

MAKING SENSE OF CARTOONS ON SELECTED #ENDSARS PROTEST IN NIGERIA: A PRAGMATIC ACT APPROACH

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Abstract

Pragmatic act approach to linguistic analysis of a text involves exploring the contextual nuances of the text and how they determine the communicative value(s) of such a text. Scholarly works on #EndSARS protest are mostly economic, social and political. Hence, this study is a linguistic contribution to literature on the protest. A total of six randomly selected cartoons from the Guardian, Daily Trust and The Punch newspapers of 2020 are presented and analysed based on the activity and inferences parts of Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Act theory. Findings of the study predominantly reveal overt and covert expressive acts of ridiculing and berating political leadership of the country under former President Muhammadu Buhari, whom many Nigerians hitherto considered as a messiah, for poor governance. Findings of the study also indicate directive acts of appealing or requesting federal government to disband Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of Nigerian Police Force. Based on its findings, this study concludes that President Muhammadu Buhari's government performed far below expectations of Nigerians, especially the youth, and this was one of the main causes of the protest. The study equally concludes that peaceful protests are powerful weapons for bringing about good governance.

Keywords: pragmatics, linguistic analysis, EndSARS, political leadership

Introduction

Nigerian youths took to the streets of Lagos and other parts of the country in three consecutive weeks in October, 2020, demanding the scrapping of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Nigerian Police Force, which was created in 1992 to tackle violent crimes like armed robbery and kidnaping, among others (*The Punch*, October, 2020), because squad members of the Force were involved in extrajudicial killings, intimidation and human right abuses (Shola 2021). In addition, the protesting youths also demanded: bringing to book the police officers found guilty of brutality, compensation for the victims of police brutality, psychological evaluation of the disbanded men of the Force and improvement of the welfare of the Force.

The first and main request of the protesting youths was quickly granted as the federal government announced the disbandment of SARS. The federal government asked for more time to meet other demands of the protesters. However, the immediate replacement of SARS

with Special Weapon-Handling and Tactic Team (SWATT) is in the opinion of this study 'giving out something with the right hand and taking it back with the left one.' According to Dami (2021), #EndSARS, which started as a twitter campaign in 2017, was a microcosmic manifestation of deeply rooted dissatisfaction of Nigerians with social, economic and political situation of the country. The #EndSARS movement had no single leader. Hence government could not clamp down on the protest (Egbunike 2021), which lingered on until it turned violent. The violence led to the attack on innocent citizens as well as looting, vandalisation and destruction of public and private property in the country.

Cartoons are one of the channels or codes through which news item writers satirize or make a caricature of policies, programmes and actions of government, especially when government is anti-masses. In other words, cartoons are explored by man to express his concerns, present his experiences or to be communicatively accomplished without using a word. This is

because, given advancement in information and communication technology, verbal language (spoken or written) alone is inadequate a means of communication today. Hence, people resort to using visual images such as cartoons to communicate their concerns, feelings and opinions.

Pragmatics

As a distinct branch of linguistics, pragmatics began with posthumous publication of John Austin's (1962) *How to Do Things with Words*; a collection of J. L. Austin's lecture notes at Harvard University (Saeed, 1981, p. 222), and developed by the likes of Searle and Grice, among others. Pragmatics is a subfield of linguistics with focus on context-influenced interpretation of any instance of communication, be it verbal or non-verbal. In other words, the pre-occupation of pragmatics is interpretation of language in use. Akmajian, Demer, Farmer and Hanish (1990, p. 308) opine that the concerns of pragmatics are a language user's intentions, purposes, beliefs, and desires for using language in a particular way. Mey (2001, p. 207) submits that pragmatics studies language as it is used by a people for their own purposes and within their own limitations and affordances. Mey further states that pragmatics studies the use of language in human communication as determined by conditions of society (p. 6). Ayodabo (1997) cites Lawal (1995) to have posited that "pragmatics comes to be as a result of the limitations of structural semantics to capture satisfactorily the sociological and other nonlinguistic dimensions of ... communication."

Text and Context

A text can be any instance of spoken, written or sign communication. That is, in linguistics, a text is not only what is written. It is rather a functional linguistic term concerned with whatever channel or code that interlocutors who are physically present at the scene of communication or separated by distance explore to communicate with each other (Halliday and Mathiessan 2004, p. 3). Context, on the other hand, is the aggregate of all the factors that determine meaning in social interactions. It is the core of pragmatics. Different scholars have made diverse submissions on context. According to Lawal, (2003, p. 55), Context could be linguistic or

nonlinguistic. As the name suggests, linguistic context is language-based while non-linguistic context is determined by the participants in a communication event and their shared socio-cultural, psychological and situational knowledge of the communication event.

Halliday (1978, p. 33) views context in terms of what he calls field, tenor and mode. Field is concerned with the setting of a speech event, the subject matter and the activities of the participants in such an event. Tenor is the kind of relationship that exists between the interlocutors in terms of age, status or social distance. It could be leader-follower or employer-employee relationship. By mode, Halliday means the medium of a speech act. It could be spoken, written or sign. All these point to the centrality of context in determining meaning in any channel or code of communication.

Cartoon

Cartoons are pictorial representations of political and social issues or events as well as parties or characters involved in such events in an animated and condensed form. According to Test (1991), a cartoon is a humorous depiction of events by exploiting the ability of irony and satire to unravel, ridicule or attack an individual, a system or government in a playful, witty and artful manner. Cartoons project points of view of the cartoonist and enlighten readers on public issues while exposing wrong practices (Akande 2012). Similarly, Medubi (2003) submits that cartooning involves conceptualisation in metaphors of observed realities resulting in outputs that have to be unpacked by the reader through inference and logic. Proper interpretation of a cartoon is guided by one's broad knowledge of current affairs which the cartoon is intending to report as well as the ability to draw conclusions or analogies (El-Rafaie 2009). These views point to the fact that cartoons are powerful weapons for influencing public opinion on the state of an affair or an issue of national interest.

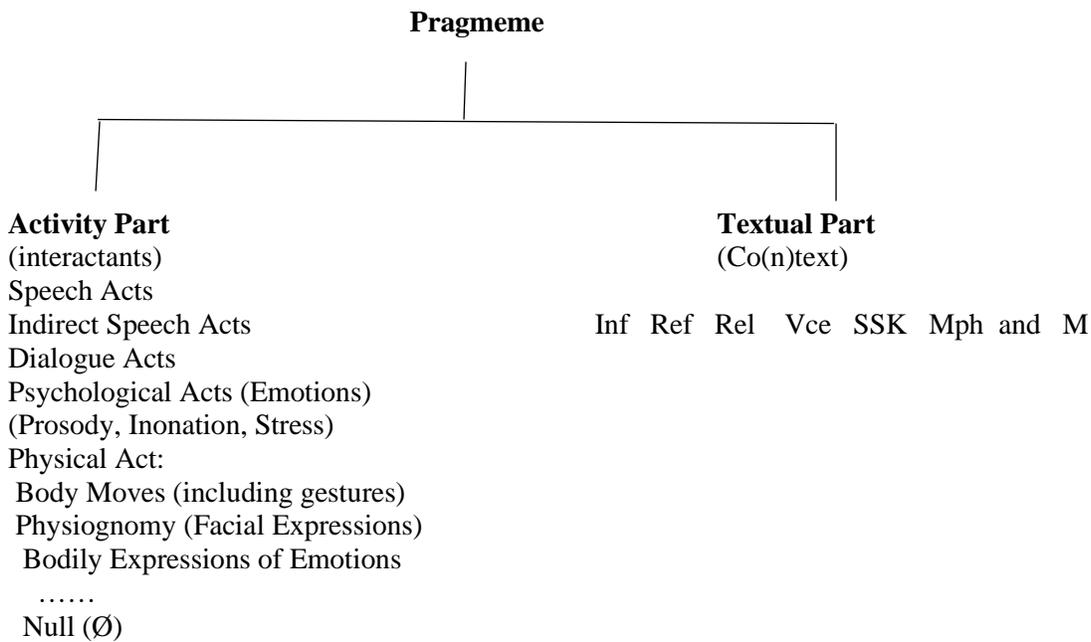
Theoretical Framework of the Study

This study is based on the activity and inference parts of Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Act theory (henceforth PAT). As the name suggests, the activity part of the theory principally concerns any form of communicative (physical, psychological, sign) actions by participants in a

conversation and therefore comprises speech acts (direct and indirect), dialogue acts, psychological acts, and physical acts which are only explored for the analysis of conversational or interactional texts, including cartoons. Inference, on the other hand, deals with the deductions that can be made from a text in relation to all the contextual nuances of the text. It is a subpart of textual aspect of Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Act theory. It can be deployed to analyse both conversational and non-conversational texts. Hence, these parts of PAT are

found suitable for appropriate interpretation of the sampled cartoons in this study.

Mey's PAT prioritises socio-cultural or societal factors (i.e. situation, environment, activity or extra-linguistic cues) in meaning construction and comprehension (p. 221) as it maintains that our acting is determined by what the scene of communication can afford and by what we can afford on the scene. Below is the schema of the theory, which Mey terms *pragmeme* (p. 222):

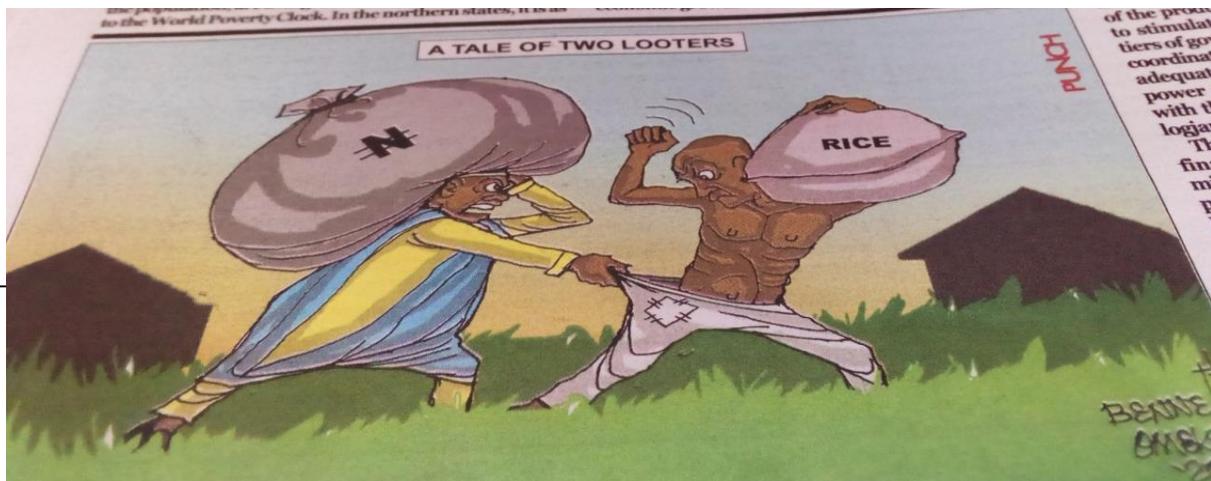


In the activity part of the schema is the list of various choices that the language users have at their disposal. They can choose one or more of the options or decide to be silent to communicate. The silence option is represented in the schema by a null sign (Ø). The textual part of the schema

comprises Inference (Inf), Reference (Ref), Relevance (Rel), Voice or Point of View (Vce), Shared Situation Knowledge (SSK), Metaphor (Mph) and Metapragmatic Joker (M), which are influenced by co-text and context of communication.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Cartoon 1



Analysis

Interactants: A Politician and an EndSARS Protester

Direct Pragmatic Act: A representative act of reporting, captured as ‘A Tale of Two Looters’

Indirect Pragmatic Act: An expressive act of satirizing corruption in Nigerian, particularly the greed of a typical Nigerian politician

Dialogue Act: The image participants in this cartoon are exchanging words in a fight or quarrel over public resources or property for selfish reasons.

Psychological Act: Each of the image participants in this cartoon is angry with the other for stealing public property.

Physical Act: The looter politician is attempting to catch or arrest his fellow looter and EndSARS protester by holding his trousers by the waist while the EndSARS protester and raises up his fist to give the politician a blow in order to escape.

Inference: Almost every Nigerian is a (potential) corrupt man or woman waiting for an opportunity to loot and impoverish others.

Cartoon 2



Interactants: A victim of police brutality on admission in a hospital and his politician visitors alongside his dog labeled as SARS

Direct Pragmatic Act: While this cartoon is on one hand an expressive act of complaining and a directive act of requesting by the victim of police brutality, it is on the other hand an expressive act of turning down the request by his visiting politician.

Indirect Pragmatic Act: Expressive act of ridiculing Nigerian political leaders for their insensitivity to the plight of the common man

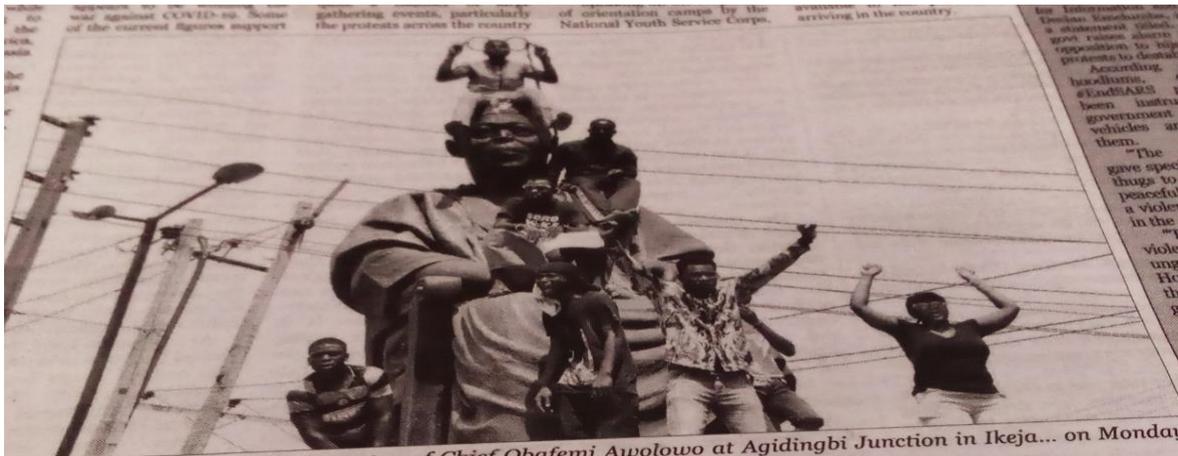
Dialogue Act: The victim of police brutality is complaining and requesting government to ban SARS, as evident in the exclamation mark (“!”) while the politician turns down the request, as evident in his response “Well, I can’t kill my beautiful dog [SARS] for you. I will come back to say sorry if it happens again!”

Psychological Act: The victim of police brutality and the politician who came to sympathise with him disagree on SARS and are therefore not happy with each other.

Physical Act: The patient puts his left hand on his forehead while taking a drip whereas his visitor prostrates.

Inference: To the government, despite the reported brutality by SARS, disbanding it will do more harm than good.

Cartoon 3



Interactants: EndSARS protesters and the statue of Chief Obafemi Awolo

Direct Pragmatic Act: Expressive act of celebrating good leadership

Indirect Pragmatic Act: Expressive of acts of decrying good old days of the leadership of Chief Awolowo, lamenting his demise and condemning leadership of modern-day Nigerian politicians.

Dialogue Act: The protesters are not only communicating among themselves but are addressing the personified statue of Chief Obafemi Awolowo.

Psychological Act: There is a mixed feeling of joy for the live of Chief Awolowo and anger over the activities of SARS operatives and by extension, the behaviour of the present-day Nigerian leaders.

Physical Act: The protester have climbed the statue and dancing on it in admiration of Chief Awolowo and condemnation of SARS.

Inference: Good legacies of a leader live long after his or her death.

Cartoon 4



Interactants: An EndSARS Protester and his Grand Pa

Direct Pragmatic Act: Directive act of questioning and representative act of responding

Indirect Pragmatic Act: Expressive act of ridiculing corrupt Nigerian politicians

Dialogue Act: The grand Pa asks: "Who taught you how to loot on this mega scale, son?"

Grandson responds: "Our politicians, grand pa."

Psychological Act: The grand Pa is surprised at his grandson's looting behaviour.

Physical Act: The grandson is dragging his looted food items on ground because they are too much for him to carry.

Inference: Nigerian youth who are said to be leaders of tomorrow are also corrupt.

Cartoon 5



Interactants: President Muhammadu Buhari, two bottles and a funnel

Direct Pragmatic Act: And this is how you #EndSARS!

Indirect Pragmatic Act: A representative act of teasingly informing Nigerians, particularly the EndSARS protesters that SARS is not disbanded as they might think.

Dialogue Act: In this cartoon, President Muhammadu Buhari is soliloquising.

Psychological Act: Federal government is happy to have particularly deceived Nigerian youths into believing that SARS is disbanded.

Physical Act: President Muhammadu Buhari is in this cartoon laughing at ENDSARS protesters as he demonstrates what his government simply did by disbanding SARS and introducing SWATT, by turning old *kunu* (pap) from one bottle to another to imply sameness of SARS and SWATT in terms of their mandates.

Inference: The aim of ENDSARS protests was defeated.

Cartoon 6



Interactants: A politician and a member of his political constituency

Direct Pragmatic Act: Directive act of appealing to politicians to be concerned about the plight of the members of their constituency rather than focusing on how to win next elections.

Indirect Pragmatic Act: Expressive act of satirising and vilifying Nigerian politicians

Dialogue Act: The electorate is telling the politician in this cartoon to fix insecurity, unemployment, bad roads and poverty in the land rather than gearing up for 2023 elections.

Psychological Act: The image participants in this cartoon are not happy with each other.

Physical Act: While the politician in this cartoon is dragging the electorate towards a signboard showing the next (2023) election timetable announced by INEC, the electorate is dragging the politician towards the signboard carrying inscriptions like unemployment, insecurity, bad roads and poverty which are the challenges that Nigerian political leaders need to address urgently.

Inference: A typical corrupt Nigerian politician's calculation is always how to win the next election at all cost.

Findings of the Study

The findings of this study reveal that indirect pragmatic acts performed in animations on #EndSARS protests are expressive acts of criticising, defaming, berating and satirising Nigerian politicians for bad governance of the country and condemning the youth for hiding under EndSARS protest to loot government food reserves, as evident in virtually all the sampled cartoons examined. However, the direct pragmatic acts found in the cartoons are representative acts of informing and reporting, as evident in all of the cartoons examined except cartoon 4, which is

overtly a pragmatic act of questioning.

Conclusion

Preponderance of implicit pragmatic acts of criticising, ridiculing and berating politicians in this study is an indication that Nigerians, especially the youth are not only fed up with the political leadership of Nigeria but are also helplessly hopeless in the country. Based on the directive acts of requesting government to bring an end to police brutality in this study, the author also concludes that Nigerians were disappointed in SARS and by extension, the Federal Government of Nigeria under President Muhammadu Buhari.

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