

## POLITICAL HUMOUR IN ONLINE COVID-19 CARTOONS

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### Abstract

This study set out to investigate the deployment of humour and multimodal resources as strategies for political communication. To achieve this, 5 online cartoons on COVID-19 from Daily Trust were purposively surfed and subjected to qualitative analysis anchoring on theoretical affordances of Schopenhauer's Incongruity Theory of Humour as well as Kress & van Leeuwen's Visual Social Semiotics Theory of Multimodal Discourse Analysis. The study agrees with extant literature that semantic negotiation is a discourse activity that is not restricted to the engagement of text among social actors alone; it can also occur in political humour leveraging on multimodal resources. Consequently, it is hoped that cartoonists, and indeed other language users engaged in text creation, will maximise the opportunities availed by multimodal resources and the malleable nature of language for their various communicative activities.

**Key words:** Political humour, multimodal resources, incongruity, online cartoons, political communication

### Introduction

Semantic negotiation is an activity that subsists between social actors all through a communicative activity. The implications of such negotiations birth actions and reactions which either align with or drift from a text creator's intentions. Consequent upon the possibility of being misinterpreted, text creators are conscious in their choice of lexicogrammatical realisations to fit certain textual as well as extratextual nuances (like tenor and mode of discourse, among others).

To ensure maximum gains from a communicative event, language users access various modes of communication. It is for this reason that humour is sometimes deployed as one of such communicative strategies. Tolutope Abisodun Oluremi notes that:

"...humour, a natural phenomenon in human society, is as old as the use of language for human communications. In its different forms of verbal and non-verbal expressions, humour has the potential to consciously or unconsciously evoke laughter from an audience" (66).

Arising from the implications of humour for comic purposes, cartoonists and comedians have chosen to use it in communicating serious as well as seemingly unserious issues for the multi-barrelled goals of sustaining/creating amusement, laughter and driving home certain semantic dimensions. It is for this purpose that humour is

similarly maximised for political communication which aims (predominantly) to checkmate certain excessive or improper uses of public trust. Qiaoyun Chen and Guiying Jiang observe that "...In recent decades, the surging multimodal humour has paralleled the volume of traditional verbal humour" (62). They explain multimodal humour to involve the use of "...more than one semiotic code functioning synchronously".

In order to achieve their aim effectively, cartoonists leverage contemporary issues of national concern for their satiric outings on political actors. It is against this backdrop that in the wake of SARS-Cov-2 (otherwise, COVID-19) pandemic, Nigerian cartoonists have consistently used it as a bootstrap in newspapers (print or online) to express certain gaps in the Nigerian socio-political cum economic milieu. In such semantic negotiations (between the cartoonists and their target audience), these cartoonists were seen to deploy incongruity and multimodal resources as strategies for humour generation/creation and political communication. Consequently, this study set out to investigate how this is achieved.

### Humour as Strategy for Political Communication

The dynamic nature of language makes it easily adaptable for language users to diversely manipulate it for diverse communicative ends. One of such productive uses to which language is deployed is for humour creation.

In an attempt to conceptualise humour as an endeavour deserving academic attention,

scholars have made efforts in this regard. For instance, in Lauren Olin's 2016 *Questions for a Theory of Humor* averred that humour is "...used to refer to an enormous range of things that are perceived as funny, and which prompt feelings of mirth, smiling, or laughter" (338). While this definition is a fair attempt at espousing the concept, it is not elaborate and is overly simplistic in approach. A more detailed definition is offered by Andrea C. Schopf, Gillian S. Martin and Mary A. Keating who see humour as a "... communication strategy that is used consciously or subconsciously to create amusement or to disguise serious messages with an allegedly amusing surface" (2). This is more elaborate but it does not account for the psychological impulses for humour. It is in reaction to this that Mariusz Rutkowski (2016) in *Humourous Names in the Light of Incongruity Theory* explained that "the source of humour (laughter) lies in the contrast caused by the juxtaposition of contrary elements" (130).

Taken together, humour is a communicative activity, occasioned by incongruous linguistic elements, aimed at stoking pleasant emotions of laughter and happiness in the audience. But, humour should not be mistaken as some fun stirring communicative action only. Giseline Kuipers affirms that "despite its association with mirth, sociability and light heartedness, humour can bite, hurt, offend and enrage" (63). So, humour can be double edged and applied on unserious as well as serious subject matters like politics. When used for political purposes, the humour creator uses its light hearted dimension to express issues of grave political consequences/implications on the masses. Tazanfal Tehseem and Zahra Bokhari conclude that "...one particular aspect of the political cartoons is that they are almost always satirical" (2).

### Review of Related Literature

Scholarly interests in humour as a tool for political communication have been variously engaged from a plethora of perspectives. Some of these shall be reviewed with the intent of espousing the gap in literature and properly situating the present study.

In 2016, Tolulope Abisodun Oluremi and

Ife Ajepe embarked on a study which they titled *Signifying Cartoons: A Pragmatic Reading of Nigeria's 2015 Political Cartoons*. The onus of the study was to investigate 15 purposively selected political cartoons published in major newspapers in Nigeria between November, 2014 and February, 2015. The data was analysed using insights from Mey's 2001 Pragmatic Acts Theory. It was found that the predominant practices in the cartoons were satirising, promoting/demoting, indicting, condemning /sensitising, revealing and cautioning.

Ogbo Salisu Usman and Nuhu Tairu Momoh in *Satire as Tool of Political Cartoons in the Nigerian National Dailies: A Critical Discourse Analysis (2016)* investigated the significance of deploying satire as a strategy for creating imageries to depict certain political issues of national concerns, by means of cartoons. They achieved this by generating data through survey method which involved sampling political cartoons in national dailies for analysis. It was revealed that the satirical images in the cartoons were those of corruption, official responsibility, political failure among others.

Also, in *Seriously Funny: The Political Work of Humour on Social Media*, Jenny L. Davis, Tony P. Love and Gemma Killen (2018) investigated the extent to which "politics are fodder for 'silly' content production vis-à-vis humour as a serious political tool" (1). The 'small data' approach was adopted to sieve data from Twitter about two trending instances that occurred in a televised debate during the 2016 US presidential election in which Hillary Clinton described Donald Trump's supporters as a "basket of deplorables; in retaliation, Trump called her a "nasty woman". The study found "funny content enacting meaningful political work including expressions of opposition, political identification, and displays of civic support" (1).

Similarly, in 2019, Tolulope Abisodun Oluremi undertook a study titled *Pragmeme of Political Humour in Selected Nigerian Political Cartoons* in which six 2016 political cartoons were subjective to pragmatic investigation; using Flamson and Barrett's Encryption Theory of Humour and Mey's Pragmeme Theory. The study

found that the audience category which shared common ground knowledge with the cartoonists on the political activities foregrounded were able to decrypt the sense communicated.

A common strand that strings through the above studies is that they all investigate political cartoons from other linguistic dimensions, apart for elucidating the phenomenon from a semiotic perspective as well as adopting the Incongruity Theory for analysis. It is this gap in literature that the present study seeks to fill.

### **Theoretical Frameworks: Incongruity Theory and Multimodal Discourse Analysis**

In a bid to account for humour and amusement from a scientific stance, several attempts have been made in this regard. One of such classical theories on humour is the Incongruity Theory (which ranks among others like the Superiority Theory and the Relief Theory) and gains credence to the works of Cicero, Kant, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and so on.

This theory explains humour to be occasioned by a distortion in the audience's schemata on the issue being expressed. Cited in Tomas Kulka's 2007 work titled *The Incongruity of Incongruity Theories of Humor*, Schopenhauer submits that "...the cause of Laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity" (322). Similarly, Qianoyun Chen and Guiying Jiang in a 2018 study titled *Why are you Amused: Unveiling Multimodal Humour from the Prototype Theoretical Perspective* add that "... the incongruity theory holds that the perception of incongruity leads to humour when two normally disparate concepts, schemata, or meanings are juxtaposed in a surprising or unexpected manner" (65-66). Taken together, it can be deduced that to the proponents of this theory, incongruity is core

and its realisation in discourse is what stokes humour, laughter and amusement in the audience (when they interpret the discourse and identify the incongruous elements in it).

Political humour is achieved when the text creator juxtaposes satirical content against ideal situations with the intention of transmitting information about certain contemporary societal issues of political implications. It is against this background that the Incongruity Theory was adopted to account for such incongruities.

However, the Incongruity Theory does not efficiently have affordances for the explication of multimodal communication in the form Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) does. It is on this note that MDA was deployed for the analysis, with specific reference to Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) *Visual Social Semiotics* which was influenced by Halliday's contraptions of language as a social semiotic system of systems.

Visual Social Semiotics is premised on the observation that meaning co-construction in discourse is a function of a seamless interaction of visual and nonverbal components. They opine that meaning can be arrived at by taking a holistic view of the linguistic and non-linguistic realisations in a text. Consequently, they approach the analysis of (media) discourse by accounting for basic semiotic principles interpreted along three plains: Representational, interactive and compositional.

### **Methodology**

The study applied Incongruity Theory and Visual Social Semiotics to explicate meaning strands in humour discourse, with specific reference to 5 purposively selected online cartoons from Daily Trust. The cartoons were those published between February and July, 2020. The data was subjected to qualitative analysis based on aspects of the theories which align with the objectives of this study.

## Analysis and Discussion

### Text 1



Source: Daily Trust Cartoon, 28<sup>th</sup> February, 2020.

### Incongruity Analysis

When political leaders make pronouncements, the followers are obligated to trust them to be able to act out such pronouncements. This is owing to the capacity of such personalities to pull government resources to make such happen. In the above cartoon (Text 1), the FG which is the highest level of the executive arm has been referenced that "...they are fully prepared". This statement seats well among the masses who are conscious of the responsibility of government in catering for their wellbeing and security. However, incongruity is expressed in the second sentence of Text 1; in which the speaker hopes that the government will not fight coronavirus in the manner in which corruption is being fought. Note that corruption is capitalised, deliberately so for emphasis.

An appreciation of the shared contextual knowledge of these interlocutors and their audience about Nigerian politics serves to project the humour in the cartoon. The political tone of the humour is expressed by the use of graphological resources: Capitalisation (of corruption) and the use of Naija my country (on the T-shirt of the standing character). Even the standing posture is indicative of semiotic relevance: His colours are neatly contrasted (red and white) to emphasise the writing on his shirt where his hand is. His hands are in his pocket, indicating a relaxed disposition of taking the government's submission with a pinch of salt. He

even makes reference to another area that has received enough doses of politicisation-corruption.

### Representational Analysis

In the Text 1, there are items of semiotic significance in the cartoon as follows: the map, the window, the sitting posture of the character studying the map, the stick in his hand, the character standing, dull colours in the background (indicating uncertainty and fear of some unknown phenomenon) and the text.

The map is conspicuously spread out and forms the basis of the discussion. The seated participant points at it with a stick as if to draw the other interactants attention to the referent item. The semiotic implication of the map is that the referent item is something that has a global implication. Corona virus is also said to be fast spreading across the globe, with countries like Algeria, Brazil and France being mentioned. The map is positioned beside a window as if to allow for proper aeration and light to properly see the map.

The map shows that the idea of corona virus had not entered Nigeria and may have been heard in the news, which is represented with the map. Hence the media is the one who tells citizens of happenings around the world. Even the government's declaration was expressed by the media, hence the use of the stick pointing at the map, for emphasis.

### Interactive Analysis

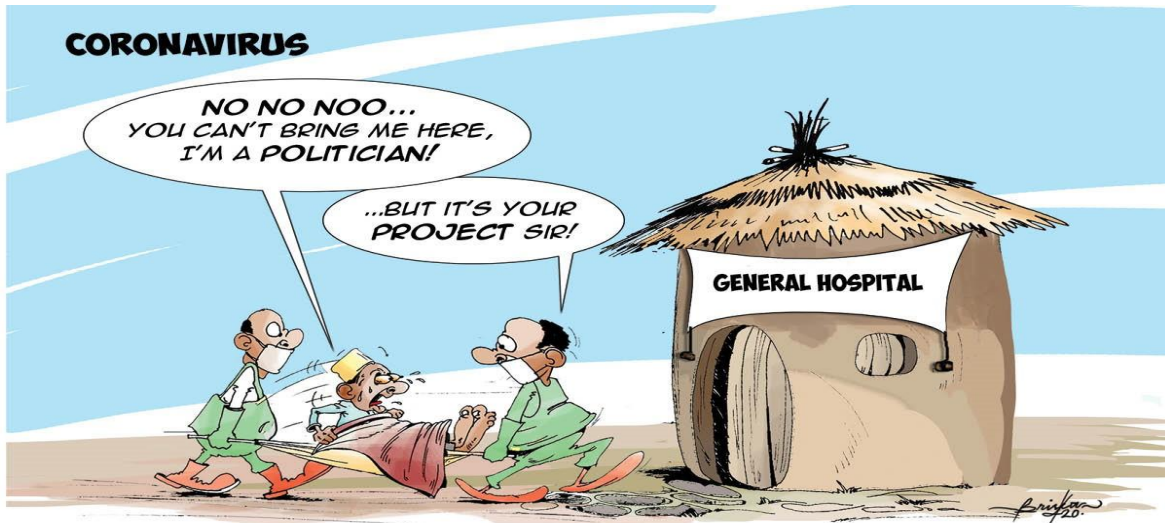
The interactants seem to be electorates whose safety and provisioning of healthcare rests with an out group (the politicians) which is referred to as FG (Federal Government), the political. The out group does not seem trusted to own up to promises made as reference is made to an earlier promise to fight corruption. Though

how the fight is executed is not mentioned in the text, the intention is to leverage the audience's common ground knowledge of the subject of discourse to tap the meaning. It is anticipated that by so doing, incongruity will occur thereby producing an anticipated meaning strand which will translate to political humour.

### Compositional Analysis

The use of semiotic features of colour use, font style, capitalisation and text combine to effectively accentuate political discourse in the text. The positioning of these items in the image appear deliberate and serves to enhance the meanings realised from taking a close look at the image.

#### Text 2



Source: Daily Trust Cartoon, 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2020.

### Incongruity Analysis

A sick person should not be selective. He should be more interested in getting safe. Rather, he is asserting his position. Now, in Nigeria, such high calibre members of the society are not taken to General Hospitals for treatment. The politician's bulging eyes and hands supporting his almost sitting posture is suggestive. The expected reaction is for him to feel relaxed being that he is in the hands of medics (wearing green and white) representative of Nigerian medics. He does not seem to worry about the people carrying him as much as he cares about the destination (The General Hospital). The hospital is a "General Hospital", not a specialist hospital for seemingly special people as the politician. It does not have a door nor a window and is thatched roofed. The incongruity arises from an

application of inferential knowledge from the shared situational knowledge of the text. The politician seems to know what to expect in the destination. The incongruous element for political humour is unveiled from answers to this question: If the political class provided the required medical facilities for qualitative healthcare provisioning, why don't they want to use it, even when their life is being threatened?

At the time of this cartoon, international flights had been barred in Nigeria as a strategy to contain the spread of COVID-19. Consequently, it was not possible for the highly favoured population of the economy (which the politician in the cartoon) represents. They had to make do with the available healthcare facilities (personnel and equipment) in the country to access their health needs.

### Representational Analysis

In Text 2, the sky is blue (indicative that for elements of nature, everything was normal as the firmament still remained). The thatched hut does not have a door nor window. In Nigeria, that kind of structure is synonymous with backwardness or poorly developed. Text: Protestation from the politician while the medics do not seem to argue, they only remind him that the work is his. There is a gap here, for the audience to fill; why are the medics seemingly calm while the politician is agitated? Bold text choices for Coronavirus and General Hospital: For reader attention and emphasis. The audience's attention is attracted to the bold font to know the context of the discourse. Emphasis is entrenched with the capitalisation of the General Hospital, with these two boldened, the reader is expected to infer and connect the two terms for the anticipated political communication that

politicians are self-serving and only use their so called projects as mere propaganda as these are deficient in standard.

### Interactive Analysis

At this level, it can be observed that the interaction in the Text is indexed on the social status of the interactants: a privileged class (represented by the politician) and the masses who are depicted as being the work tools of the privileged class. The privileged class is depicted as being laboured for by carrying him on a stretcher, with no assistance from him to alleviate their toil. HE does not appreciate their efforts, only protests. The workers seem not to be shocked at their destination because it appears to be the only available option and what they are used to. The politician, on the other hand, is seen to protest because he knows what he is likely to meet and has had a feel of what obtains in other climes.

### Compositional Analysis

The compositionality is skilfully hinged on three semiotic features for the anticipated results: Deployment of bold fonts (Coronavirus and General Hospital), Spatial distribution of text and social actors in the cartoon (text precedes the characters in bold, then the politician's protest, they are shown to be approaching the 'hospital'), both professionals (Nigerian medics-dressed in national colours-; ready to serve, the other a politician-afraid of being taken to the place of service, even though he is to directly benefit from it).

### Text 3



Source: Daily Trust Cartoon, 3<sup>rd</sup> April, 2020.

### **Incongruity Analysis**

As a strategy to stem the fast ravaging impacts of COVID-19, the federal government declared an initial lockdown in some cities (Abuja, Lagos and Ogun) where the cases of the virus were steadily spiking, on a daily basis. The lockdown was intended to restrict inter and intrastate travels in those states and indeed the entire nation.

The expectation was that inhabitants of the locked down cities would “stay home safe”. However, the reality around was incongruous with the ideal situation in which the basic comforts of a healthy environment are absent. Staying home safe is an experience that should be enjoyed in a healthy environment. But what is depicted in the cartoon (creating political humour) is an environment polluted by air and noise from power generating sets lined up with beside the houses they service. Another item of incongruity in the cartoon is the personified presentation of the viruses which seem to be expressing the views of the masses. The incongruity is that viruses are not as affected as humans by air and noise pollution (as claimed). Secondly, they are shown to be freely roaming thereby having more opportunities for oxygenated air than those locked up in their houses with no human presence in sight. The fumes are also represented to be passing by the Nigerian flag which signifies that it is a national challenge. The political communication which can likely be gained is that Nigerians are responsible for providing themselves electricity and suffer the associated inconveniences occasioned by such acts.

### **Representational Analysis**

In this cartoon, it was observed the houses were closely lined up; indicative of the dense population characteristic of the affected cities. Each of these houses has a medium-sized

### **Compositional Analysis**

The various linguistic and graphic resources (pictorial and colour choice) were seen to be intentionally arranged/sequenced to achieve the intended political humour.

power generating set beside it suggestive of the social class of the owners who are middle class Nigerians. This vibrant and viable class of the Nigerian society is depicted as being short-changed of a basic social amenity (electricity) which should make life comfortable, as suggested in the text “stay home safe”. The windows and doors are locked without a human presence indicating the level of compliance to the lockdown order in the affected cities. There are three textual representations in the cartoon: The text at the top right corner serving to contextualise the humour text, the one on the building requesting members to remain indoors and the reaction from personified virus decrying the implication of the pollution (from noise and air) on “their health”. The colour is dull and represents uncertainty, inconvenience and discomfort. Fumes-air pollution. There is a Nigerian flag soaked in fumes showing that electricity is a national challenge, not restricted to the states under lockdown.

### **Interactive Analysis**

The communication in the text is expressed in a monologue in which the personified virus comments on its observation. Although the others seem to observe same, their silence indicates agreement as there is no counter stance. The monologue is two-sentenced; an exclamatory (Bros eh!) and an interrogative question which appears rhetoric. These syntactic structures portend pragmasemantic undergirds: the exclamatory sentence is in pidgin language (a language of the masses) whereas the interrogative (rhetoric) is in standard Nigerian English which represents the schooled/ literate Nigerian population. This implies that the message being communicated affects all Nigerian despite their socioeconomic divides. The proximity between the first two “interactants” is enough to have elicited a response, which was not volunteered.

#### Text 4



**Source: Daily Trust Cartoon, 23rd May, 2020.**  
**Incongruity Analysis**

At the outset of the “fight” against the spreading scourge of COVID-19, the World Health Organisation (WHO) assumed the position of global mobilizer. Its mobilisation was aimed at conscientisation, galvanising resources and encouraging information sharing and innovations across the globe. This encouraged member nations to move in this direction. Consequently, with innovative strides from Africa, as depicted in the box in the cartoon above, an excited WHO would have attended to such innovations. However, the picture shows WHO’s Director-General (Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus) looking away in a posture that is suggestive of being disappointed and seeming to be immobile; waiting for something from Europe and America. This incongruous disposition informs humour in the audience which has trailed the conversations around the “fight” against COVID-19, up to the point innovations sprang from Africa vis-à-vis WHO’s reaction to these innovations as evidenced in their immobility.

#### **Representational Analysis**

In the Text, there is a box which represents the African continent. In the box, there are suitcase-like entities which are representative of some countries in Africa. These have

#### **Compositional Analysis**

The image shows a box containing innovations from Africa. This box is positioned in a way that it is the first thing the reader sees. The implication is to inspire curiosity and ensure emphasis. The direction

inscriptions on them which communicate the innovations from the specific countries. There is also the face of the WHO director, seemingly frowning (his head enlarged, for emphasis). On his suit is an inscription “WHO”. In front of him is a piece of text which seems to suggest what is going on in his mind. His gaze is also distant, in the direction of the writing. Signifying that he is expectant of results from Europe and America.

#### **Interactive Analysis**

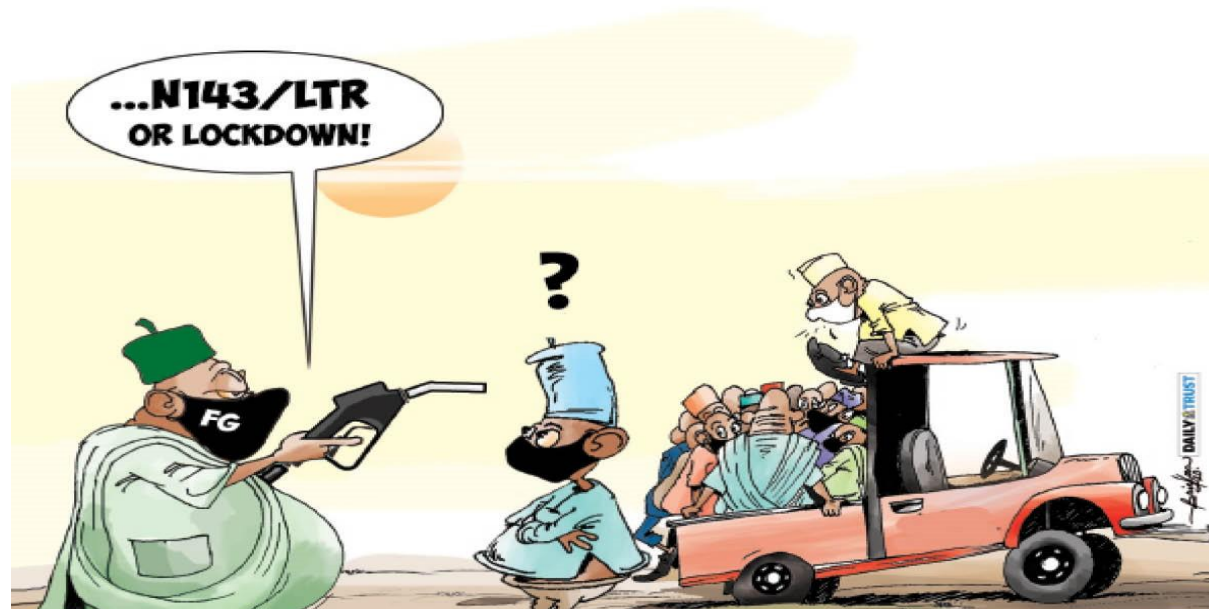
Two main characters are depicted in the cartoon: a box and a figure. The box expresses a semiotic meaning which suggests that, on the international scale, Africa is best viewed as an out group against a favoured in-group. Despite the innovations from them, because they are in the out-group, attention is not given, rather strategies are stalled to create space for the in-group to present innovations to the world.

Similarly, it shows that however potent and efficacious the innovations may be, they need to pass through WHO for international seal. Although WHO does not seem favourably disposed to giving the needed attention, the innovations are at best paper work which do not have capacity for global impact without being approved. It also shows helplessness and no reward for efforts, as coming from Africa.



of the WHO's Director's gaze is also intentional to show disinterest. Although he does not verbally express his thoughts, what he seems to be thinking is expressed in a dialogue box right in front of him; meaning to say he does not need to talk for his body language of disgust for African innovations on COVID-19 to be interpreted.

### Text 5



Source: Daily Trust Cartoon, 3rd July, 2020.

### Incongruity Analysis

In the cartoon, a well fed man wearing an accompanying flowing gown which depicts his social status points the service end of a fuel dispensing hose at someone looking at him. This pointed item has the semblance of a gun. The accompanying textual resource of this image is what stirs up humour. It is incongruous for the government to use the same expressions used by robbers to rob. Background knowledge of such encounters is 'your money or your life'. In this case, the government says N143/ltr or lockdown. At the point of easing interstate travels, the pump price hiked from 125/ltr to 143/ltr. The distraught onlooker has a question mark on his head which suggests that he does not know which of the two options to choose.

### Representational Analysis

The text has a three pictures representative of various social realities of the Nigerian society: the well fed and dressed man in green dress with a face mask with FG written on it symbolises the Nigerian political class, the

person he is addressing symbolises pressure groups while the people in the immobile car are the densely populated Nigerian masses; the red coloured car indicates the dichotomisation of the society into haves and have-nots (the have-nots in the car) while the haves on the other side.

The face masks on the faces of the two standing characters is indicative of the era in which the discourse is taking place (in the corona period which has introduced a new dress pattern). The passengers in the car also represents the locked down state of the people; not allowed to move about-stationed in one place, irrespective of the inconveniences arising from it. The cramped sitting arrangement in the truck also suggests that although physical and social distancing is advocated as a strategy for curbing the spread of the virus, its implementation is a challenge as the needed social space for that isn't available.

Again, the body mass, posture and dresses of the main participants is suggestive of their positions in the society: while one is privileged and authoritative (as displayed in the

instrument of economic control-the hose) the other seems helpless and not as well fed, and small statured.

### **Interactive Analysis**

The semiotic interaction between the participants tilt towards their social dispositions; the political class and the led. The interaction is anchored on the background information of the corona virus pandemic, the attendant lockdown and the sudden hike in the cost of pump price of petrol. The participants seem to be in a conversation about the situation. While the other participant is not given to much interrogation but gives the other few tough options from which to choose, the other is speechless and does not know which of the options to choose. The affected masses are seen to be helpless, oblivious of their rights and stuck in the car; seemingly awaiting a response from their driver, their pressure group leader. The leader doesn't seem to have a favourable response either.

### **Compositional Analysis**

The compositionality is anchored authoritative hierarchy. This is expressed in the

pattern of presenting the characters in the cartoon; from the political class, the pressure groups who demand better welfare for the citizens to the citizens who are vulnerable and dependent on the results of the negotiations arrived at from the political class and their leaders. The masses are seen to be patient, despite their cramped and seemingly neglected stance, they are shown to be waiting for the outcome of an interaction that does not favour them. Inequality is glaringly displayed.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Semantic negotiation is a discourse activity that is not restricted to the engagement of text among social actors alone; it can also occur in political humour leveraging on multimodal resources. The forgoing discourse serves to support this assertion; as extant literature has severally opined. Consequently, it is hoped that cartoonists, and indeed other language users engaged in text creation, will maximise the opportunities availed by multimodal resources and the malleable nature of language for their various communicative activities.

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