

EXAMINING DISCURSIVE DEVICES IN PRINT MEDIA TEXTS ON HERDER-FARMER CLASHES: A CRITICAL PRAGMATIC APPROACH

Mohammed Alhaji USMAN

Department of English
Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University
Lapai, Niger State, Nigeria

Abstract

This study investigates discursive devices explored by Nigerian newspaper reporters on herder-farmer clashes in Nigeria. Seven sampled texts are gathered from The Guardian, Daily Sun and Daily Trust newspapers of 2020 and 2021. The analysis is based on Halliday's Interpersonal Metafunction theory and Face theory of pragmatics. Findings of the study reveal preponderance of hedges achieved through words and phrases like 'Gunmen suspected to be Fulani herdsmen allegedly ...', '... reportedly', '... said to be ...', etc. deployed for the purpose of politeness, self-protection, threat mitigation and expression of lack of full commitment to the claims in the news reports. Based on this, the author concludes that, while on one hand, the preponderance of hedges in this study implies that the reporters are not eye-witnesses to the incidents of herder-farmer clashes being reported, on the other hand, it constitutes strategy explored by the reporters to save or mitigate the face of the individuals, groups, or interests that might be threatened with the reports in order to avoid worsening the situation. In other words, hedges in this study are signs of politeness, humility, modesty and respect on the part of the reporters.

Key Words: Discursive device, media text, herder-farmer clashes, critical pragmatics

Introduction

The age-long farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria, and probably the rest of Africa results from the struggle by both farmers and herders to protect and preserve available geographical and economic sources of their livelihood (Onoye and Osoba, 2020, p. 14). These struggles and conflicts are compounded by the introduction of dry season farming (irrigation) in the Savannah-Belt and the movement of herdsmen southward, to the coastal areas which have longer raining season and soil moisture retention for greener pasture and fresh water for their herds (Ofuokwu and Isife 2009). Population explosion, desertification and proliferation of arms throughout Nigeria are also identified as the causes of the conflict. *The Guardian* newspaper cites Global Terrorism Index (GTI) to have observed that there are religious-cum-ideological triggers to the conflict:

The Fulani herders are primarily Muslims while the southern farmers are predominantly Christians, which adds a religious dimension to the conflict over resources. Christian farmers in the south

perceive the influx of Muslim herders as an Islamisation of the country at a time when Boko Haram's presence in the country is still strong (June 7, 2018).

We can infer from above quotation that the growth of the conflict cannot be unconnected to climate change and unchecked population growth in the north. Climate change has negatively affected pasture for livestock production. Similarly, the rate of population growth has made fertile land and pasture grossly inadequate for cattle grazing in some northern communities. Hence, herders migrate in search of grazing grounds. In this process, herders occasionally trespass to farmlands and eat-up crops or farm produce such as maize, groundnut, rice, etc. during cattle grazing.

In the past, most of these conflicts were managed and settled successfully by village or community heads. Today, however, farmer-herder crisis in the north in particular and Nigeria in general, has taken a worrisome dimension of deadly attacks and counter attacks, which often lead to loss of lives and property of both the

farmers and herdsmen (Moritz, 2006a). Onoye and Osoba (2020, p. 15) link the upsurge in herder-farmer conflict to moral decadence, cultural decay, political manipulations (designed by the elite to achieve their selfish political interests), breakdown of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and proliferation of small arms and ammunition in our rural communities.

Critical Pragmatics

Critical pragmatics investigates implicit critical aspects of linguistic meaning or a language user's intention. In line with this, Knox (2009, p. 25) avers that critical pragmatics is more concerned with the motive for saying something rather than with what is actually said, because how something is said is as important as what is said. In other words, people do not only express their thoughts and attitudes when they communicate but also reveal their ideologies, beliefs and sociopolitical constraints of their societies. Thus, as van Dijk (2009, p. 66) submits, context has power to determine what people say and how they say it. Lexico-syntactic choices, topic turning, turn taking, and other metadiscourse resources and properties of different types of writing and speaking are controlled by the context in which the text or event takes place, just as understanding of the various events and social problems are context model and ideology dependent (Golmohammadi, Suluki, Daneshmand, and Salahshoor (2014, p. 607).

Furthermore, critical pragmatics concerns the fundamental relations and factors that assign power to individuals and various groups in society. It particularly views language context as an important instrument of exercising power, and draws the attention to the fact that pragmatics is a tool for social struggle. Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Act Theory which lay emphasis on affordances (the sociocultural and situational constraints that regulate the speaker's linguistic choices in his effort to achieve a particular communicative intent) links pragmatics with social discrimination, bias, inequality, power and control, which are the core social concepts that CDA is concerned with. This means that, like pragmatics, critical discourse analysis involves paying attention to the interface between

language and society. Thus, CDA is always and necessarily the analysis of situated language (Blommaert 2005, p. 39). For example, in a doctor-patient interaction, the fact that one participant is the doctor and the other participant is the patient is a context that engenders power imbalance and thus links CDA and pragmatics (ibid). Collins and Clement (2012, p. 380) similarly submit that critical pragmatics investigates power, ideology, identity and any form of bias or interest imbedded in language through critical discourse and pragmatic lens.

Critical pragmatics holds that prejudices and beliefs we hold as language users unconsciously influence our linguistic choices and what we do with such choices. It is therefore concerned with the exploration of a text from critical discourse and pragmatic angles. According to Mey (2001, p. 316), since by definition, pragmatics concerns language users, its critical study focuses on power and biases in the language users choice of linguistic systems (i.e. lexical, syntactic and discursive strategy choices). It focuses on devising ways of remedying socially caused linguistic problems or linguistically perpetuated social inequality (p. 311). According to Fairclough (1992), despite the input from social sciences, the success of critical discourse analysis is determined by linguistically oriented pragmatics and discourse analysis. Therefore, critical pragmatics does not only tell us what is explicitly or implicitly done with a text, but also tells us the covert ideology and power that shape what is done with the text as well as the interest being served or opposed with the text. Hence, language use and the system of language itself, functional and structural, have a certain affinity with the prevailing social conditions (Mey 2001, p. 312).

Discursive Devices

In order to influence the message or achieve a particular effect or interest, news writers explore discursive devices or markers like name-calling, hedge, hyperbole, evidentiality, ideological polarisation, rhetorical question, and stereotyping, among others. Name-calling is a device that concerns linking an individual or a group to a negative idea (Harris 2018). Hedge is a device deployed in a text to withhold full

commitment of the speaker to the propositional content of the text or avoid self-commitment. Its examples include modal auxiliary verbs ‘would, could, may, might’; adverbials like perhaps, possibly; and structures such as ‘I think...’, and ‘To the best of my knowledge ...’. (Mohamadi and Rahimpour 2018, p. 24).

Hedges reveal powerlessness of the addressee and powerfulness of the speaker. Osisanwo (2003, p. 96) describes them as cautions notes and expressions speakers and writers deploy to warn their listeners and readers about how much of what they have said or written should be taken. Hence, they are linguistically self-exonerating or self-protecting mechanisms. Hedges are negatively explored to present false accusation, rumour or unsubstantiated claims and counter claims. However, they are positively deployed as devices for politeness or face saving (p. 77). Lawal (2003) states that hedges are especially used when there is fear, suspicion or distrust between interlocutors (p. 153). Hedges have cognitive, evaluative and persuasive significance – they indicate powerlessness and reduce the likelihood of arguing (further) when deployed in conversation. Golmohammadi, Suluki, Daneshmand, and Salahshoor (2014, p. 607) describe hedges as discourse markers employed by writers as a sign of humility, modesty, and respect and as opportunities to listeners or readers to agree or disagree with the propositional content of a text. Hyperbole concerns over statement made to achieve a particular effect (i.e. emphasis) or to serve a particular interest. E g: Muslims are 90% of insurgency victims – Buhari (*The Nation*, February 5, 2020). Evidentiality involves citing figures, personalities, institutions, and events to support or counter an argument (Staedter 2004). Ideological Polarisation involves two techniques: Positive self or in-group representation and negative other or out-group representation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is driven by Interpersonal Metafunction sub-theory of Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) and Face theory of pragmatics. SFL is a meaning-oriented approach to linguistics. The interpersonal metafunction focuses on the nature of contextual, situational

and social relationships that exist between the speaker/writer and his (target) interactive and non-interactive audience, and which constraints, guides or regulate his choice of linguistic items, patterns and structures. Some of its major grammatical systems are ‘mood’ and ‘modality’ (Matthiessen 2012). That is, interpersonal metafunction of language focuses on the expression of speaker’s attitude and judgment as well as encoding of his socio-cultural and situational relationship and his motive in saying something at all (Halliday and Hassan 1976). It is the functional dimension of language that project the power relation and the extent of the intimacy or level of familiarity between participants (Egins 2004).

SFL treats grammar as meaning-making resources and insists on the interrelation of form, meaning and purpose. According to Halliday and Hassan, SFL develops analytic categories that capture the relationship between language and social structure (1985, p. 10). Unlike other approaches to linguistics, especially the Chomskyan approach, SFL is a linguistic theory that is, from the outset, designed to be applied to solve language-oriented social problems that may arise in communities around the globe (Matthiessen, 2012, p. 436). It therefore ‘liberates’ choice from structure and make it the core of Hallidayan linguistics. That is, while many earlier approaches to linguistic descriptions like Traditional Grammar, Structural Grammar and Chomsky’s Transformational Generative Grammar place emphasis on structure, the thrust of SFL is that, any act of communication involves choices, which is what is implied by the word ‘Systemic’. These choices could lexical, syntactic and discursive strategies or devices at a language user’s disposal from which he/she can choose to serve a particular interest or communication goal. The term ‘Functional’ in SFL concerns the overt and covert interpretive potentials of any of the above alternative linguistic systems or choices as may be permissible by context of situation or social practice in which the choice is made. It is a sociolinguistic device employed to evade or avoid conflict in human interaction (Lakoff 1989). Politeness brings pragmatics into contact with sociology and anthropology, thereby

widening the frontiers of pragmatic exploration of language (Leech and Thomas 1990, p. 196).

Face is a pragmatic theory that deals with an individual's public image or self-esteem (Yule 1985, p. 60). As an explanatory concept in human communication, face theory was originally introduced by Goffman (1967). Being a sociologist, Goffman defines face as positive social value a person claims for him/herself. He argues that 'face' is a society's property and therefore a loan that society gives to its members. The same society can withdraw it from any of its members found wanting or guilty of an unacceptable conduct or misdemeanor (Archer et.al 2012). Spencer-Oatey and Wang (2019, p. 8) point out that as members of a society, an individual's image is made-up of everyone's. Hence our personal behaviour affects our collective image. This means that every society has a set of linguistic and nonlinguistic norms concerning the ways its members should conduct themselves, within and outside the society, and adherence to these norms by any member of the society makes him or her to be held in high esteem. Odeunmi (2005, p. 6) characterises face as the emotional social feelings of an interlocutor, which he expects other participants to recognise. Face want begets or necessitates politeness, which accounts for underlying modes of communication that are universal to human interaction and reflect assumptions and inferences made in planning a speech (Brown and Levinson

1987, p. 56). It deals with careful lexico-syntactic and discursive strategy choices we make and tactically use in order not to offend our co-interactants or addressees. Mbisike (2008, p. 190) views it as the term used to describe the relationship between how something is said and how it should be said. Politeness helps in controlling aggression, enhancing cooperation (in interpersonal communication), and establishing or maintaining social order. By being polite, we preserve not only our co-participants' integrity but also our own integrity. According to Mey (2001, p. 76), politeness is an image preservation strategy with least cost but maximum benefits to all interlocutors.

Methodology

A total of seven texts are selected from *The Guardian*, *Daily Sun*, and *Daily Trust* newspapers of 2020 and 2021 to qualitatively examine discursive strategies explored by news writers and uncover their potential communicative values and ideological stances. The study is limited to only the headline and lead reports, given the fact that they are the summaries of news reports (van Dijk 1988), deployed by news writers to veil, promote or serve particular interests and downplay others (Bell 1991). The analysis is guided by Halliday's Interpersonal Metafunction theory and Face theory of pragmatics. In the analysis, discursive strategy in each of the sampled text is identified and then subjected to critical-pragmatic interpretations.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Text 1

“Suspected herdsmen kill OPC member, abduct farmer in Ondo”

“Barely five days after the peace parley between Ondo State Government and Fulani herdsmen, some suspected herders have killed a member of Odudua Peoples Congress (OPC) in Iju Akure North Local Government Council” (The Guardian, February 5, 2021, p. 17) .

Discursive Devices

Hedge: is found in the phrase 'suspected herdsmen', which expresses the reporter's uncertainty about his claim or withholds his full commitment to the claim that Fulani herdsmen were the one who actually killed the OPC member and abducted the farmer. With this strategy, the reporter implicitly cautions his readers about how much of the claim in the report should be taken as facts.

Blame game: is evident is the underlined adverbial clause in the excerpt: “Barely five days after the peace parley between Ondo State Government and Fulani herdsmen, some suspected herders have killed a member of Odudua Peoples Congress (OPC) in Iju Akure North Local Government Council.” It is intended to indict Fulani herders in this report. Hence, it threatens the image of the Fulani sociocultural group.

Text 2

“Herdsman behead 2 in Benue”

“Two persons were yesterday allegedly killed by suspected herdsmen in a renewed attack in Agatu, Local Government Area of Benue State. A source from Agatu, Oyaye Sule ... said Oche Alaade was allegedly killed along with his friend by suspected herdsmen who beheaded them and went away with their heads, leaving the headless bodies behind” (Daily Sun, April 14, 2020, P. 4)

Discursive Device

Hedge: is exemplified in the adverb ‘allegedly’ and the phrase ‘suspected herdsmen’, which are deployed by the reporter for self-protection or to avoid being accused of bias or false reportage, especially, given the heavy weight of the crime being reported and its potency to evoke counter attacks by farmers in Benue state. It is partially face saving to the Fulani herders, as the reporter does not express certainty about the identity of the killers.

Text 3

“How herdsmen killed my husband over dead cow – wife”

“A bereaved house wife, Jenifer Nwache has appealed to the Police in Delta State to fish out the killers of her husband, Austin, at Albert Camp in the suburb of Asaba, the state capital. Gunmen suspected to be herdsmen allegedly stormed the home of the Nwache and shot the head of the home dead instantly. Local sources said the herdsmen were enraged by the alleged killing of one of their cows by an unknown person, and decided to revenge” (Daily Sun, April 13, 2020, p. 4).

Discursive Devices

Hedge: is evident in the underlined parts of the extract: “Gunmen suspected to be herdsmen allegedly storm the home of Nwache ...” The reporter deploys this strategy to avoid being accused of responsibility for the possible retaliation against the herdsmen in the community or the entire south-southern region of the country.

Synecdoche: is found in the underlined stereotypical part of the excerpt: “Gunmen suspected to be herdsmen allegedly stormed the home of Nwache and shot the head of the home dead instantly.” The choice of the ‘head of the family’ to imply Austin in this text or husband in general reveals patriarchy in our family system, as it represent women as dependents of men and therefore intended to deepen sympathy for the family of deceased and attract succour from members of the public to the family.

Text 4

“Two herders lynched in Plateau”

“Two herders have been killed in Furfun village of Jos East Local Government Area of Plateau State. The Chairman, Miyyeti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria in Barkin Ladi Local Government Area, Muhammad Adam ... said the victims were lynched last Thursday when they went to the village to pay compensation for a farm said to have been destroyed by cattle” (Daily Trust, July 26, 2021, p. 8).

Discursive Device

Hedge: is found in the underlined part of the extract: “... the victims were lynched ... when they went to the village to pay compensation for a farm said to have been destroyed by cattle.” It expresses the speaker’s doubt about the claim that Fulani men actually destroyed the farm, reveals that the Fulani men decided to pay compensation on the farm in order for peace to reign, and implies that the killing of these Fulani men was unprovoked and unwarranted.

Text 5

“Legislators’ decades of zero legislation on farmer / herder clashes”

“Despite incessant killings in the conflicts between farmers and herders in the country, there has yet to be an appropriate legislation on the clashes or towards curtailing them by the country’s legislature - the National Assembly and most state assemblies” (Daily Trust, March 18, 2021).

Discursive Devices

Exaggeration: The headline: “legislators’ decades of zero legislation on farmer/herders clashes” is an

exaggeration exploited to threaten the face of National Assembly members and challenge them to live up to the expectations of Nigerians.

Threat Mitigation: In the lead report, the above threat is mitigated with the word ‘appropriate’ employed by the reporter to modify his allegation: “Despite incessant killings in the conflicts between farmers and herders in the country, there has yet to be an appropriate legislation on the clashes or towards curtailing them by the country’s legislature.”

Text 6

“Gunmen Kill Police Officer, Seven Civillians in Katsina, Plateau”

“The agrarian community of Vatt in Barkin Ladi Council of Plateau State was thrown into confusion yesterday as suspected herdsmen gunned down two farmers and wounded four others A reliable source in Vatt ... declared that the (deceased) farmers identified as Pam Bulus (23) and Chum Toma (20) hailed from a neighbouring village to Vatt ...” (The Guardian, June 26, 2020, p. 5).

Discursive Devices

Hedge: exemplified by the phrase ‘suspected herdsmen’ reveals the reporter’s uncertainty about the actual identity of the attackers or killers in this report. Hence, the reporter deploys it not to commit himself or to prepare ground for self-defence in case he is accused of ethnicity against Fulani herders. Hence, the report partially threatens the face of the Fulani herders.

Ambiguity: The expression ‘four others’ in the extract: “... suspected herdsmen gunned down two farmers and wounded four others” could mean that both the dead victims and the wounded ones were all farmers or that only the dead victims were farmer, the wounded ones were not. This strategy may be deployed for the purpose of exaggerating the victims and attracting public sympathy to the communities affected by the attack.

Anonymous Source of information: This device is evident in the underlined part of the excerpt: “A reliable source in Vatt ... declared that the (deceased) farmers identified as Pam Bulus (23) and Chum Toma (20) hailed from a neighbouring village to Vatt ...”. It is intended to ensure safety of the source of information in this report and to encourage other Nigerians to provide the security agents with credible intelligence about the criminals in their various communities.

Text 7

“Obiano declares armed herders as criminals”

“Anambra State Governor, Willie Obiano has declared herdsmen wielding AK-47 in the state as criminals “Any herdsman with AK-47 is an armed robber. They should be pulled down. They should be treated the same way you treat other criminals” (The Guardian, March 3, 2021, p. 8).

Discursive Devices

Modality: The modal auxiliary verb ‘should’ in the excerpt: “They [armed herders] should be pulled down. They should be treated the same way you treat other criminals” does not only express necessity but also intended to accuse the security agencies of ethnic and regional biases in dealing with criminals in the country, and challenge them on equal treatment of these criminals irrespective of their region of origin, ethnic background, and religious affiliation.

Blame: Willie Obiano has with this excerpt indirectly accused the military and other security agents of nepotism against other criminals in the south (i.e. IPOB members), and kid-glove treatment of their counterparts in the north (i.e. armed Fulani herders). Hence, this report is face threatening to the Nigerian security agents.

Findings of the study

Discursive strategies that are evident in this study include: hedge, exaggeration or hyperbole, ambiguity, sexism/stereotyping, synecdoche and blame game. Hedge is the

predominant discursive device found in the study. It is deployed for the purpose of politeness, self-protection, mitigation or expression of lack of full commitment to the claims, and achieved through words and phrases like ‘... allegedly’, ‘...’

reportedly’, ‘... said to be ...’ ‘Gunmen suspected to be Fulani herders...’. The second dominant discursive strategy found in this study is blame game which is evident in texts 1 and 7. In text one, it is explored to threaten the face of Fulani herders while in text seven, it is intended to threaten the positive image of the security agencies.

Conclusion

On one hand, Preponderance of hedges like ‘suspected herdsmen allegedly or reportedly’ and ‘... said to be ...’, etc. in this study implies that the reporters are not eye-witnesses to the incidents of herder-farmer clashes being reported. On the other hand, it implies that news reporters of herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria are

courteous and modest in their representation of individuals or groups involved in the conflicts so as not to worsen the situation. In other words, hedges in this study are signs of humility, modesty and respect on the part of the reporters, who in line with the view of Golmohammadi, Suluki, Daneshmand, and Salahshoor (2014, p. 607) offers the readers the opportunity to agree or disagree with the (mis)representations in the reports. Based on this, researcher concludes that Nigerian news writers are sensitive to the public image of the actors, individuals or groups directly or in directly said to be responsible for the security challenges in the land, especially herder-farmer attacks.

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