forms, is the means by which every human activity is carried out. A broad and dynamic phenomenon, language is a complex contraption which is variously verbal, nonverbal (action-based) and paralinguistic. Through language, humans form and exchange thoughts, ideas, opinions, information; through it, they express emotions of joy, love, sadness, hatred; through it, they establish, maintain or end relationships at personal, group, communal, national and international levels; through it, they create and sustain or destroy cultures; through it, they start an argument or settle one; through it, they negotiate and control power and so on (cf. Ayodele 2013; Taylor 2014). Indeed, nothing is done or achieved without it.

Essentially, language is indispensable in all facets of human and societal relations. That is the reason why the great philosophers, poets, linguists and scientists alike have paid enormous attention to the reality of language. Samuel Taylor Coleridge once referred to language 'as the armoury of the humankind' which 'contains the trophies of its past and the weapons of its future conquests' (Agantiem n.d.). In a related sense, the renowned writer and satirist, George Orwell (real name, Eric Arthur Blaire), describes political language as something 'designed to make lies sound truthful and murder, respectable and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind' (Agantiem n.d.).

More particularly, language has been used throughout history by the political class in all climes to seek electoral advantage through campaign rhetoric borne with the denigration of opponents and the imbuement of the electorate. Thus, language has been, and it remains, a critical weapon in the game of politics. Political actors deliberately, and sometimes inadvertently, generate conflict by the way they use language. The ultimate aim is to gain, maintain and regain power.

Existing scholarship on language-conflict discourse has variously established the dual significance of language, a veritable source and catalyst of both peace and conflict (Cohen 2001; Taylor 2014). Regarding the language-conflict nexus, extant literature recognizes the role of language in the making and unmaking of conflicts. In this respect, it is acknowledged by scholars and analysts that language can play a vital role in precipitating, aggravating, or assuaging a conflict situation (Mouhleb 2005; Taylor 2014).

The present paper seeks to add to the prevailing thinking on the language-conflict dialectics by considering how such plays out within the social media space in the context of electioneering. Using Nigeria's 2022/2023 presidential election campaigns as a point of reference, the paper analyses the social media contestations between the followers of the 'Obidient Movement' (Obidients) and their opponents in an attempt to advance the language-conflict discourse in a new frontier. The paper posits that by engaging in rancorous and vituperative virtual war of words, the dramatis personae have aggravated the electioneering discourse and contest in a manner that threatens Nigeria's democratic

sustainability and national security. This is against the backdrop of the mutually vindictive hate and vileness which have characterized their online contestations.

In setting the conceptual thrust of this paper, a process view of conflict, which presupposes that conflict is a dynamic social process that begins, becomes and transforms (Okoli and Ukwandu 2021), is maintained. By conflict process, therefore, is meant elements (social variables and dynamics) that underlie the making and unmaking of conflict as a social phenomenon. So, conflict in the context of this paper encompasses both verbal exchanges and physical encounters, although the former is more applicable. Also, the notion of electioneering is used herewith to designate organized partisan activities geared towards influencing voters' and relevant stakeholders' preferences in an effort to win an election (Okoli and Iortyer 2014). It involves electoral campaigning, mobilizing and sensitizing by parties, politicians and their support groups. Electioneering is a contest because it involves opponents who are engaged in a struggle for the attainment of a competitive end of which only one of the contestants stands to win.

The paper is broadly structured under select themes: the nature of electioneering in Nigeria; perspectives on language and conflict; theoretical framework; social media as a site for electioneering in Nigeria; language and social media contestations in the context of Nigeria's 2022/2023 presidential campaigns (the Obidients and their opponents); conclusion. It is pertinent to not that the conception of language in this paper presupposes English language along with its ramifying local adaptations in the context of Nigeria's contemporary virtual space communication.

2.   The character of electioneering in Nigeria

Electioneering in Nigeria has largely reflected the intense and highly polarized primordial character of party politics in the country. State power has been desperately sought and controlled through divisive partisan contestations that often pander towards identarian rather than ideological imperatives (Okoli and Iortyer 2014). In a typical Nigerian electoral contest, high stakes identity politics has often trumped over and above issue-based, ideological considerations. Politicians and their support groups have played ethnic, sectionalist, or religious card in a manner that literarily translates to 'politicization of ethnicity and ethnicization of politics' (Okoli and Iortyer 2014).

Essentially, fault-lines of identity-based cleavages have been explored, exploited, and reinforced in an effort to galvanize electoral support and garner strategic partisan advantage. Political parties and their machineries have lacked national outlook and appeal. Worse still, they have often become platforms for sub-nationalistic politicking and mobilizing, which have added to the polarizing dynamics of the national political life.

The mass media and the wider civic space have also become centres of intense ethno-sectionalist politicking. Oftentimes, mainstream media outfits as well as organized interest groups have canvassed narrow partisan agenda that appeal to primordial

sentiments in the negation of the prospects of national cohesion. In the scenarios being described in the foregoing, the dominant factor has been the political elites and their self-regarding, but often popularly disguised, partisan interests. The emergence of the 'Obidient' movement in the context of the 2022/2023 electoral dispensation brought about a significant departure in Nigeria's electioneering experience. First, there was a marked and unprecedented generational shift in the national partisan relations as evidenced in the dominant role played by the youths in that regard. Secondly, the conversations and contestations that characterized the electioneering were reasonably polarized, not along sectionalist lines but along quasi-ideological and ideational lines. Thirdly, the dominant platform for civic and electoral engagements changed from the mainstream media to popular and social media, and the latter became its centre-piece.

3.   Understanding the 'Obidients' and their opponents

The notion of 'Obidient' is a neologistic expression used to describe fans and followers of the 'Obidient Movement' in Nigeria. The movement is composed of youthful pro-democracy activists who are galvanizing electoral support for the presidential candidate of the Labour Party (LP), Peter Obi, in whom they repose a lot of conviction and confidence for the remaking of Nigeria. The 'Obidient Movement' was founded on the mainstream social media in the first quarter of 2022. It draws enthusiastic following mostly from urban youth and intelligentsia who seem to be desperate for a new democratic Nigeria.

The 'Obidient' movement mainly represents a group of digitally literate and active urban youth that was committed to driving a radical and generational shift in Nigeria's national leadership character. Among other things, its membership sought to work for the emergence of a younger, vibrant, and progressive candidate as the president of Nigeria, seizing the opportunity of the 2022/2023 electoral dispensation. The movement is, thus, largely an amalgam of politically aggrieved youths who felt let down by the failure of the successive past governments to discharge responsible national leadership and are poised to vote them out. The youths utilized both the popular and social media to mobilized support for the candidate of the Labour Party for the 2023 presidential contest in whom they reposed much confidence for changing the character of national leadership in the country. The Labour Party is one of the minor political parties in Nigeria, formed in 2002.

The opponents of the 'Obidients' were adherents of the mainstream dominant parties in Nigeria, namely the People's Democratic Party (PDP), All Progressives Party (APC), All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), and others. In the context of the 2022/2023 electoral campaigns, there was a polarized contestation between adherents of these two groups, particularly with regard to the presidential race. The substance of the contestations was on the imperative for continuity or change between the dominant parties and the relatively new party, LP, which was seeking to upstage the former. The contestations were mostly incubated and transmitted via social media platforms where

youths engaged themselves in hotly polarized discourses that bore trappings of quarrelsome electioneering. Although the medium of the discourses were basically the social media, some of such narratives were also featured in various popular media platforms.

4. Perspectives on language and conflicts/peace

Language is like a double-edged sword. Its use per time can be positive or negative, depending on the motive or circumstances. In effect, language can be used to heal, harm, console, aggravate, and so on. As an enabler of communication and social interaction, language creates the basis for understanding or misunderstanding interpersonal or intergroup relations (Rasmussen 2012). Hence, language has been recognized as a catalyst to conflict and violence. It has been used to construct and express nuances that inflame hostilities, incite violence, and undermine peaceful coexistence (Fodang 2018). A study conducted on Jos crisis in Nigeria by Fodang (2018) shows how the unguarded use of language by the feuding parties brought about outcomes that escalated the crisis.[2] Such outcomes included unfounded narratives that inflame inter-group and inter-communal conflagrations.

Apart from inflaming negative passions and inciting violence, inappropriate use of language has been identified as a major setback to conflict management and peacebuilding (Okoli and Orinya 2013). The reckless use of language by conflict actors lead not only to the escalation of an existing conflict, but also vitiates the prospects of sustainable restoration of peace. In fact, utterances of parties, mediators, and other stakeholders in a conflict situation can make or mar the promise of its resolution.

Language has also been recognized as an instrument of peace and conciliation. It is used to propagate values, symbols and nuances that promote unity and harmonious social existence in society (Obadare 2010). In Nigeria, language is considered a crucial component of the national endeavours at peace education and advocacy (Ayodele 2013). It has equally been used in the framing of narratives and counter-narratives that form part of the country's counter-insurgency/terrorism strategy (Okoli and Lenshie 2022).

Generally, language has been deployed in a strategic manner in the spheres of political communications, propaganda, intelligence, and diplomacy to advance the course of statecraft (Mclean and McMillan 2003). Oftentimes, the misuse of language in such contexts has engendered complications that undermine national security and stability. Further to this is the misguided use of language by both mainstream and social media to spread fake news, hate speeches, and toxic anecdotes that negate national cohesion and

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[2] Jos crisis is a perennial communal conflict predominantly between the Biron and Hausa communities in metropolitan Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria. The crisis has assumed both religious and sectionalist complexions over the years, causing identity-based polarizations in urban Jos and its environs.

integration in many countries. The significance of language in the context of politics needs to be closely appreciated. According to Joseph (2006), language, whether at the level of personal utterances or interpersonal discourses, is political. Aboh and Uduk (2017: 38) observe that "There is a relation among language, power and politics but that relationship is not transparent". Scholars of literary discourse recognize language as a dynamic social phenomenon which can be understood from the standpoints of both 'speech form' and 'speech act' (Thompson 1987; Kymlicka 2001). This, among other things, presupposes that language is not only a means of communication; it is also a means of non-communicative and symbolic expressions that may form the basis for social action. Hence, language has been acknowledged as an instrument of social and political mobilizing (Kymlicka 2001), but also as an element of ideological propagation (Thompson 1987).

Understanding language as an instrument as well as an element of politics is essential to situating its essence as a factor in electioneering. In effect, the attempt to discuss language as a variable in the virtual contestations during the 2022/2023 presidential elections campaigns in Nigeria must seek to problematize its dual import as a veritable instrument as well as an object of political communication, interaction, and action.

5. Methodology

The study that yielded this paper was an exploratory research aimed at engendering a prima facie result to stimulate further investigations on the subject matter. The study was based on participant observation conducted by the authors, working with a cohort of research aids, on two social media sites, namely: Facebook and WhatsApp.

As participants during the research, the researchers observed and participated in conversations, debates and contestations that trended on the applicable social medial sites in which they belonged while the study lasted between late 2022 and early 2023. By doing so, they took part in creating, stimulating and shaping the narratives that form the substance of analysis in this paper. Their participation in the process was sporadically continuous within the research duration.

The choice of Facebook and WhatsApp as focal sites of the research was informed by the need to focus on the most popular social media platforms that guaranteed widest access and participation. In addition to having widespread subscription base, the two platforms have emerged as common and regular sites of social and civic engagements (Okoli and Ngwu 2022).

The discourses that resonated on the social media platforms were carefully monitored, documented, corroborated, and harnessed into the thematic narratives (Table 1) that constitutes the fulcrum of the analysis in this paper. Insights from site-based research were synthesized with the prevailing anecdotal accounts that trended in the public domain during the research.

The thrust of analysis was extrapolated to a creatively harnessed conversation analysis (CA), which considered language as both a modality of thought and act (Liddicoat 2022). As an approach to the study of social interaction, CA focuses on verbal and non-verbal conduct, especially in situations of everyday life (Liddicoat 2022). The confrontations, contestations, and mutual animosities between the 'Obidients' and their adversaries are amenable to such patterns of analysis.

6. Social media as a site for electioneering in Nigeria

Nigeria's public space has witnessed remarkable transformations over the years. Hitherto, public engagements and conversations were restricted to physical gatherings and mass-media enabled platforms (Ye et al. 2017). Nowadays, it is common and fashionable to host, share, transmit, or live-stream events online via diverse technology-mediated avenues such as Zoom, Skype, and so on.

In addition to the new media platforms, social media is fast becoming an indispensable channel of public engagements, interactions and networking (Omotayo and Folorunso 2020). The digitization of public space in the era of Internet revolution is such that sundry commercial, political, religious and socio-cultural activities are now conducted online and are open to wide-ranging global participants. The scope of such activities is rather encompassing: e-banking, e-entertainment, e-governance, e-diplomacy, e-commerce, e-learning, to mention but a few. The arrival of the various social media platforms, such as the Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and WhatsApp, marks a culmination of the global digital order (Carney 2022).

Social media solutions provide avenues for democratic participation (Nebeife et al. 2021). Although such innovations have also created limitations for civic participation among the illiterate and digitally less advance populations, they have been an enabler of political education, communication and mobilization. With respect to party politics, they present the political parties and politicians with veritable platforms for promoting their plans and purposes in an attempt to garner voters' patronage. They also provide the electorate with the opportunity to engage the parties and contestants on their manifestoes and action plans (Omotayo and Folorunso 2020).

Although the use of social media in advancing the cause of electioneering is nascent in Nigeria, the impact of such practice over the years has been remarkable (Omotayo and Folorunso 2020). It started with the 2011 general elections when digital campaigning and mobilizing prominently became an important part of the electioneering experience. By the 2019 elections, the practice had been entrenched as a formidable tradition in Nigeria's electoral politics. In that context, social media were not just deployed as a means of canvasing votes; they were used as sites for voter activism, voter education and partisan contestations (Apuke and Tunca 2018).

In addition to their legitimate use, social media were also grossly abused and misappropriated in the context of the 2019 electioneering. In effect, they were used to create, spread and propagate falsehoods, blackmails, fake news and hate speeches, which contributed in heating up the polity (Nebeife et al. 2021). Unfounded contents and narratives capable of breaching public peace and order were circulated in a manner that promoted an atmosphere of rancour and bitterness in the polity. A case in point was the viral fake news that the presidential candidate of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), Atiku Abubakar, was a gay (Ajebode 2018).

The use of social media for electioneering purposes in Nigeria has been promoted by the proliferation of smart phones among the Nigerian population. The COVID-19 civil restrictions also promoted the spread and popularity of social media use by encouraging people to utilize the various social media platforms as an alternative channel of social engagement and networking. The arrival and consolidation of social media culture in Nigeria is already manifest in all facets of her national life. This is evident in the preponderance of social medial activism in the ongoing 2022/2023 electioneering proceedings.

The increasing role of social media in the context of electoral politics is a global trend. Studies have shown the place of social media as a critical determinant of electioneering dynamics and outcomes in many parts of the world (Cameron et al. 2015; Fujiwara et al. 2023; Carney 2022). Recent presidential elections conducted in Tanzania and Kenya, among other things, demonstrated the significance of social media as crucial element of the electoral process.[3]

7. 'Obidients' and their opponents: language and social media electioneering and contestations

The social media contestations between the 'Obidients' and their opponents trended from the first quarter of 2022. It was championed by the supporters of the 'Obidient Movement' and their antagonists belonging to other partisan persuasions, who used the social media handles to publish and/or share contents designed to promote or de-promote a preferred candidate.

The subject and object of the contestations were to either advance or undermine the electoral prospects of the preferred candidate by propagating ideas, claims and sentiments that are instrumental to their cause (see Table 1). The contestations were essentially vile, malicious and vituperative. Once they emerged from the social media handles of their purveyors, they were posted and reposted on multiple chat-groups and they go viral momentarily.

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[3] For the Kenyan example, see Omondi (2022).

Table 1. Contestations between the 'Obidients' and their -Opponents

Narrative	Referent	Commentary
'Labouring in vain'	Labour Party (LP) and the Obidient Movement	The narrative was designed to deride and scorn Labour Party (LP) and its aspirations to upstage the ruling All Progressive Party. It was also geared towards discouraging the followers of the LP/ 'Obidient' Movement by telling them that their endeavour will amount to nothing.
'Obidiots'	The Obidient Movement	The narrative was intended to spite and taunt the followers and supporters of the 'Obedient' Movement whom it characterizes as 'idiots'.
'Obi-tuary'	The Obidient Movement and the presidential candidate of the LP, Peter Obi	The narrative was geared towards discouraging the supporters of Peter Obi by telling them that the ambition of their principal is dead on arrival.
Ill-health rumour	The presidential candidate of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Bola Ahmed Tinubu	The narrative was designed to de-promote /de-market the APC's candidate, Bola Ahmed Tinubu. It was also aimed at discrediting APC and its choice of candidacy for the presidential race.
Boko Haram connection	The vice-presidential candidate of the APC, Kashim Shettima	The narrative was designed to discredit the vice-presidential candidate of APC by associating him with the Boko Haram infamy. It was also aimed at demonizing APC as a party of terrorists.
IPOB (Indigenous People of Biafra) connection	The presidential candidate of LP, Peter Obi	The narrative was aimed at discrediting the presidential candidate of LP by associating him with the treasonable activities of the proscribed Indigenous People of Biafra.
Anti-North disposition	The presidential candidate of LP, Peter Obi	The narrative was aimed at discrediting the presidential candidate of LP as an ethnic bigot that hates the people of the North. It was also aimed at whipping up counter-sentiments against Obi's candidate by representing him as a potential sectionalist leader.
Anti-Igbo stance	The presidential candidate of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Bola Ahmed Tinubu	The narrative was aimed at portraying the APC presidential candidate, Bola Tinubu, as an anti-Igbo bigot. It was also aimed at whipping up counter-sentiments against Tinubu's candidacy by people of the South East.
Islamic agenda claim	APC	The narrative was aimed at discrediting the APC for fielding a same-faith (Muslim-Muslim) presidential ticket. It was also aimed at whipping up populist counter-sentiments against the party.

Source: Authors' original compilation.

Table 1 is merely indicative and illustrative of the substance of the vituperative contestations under review. Narratives underpinning such contestations were essentially framed in bad faith. For instance, referring to fellow compatriots as 'idiots' (Obidiots) is, at best, bereft of civility and good conscience. This is as bad as labelling a statesman as a terrorist (even without legal conviction) as in the instance of the 'terrorism connection' narrative. Apart from their intents to malign, spite, scorn, castigate, vilify, and discredit the target, such narratives also bore the tendency to incite and propagate hate and divisiveness in a highly fractured polity like Nigeria. For instance, the 'anti-North' or 'anti-Igbo' claims were capable of instigating sectionalist of ethnocentric antipathies or violence. Once such vicious narratives permeated and dominated the electioneering discourse, issues-based campaign took flight as pettiness aggrandizes.

It is evident from the foregoing that the social media contestations between the 'Obidients' and their opponents was anything but healthy and progressive. In their characteristic ill-passioned banters, the parties have engaged each other with utmost ill-will and rancour. In effect, both the 'Obidients' and their opposing APC followers were engaged in a mutually vindictive vendetta; they have been involved in a viscid campaign of calumny.

In their desperate bid to vilify each other to gain electoral advantage, the parties have engaged in vile propaganda, cheap blackmail, mudslinging, and deliberate character assassination. By so doing, they have impugned the norms of civility, which is one of the hallmarks of democratic politicking (Okoli 2003). More importantly, by the divisive narratives propagated, the parties succeeded in further fracturing Nigeria along ethno-communal lines and fault-lines. Associated with this was a dramatic revival of identity politics based on primordial particularities and inwardness in the country. The implication of this trend for national cohesion and integration can be vividly imagined.

Lastly, the contestations between the parties went way beyond the remit of the social media space. There were isolated instances where the encounters were translated to physical confrontations (Ekwowusi 2022). Such an occurrence gave an indication that the groups had the tendency to resort to thuggery, brigandage or self-help redress in future electoral contests. Such an eventuality would be a recipe for post-election violence in the country.

8. Conclusion

Language plays a crucial role in all facets of human social relations. It enables peace or conflict by creating interactive processes that make them possible. In relation to conflict, language creates signs, symbols and meanings that may create, defuse or escalate social differences or contestations.

This paper has explored the nexus between language and a pattern of conflict in the context of social media electioneering in Nigeria. Essentially, the paper focused on the

conflict-ridden virtual interactions by Nigerian political actors and their adversaries with emphasis on the powerful role language plays in aggravating this electioneering discourse. Focusing on the 2022/2023 presidential election campaigns, the paper examined how electioneering contestations between the followers of the 'Obidient Movement' (Obidients) and their opponents played out within the social media space, and how that added to what is known regarding the language-conflict problematique.

By way of a thematic analysis of select social media narratives, the paper posited that the 'Obidients' and their adversaries were engaged in a conflictive virtual interaction wherein language played a powerful role in aggravating an electioneering discourse. The paper problematized some of the narratives that essentialized the rancorous discourse and submitted that the online political battle has wide-reaching consequences that impact negatively on Nigeria's national cohesion.

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