

‘Occupy Nigeria 2012’: a Critical Analysis of Facebook Posts in the Fuel Subsidy Removal Protests

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Abstract

This study critically examines the discourse of posts on *Facebook* in the ‘occupy Nigeria’ fuel subsidy removal protests. The *Facebooks* posts are viewed as protest discourse with its ideological imprints of positive ‘we’ in-group representations and negative ‘other’ out-group constructions. With a CDA analytical approach, the study shows that *Facebook* posts are effectively used to describe the identity of the actors, articulate their arguments and demands, enunciate their activities and goals as well as provide information updates to the protesters. The protesters apply linguistic strategies such as codeswitching between English and the local languages (e.g. *Yoruba*) and the use of Standard Nigerian English and the local pidgin to express solidarity as well as for social interaction. However despite the seeming effectiveness of the online protests via *Facebook*, the Nigerian protesters did not ultimately achieve their aim partly because the protests did not attract sufficient participation. The individuals engaged in the protests were divided and many still pledged their loyalty to political in-group and ethnic interest rather than national interest.

Keywords: discourse, Facebook, ‘occupy Nigeria’, online activism, posts, protest

1. Introduction

The ‘Occupy Wall Street’ protesters and members of the occupy movements in New York and other American cities who said they represented 99% of the American population adopted a non-violent protest against social inequality in the United states blamed on the assumed greed and corruption of the 1% who wield economic power. ‘Occupy,’ representing the revolutionary tactics of the Arab spring, has since become the slogan in other countries and regions for similar actions (e.g. ‘occupy Frankfurt,’ ‘occupy Zurich,’ ‘occupy Hong Kong’ etc.). Pickerill & Krinsky (2012) describing the general philosophy of the occupy movement, note that there is the core claim to space by deliberately challenging the privatization of certain city sites; thus, the ‘occupy’ or ‘sit-in’ philosophy re-enforces the need to reclaim space from corporate greed. The movement also crafts and repeats slogans like ‘we are the 99 percent,’ which was powerful in establishing true democracy. Hence, the occupy movement prefigured and envisaged a new society (p.282).

‘Occupy Nigeria’ is slightly different from the ‘sit-in’ ‘camping’ practice; because, protesters did not just ‘occupy’ a particular spot like the *Tahrir Square* in Egypt or lower Manhattan in New York; they were angry workers and demonstrators on the streets, and major cities’

express roads, chanting war songs with placards and green leaves in their hands, protesting against the controversial withdrawal of a fuel subsidy in Nigeria on January 1, 2012. Although, the protesters did not ‘occupy’ in the real sense of occupying a single location, they still chose to call their action ‘occupy Nigeria’ because it articulated a collective civil engagement.

The occupy Nigeria protests, which were viewed as successful in terms of organization and participation, were largely organized, and mobilized through the social media, namely *Facebook*, *Twitter*, SMS text-messaging and specialized political blogs. According to Deluca, Lawson & Sun, (2012), social media create new contexts for activism that is not possible in traditional media, because they (Twitter, Facebook and You Tube) ‘foster an ethic of individual and collective participation, thus creating a norm of perpetual participation and that norm creates new expectations of being in the world (p.483).

This study applies a critical discourse analysis (CDA) and sociolinguistics methods to examine the contents of this type of ideological (protest) discourse on *Facebook* and how they (the Facebook posts) are used to mobilize protesters. The study attempts to answer the following questions: (i) what are the discursive functions of the (protest) posts on Facebook as a form of resistance to a perceived unpopular government policy? (ii) What discursive strategies are reflected in the posts that reveal ideology in the protest discourse (of resistance)? (iii) To what extent do the protesters apply their socio-cultural/linguistic knowledge as a form of multicultural discursive strategies to mobilize supports? The study begins with a brief overview of the politics of fuel subsidy and fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria.

2. The Politics of Fuel Subsidy/Removal

In the context of this study, ‘subsidy’ means money paid by government to reduce the costs of service or production of goods for their prices to be kept low but has the tendency to create distortion in the energy market and attract large economic costs (Ogwuonuonu, 2011). Nigeria is the largest crude oil producer in Africa and the 7th largest in the world. Statistically, the country produces about 2.4 million barrels of crude in a day. The oil is exported for refining, and afterwards imported for domestic consumption due to inadequate refining infrastructure and total breakdown of the country’s refineries. With a population of over 150 million, the country consumes an average of 35 million litres of fuel per day (*PPRA Report*). According to Chiejina (2012), the pricing template of the Petroleum Pricing Regulatory Agency (PPRA) showed that the landing cost of a litre of fuel as at August 2011 was N129.21. The margin for transporters and marketers stood at N15.49, bringing the expected pump price of fuel to N144.70. Working with these statistics, the government in 2011 subsidized the pump price with N79.79 per litre with the aim of making the fuel available to the citizens at an affordable and official price of N65.

Some economists have viewed the subsidies as immensely corrupt and wasteful and said they did not really benefit the people, rather the oil importers. The government also claimed that

the increase in the cost of importation of fuel had made the subsidy an overload on government expenditure, the government spending about N1.4 trillion (over \$8 billion) in 2011 on fuel subsidy alone. This and some other factors like insufficient funds to meet infrastructural needs in the country resulted in the decision to withdraw the subsidy, which was announced on January 1st 2012 by the PPRA (Alabi, 2012). The government had also argued that the deregulation of the oil sector was necessary because the fuel subsidy merely enriched a few corrupt government officials. Over the years, Nigerians had enjoyed cheap fuel prices since the introduction of the subsidy policy in 1982. However, following the withdrawal, the pump price of fuel rose from the initial N65 to N141 per litre (less than US\$1) - an increase of about 120%. This resulted in the drastic increase in transport fares; goods and services in the market became more expensive and the general cost of living became much higher for most Nigerians who live on less than two dollars a day.

The Nigeria Labour (NLC) and its allies had argued that the government could adequately subsidize fuel price since the nation was rich enough to afford the subsidy. Unfortunately, the greater bulk of Nigeria's wealth was said to go into private pockets. According to Grant (2009), Nigeria had earned about \$500 billion from oil exports since production began in 1958 and earns over \$10 billion annually (Chiluwa, 2011a). Recent studies by the World Bank and Nigeria's Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) have also estimated that over \$400 billion might have been stolen by corrupt officials since 1960. According to the Economic Intelligence Unit, the Nigerian GDP had nearly doubled from \$170.7 billion in 2005 to 292.6 billion in 2007. The GDP per capita had also moved from \$692 per person in 2006 to \$1,754 per person in 2007. Currently, Nigeria is the largest economy in Africa with GDP growth totaling N80.3 trillion (\$509.9bn) for 2013, higher than South Africa with \$370.3bn. (*BBC*, April 4, 2014 quoting the Nigerian Office of Statistics). Ironically however, the growing Nigerian economy has not impacted on the living standards of most of its citizens (see Chiluwa, 2011a). The NLC had argued that the estimated N1.3 trillion the government claimed it would save from the subsidy removal might have been embezzled by politicians and not used for development purposes. They recommended therefore that politicians and political office holders should rather cut down on their ridiculously high living standards. For instance, it was reported that the average senator in Nigeria earns much more than a senator in the United States with a take home of about \$1.7 million per annum; this is ten times more than the salary of a senator in the US (*PM News*, July 29, 2010). Some federal ministers were also said to be paid in US dollars rather than the Nigerian local currency, contrary to the provisions of the Nigerian constitution (Akande, 2011). Up till the present times, corruption cases and financial frauds involving politicians and legislators are still pending in court and debated in the federal legislature. NLC and civil rights groups therefore insisted that the rise in the cost of fuel production and importation should not be borne by the masses who were already suffering in the midst of plenty. This led to the nationwide strike referred to as 'occupy Nigeria' protests.

The nationwide protests, organized by the NLC with the support of the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and civil society organizations, began on the 2nd of January and went on for two weeks. The protests soon became widespread, and extended to main cities across the country

and Abuja, leading to a complete paralysis of economic activities, including both partial and complete closure of Nigerian seaports and airports. In Lagos, protesters gathered at the popular *Ojota Gani Fawehinmi Park* (named after the late popular Lagos radical civil rights lawyer), before moving to the streets, where rallies conducted by civil rights activists were held. Though they began as non-violent demonstrations and rallies in the north and south-western states, the protests soon turned violent, with reports of deaths in several places following confrontations with the police and security agents. In solidarity with fellow Nigerians at home, Nigerians abroad also participated actively, some of them gathering at the Nigerian embassy in their various countries. For instance, demonstrators gathered outside the Nigerian High Commission in London, the World Bank Complex in Washington D.C, and Nigerian embassies in Brussels and Ghana, among others. The Nigerian government was later forced to announce a reduction of fuel price to N97 after a series of consultations with NLC and other key stakeholders. The reduction of the fuel price, which was described as a partial subsidy removal, was accepted by NLC and the protests were suspended on the 16th of January, 2012. However, the NLC's compromise with the government was viewed by many people as a betrayal of trust, since the goal of the protests, (i.e. complete reversal of the fuel price to the original N65 per litre) was not achieved. Nigerians normally see the availability of crude oil in large quantity in Nigeria and the country's role in oil production and supply across the globe as a natural privilege; hence, the provision of fuel at a cheap price is the only right they can enjoy from their country (Ibanga, 2005). According to the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), the protests cost an estimated average loss of N96.764 billion per day and a total of about N483.8 billion (over \$2.9 billion) in the five working days of the protests (*The Punch*, Jan. 13, 2012).

Later revelations following reports by the House of Representatives' committee of enquiry set up to investigate the Nigerian oil sector and the fuel subsidy policy subsequent to the protests, revealed that about \$6bn had been defrauded from the fuel subsidy fund in the past three years (2010-2012). The parliamentary report also uncovered the record of oil retailers, Nigeria's Oil Management Company and the Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) in collaboration with fifteen fuel importers who received over \$300 million without importing any fuel; over 100 oil marketers were also said to collect the same amount of money on several occasions for doing nothing. Many of those named in the report were officials of the present government under President Jonathan (BBC, April 4, 2012). Nigerians were then beginning to wonder if the subsidy removal was a good option after all.

3. Facebook in Social Protests

Since its creation in February 2004, *Facebook* has become a household name, becoming the biggest and most popular social networking site in recent times. In Nigeria, Facebook is viewed as the most popular social network site used by young Nigerians (Asoto, 2011). Aside from being used for leisure activity, *Facebook* has become a valuable resource for monitoring the political mood in the country, especially because it provides people the forum to make their voices heard (Cleveland, 2010). It is the younger generation which is mostly involved in *Facebook* activities in Nigeria, with about 71% within the age bracket of 18-34 (*Socialbakers.com*).

Of greater interest in recent times is the adaptability of online social networks, particularly *Facebook* and *Twitter* for social activism and protests. The successes of the Tunisian protests and the initial Egyptian protests that ousted Hosni Mubarak, for example, have been attributed to *Twitter* and *Facebook*. Libyan protesters also utilized *Twitter* and *Facebook* in the protests that ousted Muammar Gaddafi to mobilize themselves and coordinate their activities (Raddatz, 2011; Chiluiwa, 2012d). In Nigeria, *Twitter*, blogs and online forums have also been used for social mobilization and political participation (Ifukor, 2010; Chiluiwa, 2011b, 2012a).

Several scholarly works on social protests and activist movements on the Internet support the view that indeed the Internet and ICTs are significantly influencing the ways activists communicate, collaborate and demonstrate (Vegh, 2004; Garrett, 2006; Tao, 2011; Idle, Nunns, 2011). According to Shirky (2011), social media have become coordinating tools for nearly all the world's political or protest movements. Thus, the Internet has enabled a networked population to gain greater access to information and more opportunities for collective action and increased freedom to demand change.

The social media not only provide a platform for civil protests but also enable participants from the Nigerian multicultural backgrounds to express the cultural identities. Heyd (2014) observes that some Nigerian online forums (e.g. *Nairaland*, as in *Facebook*) for example, are used for 'doing race and ethnicity' where cultural labels and multicultural/linguistic identities enable participants to engage in 'narratives of belonging' (p. 38). Some of the forums are even established along ethnic lines such as 'Oduduwa net' (for Yoruba speakers) and 'Igbo net' (for Igbo speakers) (Ifukor, 2011). On *Facebook* or online forums, socio-cultural labels and greeting formats such as 'Igbo nma ma nu' (equivalent to 'hello Igbo') or 'Udo gadi' (i.e. 'there shall be peace' in Igbo) or linguistic behaviours like codeswitching (i.e. Standard Nigerian English-Pidgin/Standard Nigerian English-local languages) are used for cultural identification and solidarity that are necessary for collective action (see Chiluiwa, 2012b).

4. Critical Discourse Analysis

This study views Facebook posts under study as a form of computer-mediated protest discourse, which is also a form of 'discourse of resistance' (see Putnam et al 2005; Chiluiwa 2012a). This type of discourse is often characterized by strategies that highlight unequal power relations or some forms of oppression, either in an organization or in a society. In the neo-Marxist perspective, resistance is a function of the oppressive nature of capitalist modes of production that lead to the alienation of the workers (Putnam et al 2005). According to Putnam et al, discourse in this context often functions as an expression or the construction of organizational subjectivity and reveals how power relations function to constitute particular identities and influence the resultant resistance or protest. At a personal or group level, discourse (of resistance) may function as an expression of dissatisfaction or frustration with terms of employment or a way to renegotiate a new order/policy or a strategy for challenging prevailing social arrangements (Brown 2000 cited in Putnam et al 2005). Hence, resistance is bound to occur where power (political, organizational, religious etc) exists and change is desperately needed (Chiluiwa, 2012a).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a type of discourse analysis that ‘aims to contribute to addressing the social ‘wrongs’ of the day (in a broad sense – injustice, inequality, lack of freedom etc.) by analysing their sources and causes, resistance to them and possibilities of overcoming them’ (Fairclough, 2009:163). Hence, a critical discourse analyst will examine how certain levels of discourse (e.g. multicultural use of language on *Facebook* in this study) reveal value judgements and ideological perspectives. Ideology in this context includes the ways in which individuals or groups/identities represent themselves or are represented by others. According to van Dijk (2005), ideologies go beyond the representation and legitimization of class domination. Dominated groups (e.g. the workers) also require a form of ideology as a basis for resistance. Ideological discourse very often reveals evidences of positive ‘we’ representation (‘we’ representing either the workers, an ethnic group, or a particular political persuasion) and negative ‘other’ representation (‘other’ being either the government or a political opposition group etc). Protest discourse in this study therefore illustrates van Dijk’s (1998) ideological square (i.e. the stressing of the positive actions of the ‘we’ in-group and the negative actions of the ‘they’ out-group). In other words, (i) emphasize ‘our’ good properties/actions (ii) emphasize ‘their’ bad properties/actions (iii) mitigate ‘our’ bad properties/actions (iv) mitigate ‘their’ good properties/actions’ (p.33). Hence, meanings are structurally manipulated by the principle of in-group preference and out-group denunciation. Discursive meaning influenced by ideologies frequently features information that enunciates (a) self-identity description (e.g. who we are, where we come from, who qualifies to be part of us etc.); (b) activity description (e.g. what our tasks are; what is expected of us, what our social roles are etc); (c) goal description (d) norm and value description; (d) position and relations description (e.g. ‘our’ identity, activities and goals) and (e) resource description (van Dijk, 1995).

In the current study, the ideological discourse of protest in the Nigerian fuel subsidy withdrawal protests of January, 2012 is viewed as a means of resisting what the workers perceive as an unfair and oppressive policy of the government. Categories of ideological discourse analysis, some which are identified and analyzed in this study, include (i) actor description (involving the neutral or positive ‘we’ in-group description and negative ‘other’ out-group representation, highlighting the negative attributes of ‘others’ and being silent about or minimizing the negative description of ‘our’ group), (ii) arguments (e.g. the formal presentation of ‘our’ case and ‘we’ having the right to be heard) and (iii) the activity and goal description of the protesters. This forms the framework for the analysis. It is also important to highlight the multicultural identities of the actors and their cultural linguistic activities in order to properly situate the context of the protests.

4.1 Protest Discourse in Nigerian English/Pidgin

Nigerian English (NE) is one of the world’s new Englishes, which is still in the process of being fully domesticated and has since developed some distinct features. These features include the emergence of two distinct varieties (the standard and non-standard). Both varieties feature new words and expressions that are peculiarly Nigerian, which reflect new ways of perceiving and constructing the local multicultural environment (Chiluwa &

Adetunji, 2014). The Standard Nigerian English (SNE) generally associated with highly educated Nigerians is characterized (at the lexico-semantic level) by local idioms, code-switching and loan words. The non-standard variety (non-SNE) (i.e. English produced by the illiterate or half-educated people) is often full of direct translation of the indigenous language and the occurrence of some forms of linguistic ‘hybridization’ (i.e. combination of a word or sense of a word in English with that in the indigenous language (Adegbija, 2004)). In most cases, speakers/writers of both the SNE and non-SNE force certain cultural nuances of language that are peculiar to the Nigerian society into English. However, in terms of structure and lexical forms, SNE is similar to the Standard British English (SBE) except in some cases where speakers/writers have to use loan words and coinages that lack direct English translation, which gives the variety some local ‘flavour’ or ‘colouration’ (Okoro, 1986). At the phonological level, very often, vowels and consonants from a local language are substituted for English ones and stress is replaced by tone. This is clearly illustrated in the posts (in the present study), where ‘the’ is pronounced as ‘d’ and ‘them’/ ‘that’ is realized as ‘dem’ or ‘dat.’ These features are often associated with the non-SNE. It is important to point out here that ‘d’ is also a common abbreviation for ‘the’ in texting or computer-mediated discourse, and may not be viewed as being unique to Nigerian English (NE) (see Chiluiwa, 2008). Jowitt (1991) also confirms category shifts such as reclassification of grammatical categories, insertion of categories and deliberate omissions of some linguistic items in sentences are some of the features of NE grammar, while spelling pronunciation, stress shifts or localization of stress/tones are other features of its phonology. These phonetic variations or ‘errors’ are a function of mother-tongue interference (see Chiluiwa & Adetunji, 2014). Codeswitching is a common feature of both the standard and non-standard Nigerian English and is not viewed as non-standard practice.

The Nigerian pidgin is more widely spoken in Nigeria than the SNE and is in fact a mother tongue for a number of families in some areas and communities (Ofulue, 2004). It currently functions as an important medium of communication at both the local/urban towns and cities for inter-ethnic communication, especially to reach the wider Nigerian society, which could not be reached by English or the local languages such as Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Efik¹ etc. (Ofulue, 2004). Hence, the Nigerian pidgin has also been widely used in Nigerian literature, entertainment, music and the media; hence, became part of the language of the protests on *Facebook*. Since an average Nigerian youth speaks at least two languages, i.e. a version of English/pidgin and a native language, those engaged in online communications often code-switch between the Nigerian pidgin, and a local language, depending on the writer’s cultural and linguistic background. This study however reveals that writers in the protests, code-switch between English and the Nigerian pidgin, rather than the local languages. Most of the post writers deliberately avoided the indigenous languages, which would have expressed ethnic sentiments, because the protests were originally viewed as ‘national’ in the pursuit of ‘national interest’ irrespective of Nigeria’s ethnic diversity. But codeswitching from the local pidgin to English (as in P139 below) not only expresses solidarity but also gives the protesters the freedom to express themselves. It appears easier to switch between English and pidgin

¹ Nigeria is a multilingual society with over 400 languages.

(within sentence boundaries) in order to say what must be said, especially where the speaker/writer has not acquired sufficient English skills to express his thoughts. Also, certain social labels and coinages are better expressed in the local pidgin, where their socio-cultural meanings are more profound and better communicated. This can be said about the use of ‘na wa o’ (explained in section 6.4 below), which lacks direct English translation. Thus, switching between English and pidgin performs two basic important functions in the protests; namely, to express social identification and solidarity with the protesters and secondly, as a means of expressing local or cultural meaning.

5. Methodology

The data consist of text-based posts on *Facebook* presumably written by Nigerians at home (i.e. in the country) and in the Diaspora, comprising individuals, social activists, and civil rights groups. It is of course difficult to conclude that all the post writers are Nigerians since it is possible that writers might include non-Nigerian sympathizers with the Nigerian workers. However, the contents of all the posts in the data express socio-political and cultural issues that are peculiarly Nigerian. Some express identities and sentiments that are also Nigerian; for example one of the group accounts is referred to as ‘Nationwide Anti-fuel Subsidy Removal: Strategies Protests Group,’ which in my opinion was constituted by Nigerian youths. The data were collected from January 1st – 31st, 2012, covering the period of the protests. As at the time of this research only a total of **245** posts were available and obtained for this study from **150** *Facebook* accounts. They consist of posts from individual accounts (i.e. personal posts by individual users, usually through status updates and comments). Some personal accounts were accessible to the researchers during the research. The second category are the group accounts comprising posts representing a group’s opinion or position e.g. that of ‘Occupy Nigeria Group’, ‘Save Nigeria Group’, ‘Nationwide Anti-fuel Subsidy Removal: Strategies Protests Group,’ etc. Table 1 below shows the number of posts obtained from each of the individual and group accounts. The posts are numbered **P1-P245**, (‘P’ represents ‘post’).

The analytical method adopted in the study is basically qualitative with a focus on the contents and meaning of the posts. Hence, the interpretive CDA carried out in the analysis highlights how ideologies play out on the positions of the individual and group protesters on Facebook. Linguistic and discourse, as well as rhetorical strategies applied by the protesters in the posts are analysed.

Table 1: Data in Groups

Type of Account	No of posts	%
Individual	180	73.5
Group	65	26.5
Total	245	100

6.0 Analysis and Discussion

Because of the restricted space for this paper, only a few of the posts that clearly illustrate ideological positions, particularly those that reflect some of the ideological categories enumerated above, e.g. self-identity and actor description, main arguments, activity and goal description etc. are reproduced in the analysis. In these example posts, aspects of the multicultural and plurilingual make-make of Nigeria are highlighted. Heyd & Mair (2013) have also rightly noted that ‘the folk-linguistic discussions’ in the social media involving Nigerians ‘provide an ideal locus to study contact varieties as globalized vernaculars that are particularly used in mediated, mobile, and diasporic contexts...’(p.1).

6.1 Self-Identity and Actor Description

As pointed out above, self identification or actor description is a feature of ideological (protest) discourse. This is where the actor(s) in the discourse define themselves, i.e. where they reveal who they are, where they come from, what their properties are, how they are different from others, what qualifies membership of the group and perhaps, and who their friends and enemies are. In other words this is where ‘we’ and ‘they’ are defined. In the current study, the actors are simply identified as ‘we the Nigerian people’ (P21); ‘we ordinary Nigerians,’ (P82) or the ‘sagacious populace...’ (P113) below:

- P21** We Nigerian people will not stop fighting for what is rightfully ours...
- P82** We Ordinary Nigerians say nooooo
- P113** What a weird saga, and it arouses d consciousness of sagacious populace to voice out with a genuine and unique voice of saying no to fuel subsidy removal...

There is the general topicalization of the ‘we’ in-group in many of the samples, which invariably makes ‘us’ the focal point, and the more important party in the situation. This generally has the potential to direct the reader’s attention to the ‘we’ in-group and possibly manipulates his/her opinion to ‘our’ side, especially by stressing the positive side of ‘us’. Notice that in P113, ‘we’ is described as ‘sagacious populace’ and they possess a ‘genuine and unique voice.’ In the Nigerian context like in some other societies, to be described as ‘ordinary people’ or the ‘populace,’ means that the identified persons belong to the mass population (often categorized as the ‘low class,’ or the ‘suffering masses’) and in the context of this study, they are members of the working class who see themselves as being exploited by the government. So the ‘we’ political in-group in this context are particularly the protesters who not only carry out their protest online but also offline. The protesters claim (though erroneously) that they represent all Nigerians, therefore describe themselves as ‘the people who voted you’ (‘you’ representing President Jonathan). In other words, the actors are the representatives of the Nigerian electorates. This is however misleading because, although the ‘occupy Nigeria’ protests were adjudged by many observers as the most popular and most ‘successful,’ there were still many Nigerians who were simply indifferent and did not participate in the protests for several reasons.

In many of the posts, the Nigerian government is generally constructed negatively as the 'other.' For instance, the government is explicitly and implicitly constructed as corrupt and politically inefficient. (e.g. P19, P191 below). Some of the posts recount the non-accountability and failure of past governments to effectively manage related programmes, especially the history of the embezzlement of public funds was still fresh on their minds (e.g. P70, P146, P223). Thus, negative lexicalization of government activities cuts across many of the posts. For example, the actions of the government are constructed as 'devilish' (e.g. P.73), 'cruel' (e.g. P.52), and 'unfair' (e.g. P.244), while their intentions are construed as a mere plan to 'suffer and punish the poor masses' or to leave them 'to die in abject poverty and hunger' (P.114). These are among the several emphases of 'their' bad property as well as the implicit constructions of the 'other' as wicked and insensitive.

The government are also described as 'embezzlers,' who 'steal our money' (P106). Some of these actions are topicalized or thematized in the posts (e.g. P146) and are used to manipulate public opinion, probably to increase the loss of faith in the Jonathan administration. As a mobilization strategy, (as we shall further see in the analysis below), the workers are supposed to judge the actions of the policy makers from a negative perspective; for example to see the government as mere embezzlers of public funds, or that they are thieves, which should therefore justify the protests (e.g. P146 below). As highlighted in the introduction however, a lot of government officials have already been indicted for illegal personal enrichment over the oil subsidy removal. This shows that the post writers wrote from their background knowledge of the history of corruption in Nigeria. Unfortunately however, the assumed negative actions of the government appear a lot more exaggerated than they really are. As a matter of fact, many of the post writers had actually directly or indirectly supported corrupt government officials in the past (see Chiluiwa, 2012b). For example, when a former governor of Bayelsa state was deported from the U.K. over money laundering, he was received as a hero with pomp and celebration at the airport by his tribesmen. At the present time, the man is still being shielded by his ethnic constituency and party supporters. Interestingly, the present Nigerian President served as a deputy governor under the man in question. Therefore, it is quite difficult in the Nigerian situation, to explain who the 'corrupt government' really refers to, while the so-called corrupt government people are still being supported and shielded on tribal grounds.

P19... The diesel and kerosene have been desubsidised long b4 now, where is the money?

P146 ...you guys have embezzled what is supposed to benefit 150 million Nigerian because of self interest and we didn't complain. Now you are removing subsidy just to achieve the 3 million naira per day food budget for you and sambo² only...

P191.... does subsidy even exist? if it does, d (i.e. 'the' in SNE) money recovered frm it b4 now how has it benefited d ordinary nigerian?

P223 ... truth is; the people dnt trust the govt at all to have an aorta of faith in it. hw many times has d govt failed us? if a path is endlessly fruitless why follow it forth?

² 'Sambo' in P146 refers to Nigeria's Vice President, Namadi Sambo

Due to the multi-ethnic and multi-party divergences of Nigeria therefore, the ‘we’ in-group is much more complicated because it is actually uncertain who the ‘we’ represents. During the protests, several people had different opinions about, and attitudes towards the demonstrations. For example, there were those who opposed the protests on the basis of their support to the Jonathan administration and the assumed economic merits of the subsidy removal. There were also those who dissociated themselves from the strikes and pledged their support for the subsidy removal on the basis of mere ethnic commitment and solidarity with Goodluck Jonathan being the first Nigerian president from the ‘south-south’ (Niger Delta) region. There were others who were simply skeptical of the intentions of the NLC (Nigeria Labour Congress); the TUC (Trade Union Congress) and civil rights groups who were the organizers of the protests.

Those that supported the subsidy removal dissociated themselves from the main actors in the protests because some of them believed that the fuel subsidy removal was capable of moving the ‘country forward in the right direction’ (P160) or was likely to ‘revive the economy’ (P121). As good as these expectations were however, it is still possible that many of them are either the ruling party supporters or had been influenced by the argument that the subsidy encouraged government corruption. Their role in the protests was mainly to dissuade the protesters and make them see the reason why the protests were unnecessary. This is reflected in the posts below:

P160 ...my support still remains for the removal of subsidy. In short, i need GEJ's Phone number. I want to send him a pro-subsidy removal solidarity message. This country must move forward in the right direction.

P121 ...To say the fact, I am in total support of what the Federal Government is doing now to revive Nigerian economy...

P64. I have always believed in ur administration and I still do, don't ever change ur mind abt this fuel subsidy bcos it's the best thing that has ever happened to this country...

P62. I'm an economist, i support d removal of fuel subsidy becos³ i know it will bring a better Nigeria...

Interestingly, the writers of the above posts, perhaps realizing that they were in the minority, avoided the inclusive pronoun ‘we,’ rather they used the personal pronoun ‘I’ as the above posts show. This implies that their views and attitudes towards the protests were essentially personal; thus, did not pretend to speak for the entire Nigerian masses. In P62, for example, the writer says: ‘I’m an economist...’ showing that he/she wrote from his/her experience as an economist rather than from a background of group ideology. ‘GEJ’ in P160 above is an abbreviation for ‘Goodluck Abele Jonathan.’ It is also used as an acronym ‘Gej’- a pet name that is symbolic of ethnic sentiment or solidarity for Jonathan, often used by the youth supporters of the President.

³ ‘becos’ is an abbreviation of ‘because,’ which is common with digital English spelling and is not unique to Nigerian English

As highlighted above, some of the actors also disagreed with the protesters, and viewed the demonstrations as sponsored plan to discredit the present administration by the northern political mafia. Posts written by these people, rather than identify with the protests, express solidarity with Jonathan on the basis of his being the first Nigerian president from the ‘south-south.’ Thus, these post writers totally disagreed with the supposed goal of achieving a better life for the average Nigerian as the protesters had envisaged. Their position is however understandable, because when Goodluck Jonathan became the President in 2010, he fulfilled the aspirations of most southerners who thought that the domination of the north in Nigerian politics was finally broken. Interestingly, the writer of P117 below argues that if the north and south-western leaders (‘Northerners and Yorubas’) imposed sufferings on Nigerians for decades, then, a ‘Niger Deltan’ doing so for the first time, should be accepted in good faith.

P106. President Goodluck is a very intelligent man. We cannot fold our hands while the embezzlers will steal our money all in the name of subsidy and expect federal govt to pay billions of naira on their behalf.

P117 ...When Northerners and Yorubas ruled us for decades and imposed suffering on the entire nation where was labour union? The first time a Niger Deltan is ruling your people want to kill my president with stress...

This argument, while sounding funny and unreasonable, gives a significant insight to how strong the ethnic divide and sentiment in Nigeria is. ‘We’ in P106 actually refers to the southern Niger Delta; the northerners are the ‘embezzlers’ who steal ‘our money,’ again, highlighting the assumed other’s negative quality. However, there have been no official statistical proofs so far to confirm that the north is solely responsible for Nigeria’s economic problems. At different times, both the northern and southern past presidents have been accused of corruption. During the strikes, demonstrations in the northern part of the country were as radical as they were in the south, suggesting that the northerners also desired a better life. According to Chilwa (2012b), Nigeria is ‘one nation’ by institutional forces, but in reality people commit their loyalty to in-group ethnic sentiments.

Not only were those opposed to the protests ethnically or politically motivated, some others viewed the protests as unnecessary and counter-productive. These people seem to continue their campaign even after the protests had begun and demanded that the strike be called off. Their position mainly stems from the fear of violence and the dangers these pose to human life and property. With reference to the posts below, the strike was construed as likely ‘to destroy Nigeria’ rather than save it (P81).

P81 For heaven sake wat is des strike for 2 save nigeria or 2 destroy nigeria, u pple had better av a rethink and call off des strike nw (Save Nigeria Group Facebook Official page)

P72. If NLC/TUC leaders and family members will not come out to the streets with their mats, water bottle and also wrapper & be ready to sleep days and weeks/months on the streets why will they tell you the common Nigerian man to come out & fight for your right & by this getting killed while they & their family take their own share of the money & stay put to their homes. Be Wise. Desist from

any form of Protest. Your life is more precious than Fuel Subsidy. Share this to everyone. (January 10 at 8:49pm)⁴

Again, it is arguable that these actors would generally hide under the ‘play it cool’ attitude to sustain their political and tribal commitments. It is also possible that among this group of non-protesters was the Igbo population (made up of traders and business people), whose businesses were endangered by the protracted strike. During the protests, shops and business centres that opened for business were vandalized and the owners mercilessly dealt with. Cars found on the streets/road between 8 am and 4 p.m. were burnt and their owners beaten up. Road-side traders and commercial buses were only allowed to operate from 6 p.m. Thus, at a point during the protests, life became unbearable for the common man and some of the protesters who were vehement at the beginning began to reconsider their positions; in fact, some withdrew and began to call for dialogue. Unfortunately, Igbos (many of them) have since lost faith in social revolutions through violent actions since the failed Biafran revolution (see Chiluiwa, 2012b). So, many of them doubted the success of the protests and the intentions of the organizers. According to Uwalaka, (2003) the Nigerian civil war crippled the average Nigerian, especially the Igbo from attempting a revolution like those in Tunisia and Libya where people took their future in their hands. That is why Igbos and other ethnic/party loyalists will generally subscribe to patience in times of protests, rather than revolutionary alternatives.

6.2 Main Arguments

Two main arguments are clearly presented in the posts; firstly, the subsidy removal rather than develop the economy meant further hardship and sufferings to the average Nigerian. Secondly, the subsidy, regardless of all else, was wrongly timed. While the government on the other hand had argued that money derived from the subsidy would be used to develop infrastructure, the protesters thought otherwise; P60 for example says: ‘no one is ready to see things your own way, unless you listen to the people that voted you...’ Thus, the government’s argument that the subsidy was ‘a blessing in disguise’ was rejected and viewed as a clever way to remove the people’s ‘national cake’ from them (P80 below). ‘National cake’ is a metaphor for the assumed share of the oil wealth by the south, particularly the Niger Delta, who has been viewed as the ‘marginalized’ minority ethnic group, despite being the host of the Nigerian oil based economy (see Chiluiwa, 2011b). In the past, Nigerian leaders have been accused of personally enriching themselves and being more committed to ethnic loyalty than national interest; thus, the sharing of the ‘national cake’ had been lopsided. According to Nkolika (2007), ethnic nationalities support the ‘one Nigeria’ political arrangement merely because of what they think they would gain from the sharing of Nigeria’s oil wealth and not for any patriotic reason or psychological bond with other ethnic groups. Hence, whenever any group’s access to the accumulation process is restricted or denied, such groups accuse the government of being ‘marginalized’ and threaten to break away from Nigeria (Chiluiwa, 2012d). This is where the argument stems from, because rather than seeing the subsidy

⁴ The variety of English in P72 above is an example of non standard Nigerian English (non-SNE). Post writers wrote in SNE and non-SNE.

removal as something that is likely to be economically beneficial, they see it as a restriction to their access to individual benefits.

Secondly, the protesters argued that the timing of the subsidy was much more devastating. Some of these arguments are reflected in the posts below:

P59. 70 percent of Nigerians are ready for revolution and u knw wat dis means, so pls provide food, water, good roads, etc and not to make lyf worse.

P60 no one is ready to see things your way unless you listen to the people that voted you, we say no to fuel subsidy removal

P80 Mr President, how could you take away the only National cake of d masses and stl cal it a blessing in disguise?

P244 ...this subsidy removal at this time when everyone is trying to survive January is unfair.

P104The fuel subsidy is fine but ur timing is wrong.

P95 ...we know the removal of fuel subsidy is a great change for us...but you did it at the wrong time maybe you should adjust the time....

P181 ...yes the timing is wrong considering this is January.

January is often viewed by most Nigerians as a difficult month because it follows immediately after the Christmas holidays when most salary earners might have spent all their savings. As a form of culturally shared norms among Nigerians, January is viewed as a month when most people struggle to survive; therefore introducing an economic measure at this time was viewed as insensitive and wicked on the part of the government. As a matter of fact, this added more vigour to the rejection of the subsidy removal. Little wonder, the policy was metaphorically described in P52 below as a ‘cruel new year gift.’

6.3 Activity and Goal Description

The activities/social actions and goals of the online protesters happen in the form of social mobilization and giving information updates to protesters (both online and offline). The posts in the data presented below not only express the disapproval of Nigerians and their efforts to resist the implementation of the controversial policy; they also reflect the description of the protests (i.e. resistance; saying ‘no’ to subsidy removal/fuel hike and ‘occupy’). The goals include ‘regaining Nigeria’, achieving a ‘revolution’ and ‘a new Nigeria.’ Hence, the protesters demanded the President’s resignation. They also demanded the resignation of the Minister of Finance (P.50), who is rhetorically told to ‘go back 2 her kitchen.’ The Nigerian protesters might have been encouraged by the outcomes of the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya where protesters were massively involved and targeted at a change in government. But the Nigerian situation was more of an industrial action rather than revolutionary demonstrations of the Arab Spring. However, the posts below show that the protesters, in strong terms, demanded a change of government, which was not their original primary objective.

P48 Its right 4 him 2 resign, we ar nt hapy of his atitude, (January 7 at 6:25pm) ·

P50 Let him resign nd go nd join his kinsmen in canoe making he kno nothing abt our economy. Let okonjo nwela go back 2 her kitchen. Struggle continues

P52...Jonathan given us cruel new year gift or what do you think about this fuel price 141naira?

P114. Mr President decides to choose removal of fuel subsidy just to suffer and punish the poor masses that voted him into power...leaving them to die in abject poverty and hunger.

P73. Mr President, i am afraid for your insensitive action as to this devilish oil deregulation. Since u have refused peaceful revolution, u will surely get violent version of it or Military coup, wc everway⁵ ur term in office is over, u have expired. (January 10 at 8:53pm)

As good as these goals sound, they are still obviously quite ambitious, especially because they were based on the assumption that most Nigerians supported the protests. But the outcome has proved the protesters wrong. The tone of anger and frustration runs through all the samples, reflecting the general mood of the protests.

P33 GUYS, it's now or never. The times create the Youth the Youth create the time

P35 say no to fuel subsidy removal...we must resist it now...

P55 Nigerians must occupy and regain Nigeria. Say no to fuel hike. Bad luck must go!

P85 we will protest until there is a new Nigeria.

P88 NO GOING BACK, NO SURRENDER until our aims is achieved.

P224 ...Bliv me I tink d tym has com 4 a terrible revolution in our dr land n I stand 4 it.

P245 ...Occupy Nigeria acting as the embodiment of emergent new united Nigerian thinking will pave the way for enduring democracy. We will not be afraid to ask questions anymore neither shall we slumber while our rights are stolen from us.

WE SHALL NOT BE MOVED!

The style and language forms in P224 and P245 appear to differ significantly. While both of them are Facebook posts, P224 illustrates the kind of 'spelling revolution' and abbreviations that are typical of digital communication in English. P245 illustrates the formal SNE without any spelling manipulations. Because Facebook posts are a form of text-based asynchronous participants adopt the spelling patterns that are typical of text messages.

Information updates on the progress of the protests were constantly made available to the protesters. Again using the local Nigerian pidgin (as discussed above), the writer of P82 below offers to use SMS to send information to other offline protesters.

P38 Occupy Enugu peaceful protests set for Monday - 9th January- spread the word and assist your comrades in Enugu (Strategies & protests Facebook page on January 5, 2012)

P82 Let's print t-shirts and send sms to Nigerians to join us. Me I fit handle the sms o---- make una leme knw what's up. January 5 at 6:41pm. (Save Nigeria group Official Facebook Page)

P30 Detsu nupe received some boos from the protesters when they marched 2 d emir palace in BIDA town of Niger stat. D protesters also took d local govt chairman 2 join d protest (Strategies & protests Facebook Page on January 10,2012)

P110 Yes, Monday. 'MONDAY' M, stands for 'make sure you protest,' O – 'occupy Nigeria and occupy yourself,' N – 'no going back,' D – 'do not give up,' A – 'act fast and,' and Y – 'your right is your power.'

⁵ 'wc everway' in P73 is not a common Nigerian expression, rather a coinage by the writer that negatively refers to the Nigerian president.

Some creative linguistic/persuasive strategies as in P41 and P110 reflect the passion of the protesters where protesters were told to ‘move for change,’ ‘lose no hope’ or ‘come out...’ etc Some of the information updates include information sent to protesters on the activities of the government (federal and state) to curtail the demonstrations. This is reflected in P29 and P31 below.

P29. Breaking New: reporting live from NTA please be advised that the FG announced that tomorrow Wednesday curfew from 6am to 8am in LAGOS... Hamm, this Govt is drumming for war!! (Posted by **Kanu Uchechukwu** on the Nationwide Anti-fuel Subsidy Removal: Strategies & protests Facebook Page on January 10, 2012)

P31Kano State Government has imposed a dusk to dawn curfew in the stae. Farouk Jibril who made the announcement in is office said the curfew wl start from 6pm to 8am daily to remain enforce until further notice...Meanwhile, people are still at the silver jubilee square in Kano protesting. (Posted by Aminu Dakata . S.)

6.4 Linguistic and Discourse Strategies

Some linguistic and discourse strategies were applied by the online protesters to describe themselves and their actions, especially in the (negative) representation of the Nigerian government. Both explicit and implicit representations of government’s actions were achieved using negative words (e.g. wicked); some discourse strategies are also used to construct negative actions. For example, codeswitching, pidginization and the use loan words (from local languages), are used to heighten negative public assumption of the government. For example, ‘Kirikiri’ in P43 below, is a prison in Lagos, mainly for notorious criminals, which is used here to imply that the government are made up of notorious criminals, only good for the prisons of the worst kind; again enunciating a negative idea of the ‘other.’ ‘Na wa o’ in P.139, is a Nigerian pidgin expression, which is usually said when the speaker (or writer) is highly disgusted and lacks words to express his/her disappointment. This expression has no direct English equivalent, and is used in this context to express disgust for the government’s policy, also described in the post as ‘a disgrace.’ ‘Oga’ in P202 is a Yoruba word for ‘master’ or ‘boss,’ often used in a derogatory sense for a despot, which in this context represent the government.

The Nigerian pidgin are used in the posts, not only to advance online activism but also to express solidarity with the protesters. In this context, ‘dem’ (i.e. ‘them’ P119) are referred as ‘foolish people’ while ‘us’ (the protesters) are the good people. The writer of P58 (writing in pidgin), explicitly refers to ‘dat man’ (i.e. the President) as ‘mad,’ i.e. ‘Dat man dey mad’ (that man is mad).

P10 That one na una business. January 18 at 5:29pm

P43 ‘They shld be taken to ‘kirikiri’

P58 Dat man dey mad ni..mst it b nw jona. January 12 at 8:52am ·

P119 its no more #OCCUPYNIGERIA.....its #SHUTDOWNNIGERIA...na den dem go know say we serious...foolish people.

P139 ‘Na wa o..... So na person get ds disgrace of d highest order...’)

P202 (‘my oga. how tins na...’)

7. Conclusion

This study has revealed the extent to which Nigerians have put to use the virtual space provided by social media networks to carry out and mobilized online protests. The Internet has so far enabled freedom of speech and social activism without consequences, especially in Nigeria where for now, there is no censorship on new media communications. Social critics, civil rights groups, civil societies and political groups are beginning to apply the new forms of communication and interactions aided by computer technologies to air their views. This was impossible during the military regime in Nigeria. As the current study has shown, it was possible for protesters in Lagos to network and mobilise, strategise, and maintain information updates with one another and with other protesters in other parts of the country. Hence, the social media enhances not only social group online activities but can as well initiate and sustain offline events. Although the goals of the Nigerian protests were not completely achieved, the power of social media cannot be underrated in Nigeria considering their impacts in North African countries. As pointed out above, there is a growing Internet literacy and use in Nigeria with many average Nigerian youths capable of initiating online discussion groups. And many youths are also increasingly aggressive in the use of social media to engage in sociopolitical debates and critique government actions. Moreover, there is no ruling out the possibility that many Nigerian online activists are gradually more in touch with their counterparts in North Africa or elsewhere, than ever before, whose influences cannot be underestimated. Hence, the ‘occupy Nigeria’ protests may not have been successful in forcing the government to retract its fuel subsidy policy, but the activities of the online protesters were indeed impactful. Therefore, online activism/protests hold a promise of a positive result in future.

This study has also further shown the potentials of social media networks to reflect aspects of language use, as well as intercultural communication. This is reflected in discourse strategies such as code-switching, the use of loanwords and the use of the local pidgin. The use of such multicultural linguistic forms in social media has since become an area of research interest to scholars in language and communication studies. The power of the social media to enable language variations and sustain all kinds of language-based actions facilitates the generation of the various discourse strategies that are possible in online interactions. In the Nigerian case, the indigenous language strategies applied by the protesters to express their grievances also reflects the tendency of language to mediate its socio-cultural context. Unfortunately, studies in language in the new media communication is just emerging in Nigeria, with interests in the sociolinguistics and pragmatics of online discourses (e.g. Ifukor 2010); the current study is therefore likely to motivate further studies on the use of social media in social activism/protests and on the use of uniquely local multicultural resources in intercultural communication. From the Nigerian experience, it is quite clear that *Facebook* has increasingly become a popular medium for socio-political and intercultural communication, especially with the growing civil responses to political developments.

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