

Full Length Research Paper

Linguistic analysis on the construction of satire in Nigerian political cartoons: The example of newspaper cartoons

Iro Sani, Mardziah Hayati Abdullah, Afida Mohamad Ali and Faith Sathi Abdullah

Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communications, University Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Malaysia.

Accepted 20 February, 2012

Political cartoons constitute a form of media text whose verbal and visual elements have made them an interesting research field across academic disciplines. The 21st century has witnessed a considerable research on political cartoons. This increasing research interest indicates that political cartoons have successfully constituted a distinct multimodal genre within media discourses. Political cartoons are used to express opinions, construct valuable arguments and provide specific knowledge on contemporary social issues. However, the analysis of the cartoons from linguistic perspectives remains under-researched. This paper aims at contributing to the knowledge of political cartoon research by analyzing the linguistic elements used in the cartoon written texts to illustrate how Nigerian cartoonists specifically use language to construct satire as a means that could be used perhaps to initiating positive social and political reforms in Nigeria. The method of analysis used in this paper as its framework of analysis, comprises of perceptual theory of satire and linguistic analytical framework within the realm of critical discourse analysis. Semiotic discussion on semiotic modes of the cartoons has also been incorporated in the analysis. From the findings of the study, a distinct lexical topology for identifying lexical items and their distribution in the cartoon written texts has been developed. The topology comprises of five items as follows: loan word, coinage, word class, denotation and connotation. Additionally, Nigerian cartoonists use interjections frequently in the cartoon written texts to create satirical impressions about political leaders, because interjections are used to express a strong emotions or feelings. Given the linguistic and nonlinguistic elements contained in the cartoon texts, cartoons could be harnessed to provide additional insights on how language is specifically used in media discourse.

Key words: Linguistic analysis, political cartoons, satire, newspapers, genre, media discourse.

INTRODUCTION

It is pertinent that the media has now become a dominant communication channel that attracts wider public interest using language as a tool of expressing thoughts and ideas from a particular point of view. This specific feature of language use has made media discourse a feasible

and potent research field. Linguists over the years have been studying how language is specifically used in different genres to accomplish communicative tasks. More specifically, understanding different approaches to language in its various links with the media will enable us to appreciate more on how language is used for communicative purposes which include information dissemination, a sense of mutual understanding and knowledge about social, economic, political and other

*Corresponding author. E-mail: isjibiya@yahoo.com.

related events that make up peoples social life in a society. Cartoons are form of social artifact (Giarelli and Tulman, 2003) used to highlight how language is specifically used in society to reflect social realities. Language from this point of view that is sociolinguistics is studied from two main theoretical orientations namely: linguistic and pragmatic perspectives (Abdullah and Talif, 2001).

This paper is mainly concerned with the linguistic function which outlines contrasts in the realization of structural systems (phonological, morphological and lexical) by speakers of a particular community. The linguistic choice determines the pragmatic function that highlights social factors influencing specific use of language. Using language resources to attract public attention and interest by the media, journalists especially cartoonists harness both linguistic and nonlinguistic elements ingeniously and persuasively to create effect in a literary or dramatic passion and to evoke a particular response from readers. These devices are employed purposely to communicate with the public to persuade them towards considering a particular topic from a different point of view to make them more receptive and to provide rational argument for making public opinion that perhaps may bring positive change in society. As communication artifacts, political cartoons are hand written graphic illustrations made on a single visual frame and accompanied frequently by written texts or thought bubbles in a form of dialog usually published on the editorial page of a newspaper or magazine.

Thus a cartoon text comprises of both linguistic (verbal elements) and nonlinguistic (nonverbal elements). Given the use of linguistic and nonlinguistic devices, the political cartoon genre provides a medium for communicating messages reflecting current sensitive issues which people are much concerned and think about through which social agenda are set, for better understanding of linguistic terminologies used in the cartoons (Greenberg, 2002). El Refaie (2009) illustrates that political cartoons, function as communicative tools in society. They form a distinctive media genre with its own history, specific styles, conventions and communicative purposes. Cartoon as a media message is usually published on the editorial or comment pages of a newspaper or magazine. This paper is aimed to analyze linguistic devices employed for the construction of satire in Nigerian political cartoons. More specifically, the analysis focuses on the choice of lexical items such as the use of coined and loan words as well as their connotations. Additionally, transitivity and modality models from Halliday's (1985) perspectives have been used to examine how satire is constructed and pointed to politicians, parties and public officers through syntactic choices. Hence, linguistic analysis provides alternatives of language choices to a particular writer to construct and present his argument or point of view on particular issues

while communicating messages to audiences. Hence, the analysis specifically describes instances of language use and functions in a particular community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, there has been an increasing research on political cartoons across disciplines. This has made political cartoons a potent interdisciplinary research field crossing different research boundaries such as education, sociology sciences, psychology, health research, pragmatics and communication. This growing research interest demonstrates that political cartoons have become a distinct and established genre within media discourse. The goal of the genre is to construct practical criticisms and provide political commentary aimed at reorienting the public. Historically, the origin of editorial cartooning is associated with Benjamin Franklin who was said to have first published editorial cartoon in an American newspaper, portraying the famous caption "Join or Die" depicting an image of the snake dissected and labeled into different colonies (Burns, 2007). Different studies have focused on different variables.

For instance, Steuter et al. (2008) examined the process of composing editorial cartoons in terms of the roles they serve in society. Lamb (2004) considers political cartoons as critical artifacts used to lampoon political leaders and their contemptible policies. Medhurst and DeSousa (1981) in their analysis looked into the nature of cartoons, where they identified four principal themes: political commonplaces, literary/cultural allusions, personal character traits, and situational themes. Cartoons depictions are usually satirical; their militant effects are just like that of armory used for launching attacks on the political leaders and the democratic process through pictorial depictions (Morris, 1992). In another study, (Benoit et al., 2001) explored and analyzed 2000 political cartoons concerning Clinton-Lewinsky-Starr Affair which concentrated on the investigations, impeachment and trial of the president Clinton. The depictions have satirically depicted Clinton reflecting the enormity of the scenario. The analytical framework used for the analysis was a fantasy theme analysis of political cartoons using symbolic convergence theory.

Thus, it is a tool for assessing rhetorical discourse with emphasis on the visual message that provides basis for the analysis of imaginative language and imagery usually embedded in the cartoons. Eko (2007) investigated how African newspapers dehumanized and deterritorialized four African political leaders in the post-cold war era. As graphic illustrations, political cartoons function as political satire (Townsend et al., 2008). Political cartoons are also used to promote candidates reputations through positive representations. For instance, Connors (2005) explored

political cartoons and the popular culture in the 2004 American presidential campaigns. He claims that political cartoons are used as tools for manipulating voters' opinion on the candidates captured in a single cartoon message during the campaign period. Thus, cartoons are used as elaborate campaign machinery in a period of elections. Basically, the success of a cartoon text depends on the interplay between verbal and visual elements.

In his study, Tsakona (2009) examined language and interaction in cartoons, using multimodal theory of humor as an analytical framework. He indicates that cartoon humor is a complex process that involves different mechanisms of language interplay between verbal and nonverbal devices such as exaggeration, contradiction and metaphor. Audiences need to pay close attention to both verbal and visual details contained by each cartoon to grasp its meaning. Despite considerable research on political cartoons, yet no research has specifically focused on linguistic devices used for the construction of satire. Therefore, an attempt is made in this paper by contextualizing its findings with previous studies to bridge in this gap and advances the frontiers of research specifically on language use in media discourse.

Theoretical background

Basically, perceptual theory was used to provide theoretical background on satire. Satire is a literary term used to refer to a witty criticism of behavior aimed at ridiculing societal faults by the use of irony or sarcasm. Hence, satire is viewed as criticisms of various societal follies which are blended with humor or other comedic elements such as exaggeration and irony. Satire as described by Bal et al. (2009) refers to the use of ridicule, sarcasm or irony to criticize something or someone to expose his weaknesses or shortcomings. The prime goal of satire is to safeguard normative boundaries of society by denouncing societal follies and promoting standard of social norms and values of a given society. Historically, political cartoon is recognized as one of the earliest forms of political satire (Townsend et al., 2008). In the 18th century, political cartoons were simply referred to as 'satires' and broadly used to criticize English rule in the colonies. Additionally, the basis of satire today largely depend on the criticism of the injustice and the abuse of power usually perpetrated by those in power or the dominant ruling party (Bal et al., 2009).

In an attempt to provide theoretical explanation on satire like other literary works, many literary theories that explain how satire is created and conveyed have been developed, but the most pertinent to this study is the perceptual theory of satire. Satire as it was described, "is neither genre nor mode, but can manifest itself, often parodically, in many genres and modes, nor has it a

moral purpose, being documentary didactic. Any norms or values it propagates, are created from within the satirist's observation, not imposed externally" (Dean, 2005). Perceptual theory accounts for the nature of satire as well as the ways people understand satire and how it is constructed and conveyed in a particular discourse. The theory was developed by Kuiper (1984) which explains how readers make inferences on the satirical effects directed at politicians, prominent personalities and public officers who are usually the targets of the satirical attacks.

METHODOLOGY

Linguistic analytical framework within the realm of critical discourse analysis is used in this paper as the framework of analysis. The analysis focuses on the cartoons' caption, thought bubbles or written texts. The written texts were analyzed specifically by Halliday's (1985) potential language system. More specifically, transitivity and modality models were used in order to identify salient linguistic devices used for the construction of satire in Nigerian political cartoons. Transitivity is an investigative model that is used to examine the means through which meaning is represented in a clause or sentence. From the linguistic perspectives, transitivity mainly deals with propositional meanings and the way syntactic elements function in a clause. The representations found within a transitivity model in a given discourse indicate bias, subjectivity and ideology of that given discourse. Modality model on the other hand refers to a category of linguistic meaning related to the expression of possibility and necessity (Von Fintel, 2006). Essentially, cartoons formed the data of the study. As many as 120 political cartoons were excerpted from the two most prominent and widely read Nigerian dailies, Daily Trust and Vanguard newspapers during the period 2007 to 2010. For illustration, 5 cartoon texts were presented to show specific choice of lexical items, connotation and the use of coined and loan words to construct satirical criticisms.

Moreover, syntactic arrangement or structural order of clauses reveals representations of political leaders and how these satirical criticisms are directly labeled against them. In Figure 1, the cartoonist denotatively portrays a picture of an elephant labeled PDP referring to Nigeria's ruling party whose motto is 'power' as the Africa's biggest and most powerful party. Nigerian president, Goodluck Jonathan was portrayed in a race to 2011 elections galloping on the giant animal towards a solidly built fortress with small entrance. The fortress refers to 'Aso Rock' or presidential villa, the official residence of Nigeria's president and the small entrance refers to zoning, the party's agenda for equitable power sharing among the country's geo-political zones. Figure 2 satirically portrays the Nigerian current political scenario. Nigeria's depicts president on a bridge driving a car heading directly towards two big tanks bearing bold inscriptions 'PDP GOVERNORS' and 'PDP CHAIRMAN', on his way to 2011 general elections. In Figure 3, a picture of the Nigerian late president dressed in Niger Delta attire as a sign of national unity is presented. He was depicted in a desperate situation trying to calm down the militants. On the far side, a globe tagged "Amnesty", was positioned between the late president and a well armed militant from Niger Delta landscape.

Figure 4 depicts an ambush attack whereby a pictorial image of the governor's convoy was attacked by political thugs or hoodlums; they focused mainly on the driver sitting behind the driving wheel; where they jerked him forward in the car interrogating him over the delay of payment of their allowances thinking that he was the

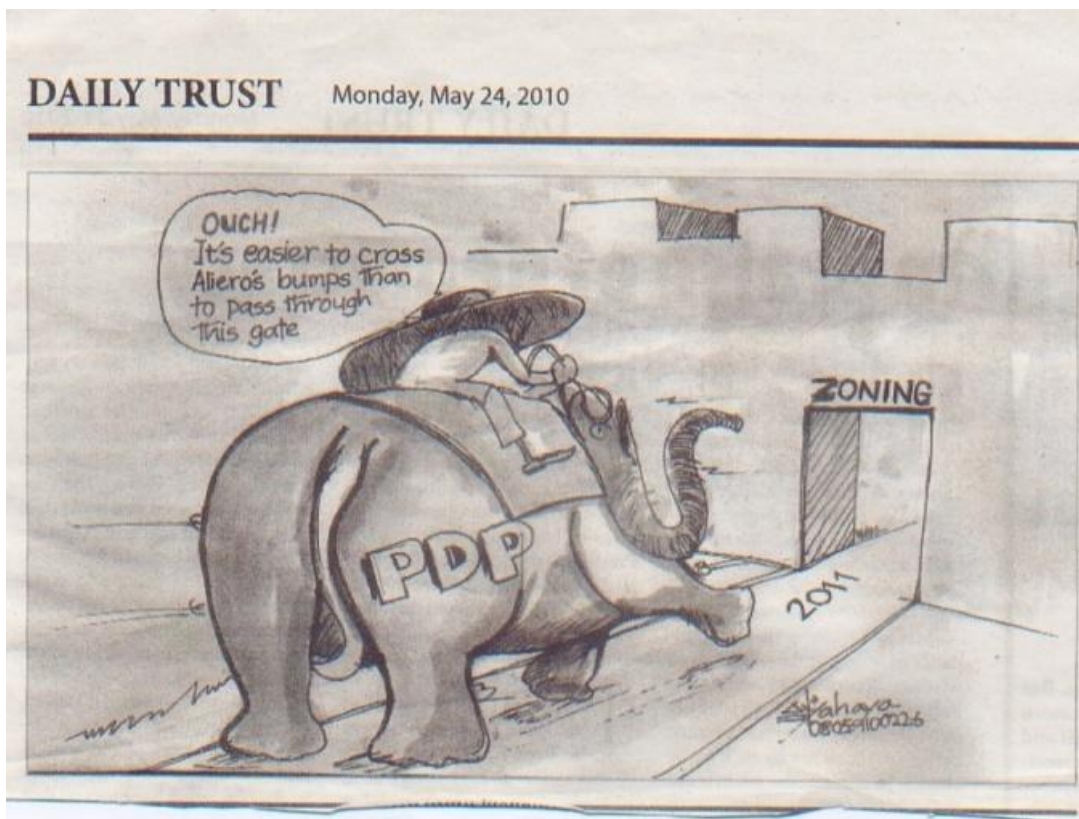


Figure 1. Daily Trust, May 24, 2010, p. 9.

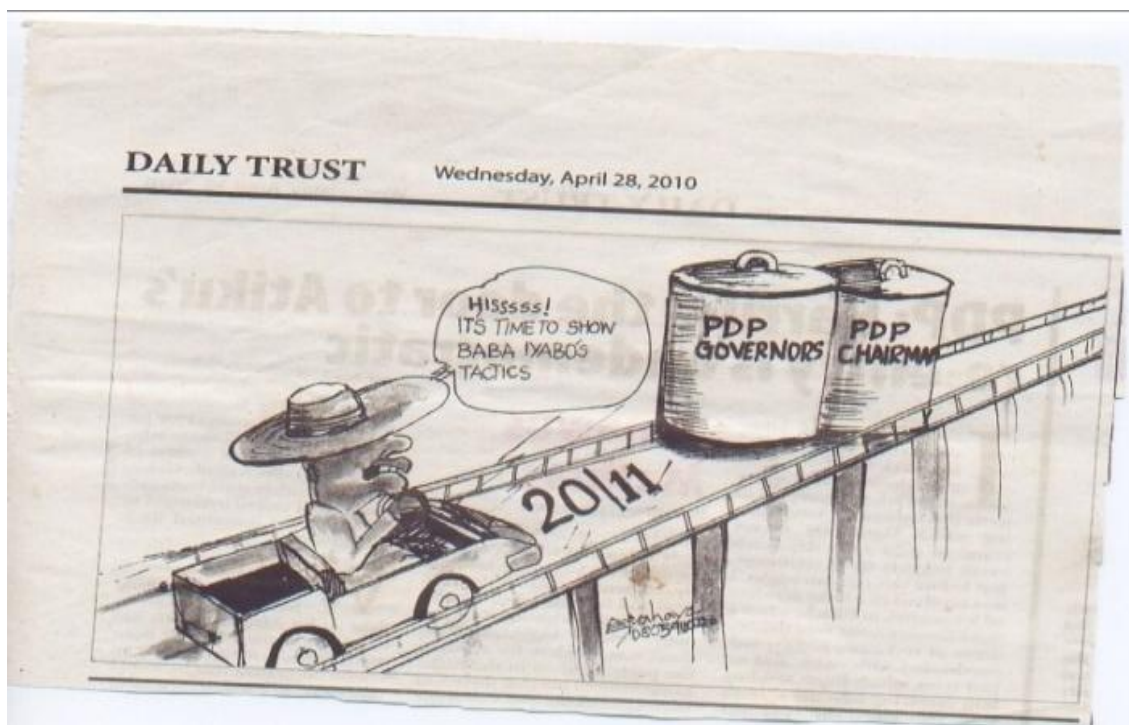


Figure 2. Daily Trust, 28 April, 2010, p. 9.



Figure 3. Vanguard, April 18, 2009.

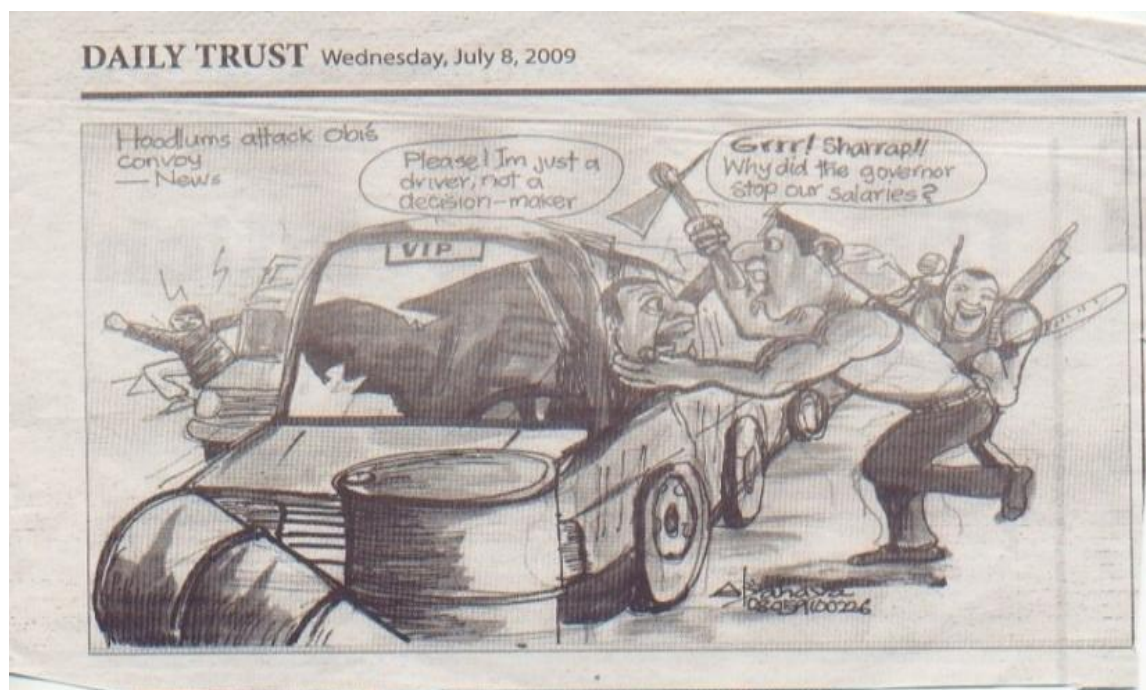


Figure 4. Daily trust, July, 25, 2010.

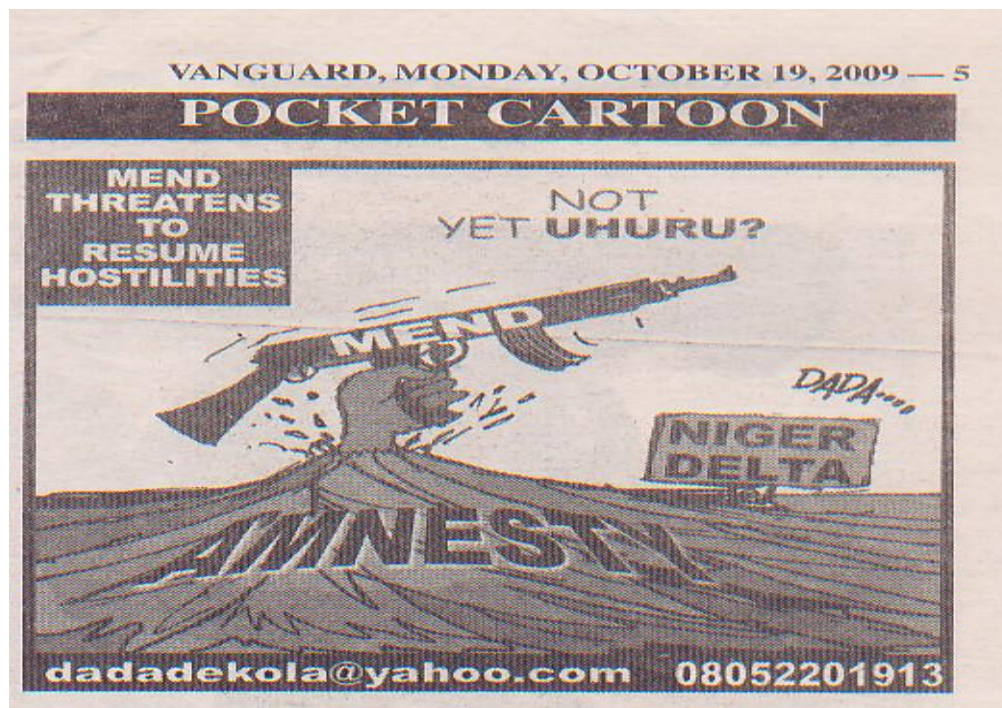


Figure 5. Vanguard, October 19, 2010.

Table 1. Outlines the written texts of the cartoons.

Figure	Newspaper	Cartoons written texts
1	Daily trust	"Ouch! It's easier to cross Alero's bumps than to pass through this gate".
2	Daily trust	"Hisss! It's time to show Baba Iyabo's tactics".
3	Vanguard	"Hey! Just keep patience! I'm on my way".
4	Daily trust	"Grrr! Sharrap! Why did the governor stop our salaries?"
5	Vanguard	"Not yet uhuru?"

governor. Figure 5 demonstrate how cartoonists make use of loan words to depict an important event at a given moment In Figure 5, a picture of the riverine area of Niger Delta is depicted where a militant's hand grasping the trigger of a sophisticated gun tagged "MEND" bulges out of water. "MEND" is an acronym that stands for one of the tribal organization that is 'Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta' was portrayed. The body of water represents the habitant area of Niger Delta as operational territory for the militants where they carry out their militant activities. Language use in the construction of satire in the cartoons is characterized with specific lexical choice in creating identities, impressions and representations of politicians. A lexical item or word can either be used in positive connotation or negative connotation. For the purpose of creating and conveying satirical depictions, cartoonists predominantly exploit lexical items that give negative image of the characters; this strategy is used to expose bad politicians and their follies at a particular political dispensation. Tables 1 and 2 present salient lexical items which portray specific pattern of lexical choices used by cartoonists in the written caption of the cartoons to create impressions and identities of political leaders.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interestingly, the analysis has developed a distinct linguistic typology for identifying lexical choice and distribution in a particular written text. The typology comprises five items as follows: loan word, coinage, word class, denotation and connotation. The analysis of the lexical items indicates that there is a frequent use of interjections in the verbal texts, because interjection constitutes a word class used to express a strong emotions or feelings. Further, the cartoonists persuasively use interjections at the beginning of the verbal texts to attract the attention of the audiences. For instance, in Figure 2 the word 'ouch' is used negatively to depict the character in a painful condition. These specific word classes which have been used in the written texts contribute to the construction of satire by making negative depictions of the politicians thereby exposing

Table 2. Below summarizes the lexical distribution in the cartoons written texts.

Figure	Lexical item	Loan word	Coined word	Word class	Connotation	Denotation
1	Ouch!	-	-	Interjection	Negative	Jonathan
2	Hisssss!	-	-	Interjection	Negative	Jonathan
3	Hey!	-	-	Interjection	Negative	Jonathan
4	Sharrap!	-	Sharrap	Interjection	Negative	The driver
5	Uhuru	Uhuru		Noun	Positive	The public

their weakness. Given that political cartoons create social identities and representations of politicians and parties, the cartoonists rely heavily on adjectives to describe identifiable behaviors of the perpetrators. Similarly, the connotation of the words (that is, positive or negative connotations) used in depicting individuals as well as the receiver (that is, the person or thing whom the expression is addressed to. For example in Figure 1, the word 'easier' is an adjective used to portray the stressful and difficult condition of the Nigeria's president.

Morphologically, some lexical items incorporated in the verbal texts include loanwords borrowed from other African languages to create an impression of a particular event or issue. For example, in Figure 5 the word 'uhuru' which means freedom or independence, is borrowed from Swahili, one of the most popular West African languages. Additionally, words are coined in the verbal texts to evoke humor while satirizing political figures and public officials. For example in Figure 4, the word 'sharrap' which means keep quiet was coined from a phrasal verb, 'shut up' to command someone to stop talking. Generally, these lexical devices are frequent options used in composing Nigerian political cartoons' verbal texts to create and convey satirical depictions of politicians and parties in the Nigerian socio-political context. The devices are used in such a way that they supplement graphic or visual illustrations thereby making them more accessible to the audiences.

In terms of modality, Halliday's (1985) model consisting modal operators was used due to its clarity of organization. Halliday specifically classified modality into modalization which expresses probability and usuality and modulation which expresses obligation and inclination. For instance, the use of "did" in Figure 4 expresses how the governor's obligation over the delay of salary payment has been queried by the attacking thugs in the cartoon. In terms of clause structure, transitivity model is used to show how ideas are presented in the cartoons verbal texts. Specifically, two main items have been considered: the type of construction (that is, passive or active); clause type (that is, simple or complex) and kind of clause (that is, declarative, imperative, interrogative and request). Looking at the construction, the cartoonists make more frequent use of active construction than passive while satirizing politicians so

as to make them feel responsible for their follies and bad policies and practices as demonstrated in Figure 4.

Using active construction, the participant is clearly mentioned as the doer of action expressed in the clause so as to directly attribute the responsibility on the participant, unlike the passive construction where the responsibility is shifted away from the participant by not clearly indicating the doer of the action expressed in the clause. Thus, the media uses this strategy to expose or to conceal the agent responsible for a particular action to shift the away the attention of the audiences as a way of reducing the intensity of such an action. Therefore, through this strategy of selective use of a particular type of clause construction, ideologies are clearly expressed and protected by the media. As an illustration, Figure 4 shows how active construction was used to directly put blame on the governor over the delay of payment. Likewise, two kinds of clauses were found to be frequently used in the cartoons while expressing propositions: declarative and interrogative sentences. They are used to provide information on state of events and to narrate facts and the reality of events and issues related to social and political activities in definite terms.

As an illustration, Figure 4 shows how the proposition was constructed using interrogative sentences. One of the functions of political cartoons is to inform the public on contemporary issues in society hence, declarative sentences provide an avenue for accomplishing such a purpose of information dissemination. For instance in Figure 3 the written text reads as "Hey! Just keep patience! I'm on my way". In this active structure, the participant or doer is clearly specified as 'I' referring to Nigeria's former president; and 'you' refers to the patient, in this case the Niger Delta militants who are affected by the action of the participant; the process is expressed using an obligatory verb in the clause that is 'keep' which is used to express the idea. The proposition of the clause entails explicitly the uncertainties currently surrounding the amnesty accorded to the militants by the former president. Another kind of clause that is also used frequently is interrogative sentence. Interrogative sentence is a clause used to ask questions. Using this kind of clause, cartoonists evoke humor and satirize politicians by exposing to the public their contemptuous practices.

Figure 5 illustrates, the use of interrogative clause in the written text ‘...Not yet uhuru? In this kind of a clause, the public lament on volatile condition of Niger Delta region despite the amnesty. In terms of clause types, simple sentence appears to be the most frequent syntactic structure used in composing the verbal texts. Obviously, simple sentence entails one main proposition because it contains one clause only; as such, it is much more accessible to the audiences. For instance, the clauses ‘Keep patience, I’m on my way... illustrated in Figure 3 are simple sentences. Each sentence is made up of only one clause.

Conclusion

Evidently, these linguistic devices used for the construction of satire in Nigerian political cartoons highlight specific features employed to present view points and create social identities and representations of political figures, parties and other public officials. The devices also provide additional insight on how language is specifically used as a vital medium of communication in social discourse especially in the political cartoon genre in the Nigerian print media. Additionally, the cartoon genre demonstrates how language is creatively and ingeniously used to accomplish communicative tasks. Hence, political cartoons are communication artifacts.

From methodological perspectives, cartoons provide useful source of data that enable researchers using social discourse to study social practices. Given the interplay of linguistic and nonlinguistic elements contained in the cartoon texts, cartoons could be used to provide potent linguistic input especially to English as a second language (ESL) student. Therefore future research should focus on the use of cartoons as instructional materials to provide linguistic input aimed at facilitating language learning and acquisition among ESL or EFL students. Further, cartoons could be used to demonstrate the use of language to accomplish specific communicative tasks. Finally, this study perhaps provides an inspiration for future studies in the field of political cartoons research.

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