Analysis of Hate Speech in Responses to Two Hausa Online Media Outlets on the Spread of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT
Effective communication through the medium of indigenous languages serves as an invaluable instrument that facilitates every language's right to information during pandemics. Different online media outlets used Nigerian languages to disseminate information that could enhance the success of public health measures targeted at mitigating the impact of COVID-19. However, not all of the audience absorbed the messages positively. This study attempts to analyze the use of hate speech in the comments of readers of Hausa online news items on **Legit Hausa** and **BBC Hausa** that responded to news items on COVID-19. To achieve this, the readers' comments were purposively sampled and analyzed based on the pragmatic principles of politeness and peaceful communication. In addition, systemic functional grammar was used to explicate the grammatical features of the analyzed linguistic elements of the comments written in Hausa. It was found that the comments were not only replete with inflammatory language – stripping the users of the status of communicative humanizer – inimical to preventive measures against COVID-19 but also capable of widening the opinion divide. Furthermore, most comments analyzed flout the principles of Hausa spelling and sentence construction. The study thus recommends that linguistic activists should consistently advocate for the use of Nigerian languages that conform to linguistic norms and the principles of peaceful communication that would curtail misinformation and division in the course of pandemic control.

Keywords: COVID-19, hate speech, Hausa, online media, pandemic

INTRODUCTION
        Languages have fundamental rights, one of which is the right to information. It is for this reason that mainstream and social media allow actors to absorb and diffuse information on a plethora of fields of discourse in different languages. Online media platforms have allowed the audience to comment on the substance of the news item or react to comments made by other members of the audience (Lewis, 2003; Thurlow, 2018). But then, news items and the audience's comments can sometimes be injurious because they are based on bias and post-truth (Bender, Davenport, Drager, & Fedler, 2019; McDougall, 2019). For instance, hate speech manifests copiously on the Internet and can be directed against different target groups, in a wide variety of contexts, and expressed via different linguistic forms (Geyer, Bick & Kleene, 2022). This is because language serves the role of creating infodemic, transmitting, and translating both accurate and inaccurate information which could create positive and negative impacts (Benlakdar, 2021). This could lead to a situation whereby the face of the

interlocutors on the online chat on the news item or a group of persons being threatened thus flouting the principles of peaceful communication.

The COVID-19 pandemic generated a lot of news reportage from 2020 to 2022. While some expressed distrust of the authenticity of the pandemic, some projected a lot of conspiracy theories that are not necessarily evidence-based on the pandemic. A conspiracy theory that is coated with political or racial bias can stoke hatred that will hardly ever dissipate, no matter the counter-facts presented; thus impeding social harmony and providing an opportunity for beneficiaries of the political economy of conflict and highly opinionated individuals to organize themselves around a divisive cause (Danesi, 2023). Of interest in this study is how the spread of the pandemic and its reportage on Hausa language online media platforms stirred the use of hate speech from the audience that responded to the news items or comments made by other members of the audience on the news items.

Relying on Austin's and Culpeper's models of Speech Act and Impoliteness Theory, respectively, Agwuocha (2020) conducted a study that analyzed social media data related to COVID-19 to establish the intensity of the toxicity of language use and its effect on peacebuilding. The study found that hate speech was used in the data and concluded that the use of hate speech can trigger violence, unrest, stigmatization, and racism against the target people. While Agwuocha's data were presented in English, the focus of this study is on data presented in the Hausa language in response to the spread of the coronavirus.

Benjamin (2021) also conducted a study on the use of language in the media concerning the spread of COVID-19. The study focuses on the relationship of humanistic psychology to the rhetoric of former United States of America President, Donald Trump, on the severe crisis of the coronavirus pandemic. The study found that Trump used divisive political and racist rhetoric on the spread of the pandemic which is linked to a rise in xenophobic violence against Asian Americans who he blamed for the spread of the virus. Similarly, a study by Snoussi (2022) reveals the manifestations of hate speech in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, exposing many tweets that contain unreliable news that promote conspiracy theories that fueled hatred in the United States and southern Brazil. Some of the tweets were from prominent world leaders.

While Benjamin's and Snoussi's studies focus on the rhetoric of former President Trump and prominent world leaders respectively, this study targets the responses of Nigerian citizens on the spread of the virus.

The xenophobic rant on Asian Americans may not be unconnected with the fact the virus in the context of this study has its origin in China. In their study, Piller, Zhang, and Li (2021) found that the COVID-19 pandemic has particularly brought anti-Chinese and anti-Asian racism to the fore which implies that COVID-19 had an inimical impact on relationship building by eroding the trust and comfort that emergency communication supposed to enhance. In Nigeria, the spread of the virus also affected the tenets of emergency and peaceful communication as a result of the use of hate speech by different actors.

The study conducted by Benlakdar (2021) reveals that the COVID-19 crisis brought to light evident underlying structural inequalities and fundamental problems in various areas of social, economic, civil, and political life, and escalated racism and racial discrimination, which exist in many parts of the world; as well as protests by religious leaders against government COVID-19 measures in respect of closure of places of worship. The communication used in most cases flouts the principles of peaceful communication. In Nigeria, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome used misinformation to advance his anti-COVID-19 conspiracies, debunking its existence and regarding claims about its reality as the biggest deception ever (Odaudu-Erameh, 2021).

In Nigeria, global public health communication during the COVID-19 pandemic provided significant inclusion of linguistic majorities in access to timely high-quality information given that information on the pandemic is disseminated in Hausa, Igbo, and

Yoruba. But then, this also triggered an infodemic via the use of hate speeches. Promoters of hate speech and conspiracy theories are vocal defenders of their positions and scornfully deride people who tend to disagree with their submissions (Cassam, 2019). Given that they are sinister, fiendish, and cruel, hate speeches posit a vast network of locations that violate peaceful communication (Hagen, 2022). It is in light of this that this study is designed to analyze hate speech in responses to two Hausa online media outlets on the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHOD

The primary aim of the study is to analyze the use of hate speech in the comments of readers of Hausa online news items on **Legit Hausa** and **BBC Hausa** that responded to news items on COVID-19. Consequently, eight (8) comments made by the audience in the Hausa language were purposively sampled, translated into the English language, and analyzed based on the pragmatic principles of politeness and peaceful communication, and systemic functional grammar. Peaceful communication which approves nonkilling linguistics requires one to employ languages for peace-making potential given that languages can be employed as instruments of harm thus the need to humanize uses of language to assure respect for human dignity and social inclusion (Friedrich & Matos, 2012).

The interpersonal metafunction aspect of systemic functional grammar deals with the speaker's relationships. These are basically of two types. First is the system of 'mood' which explicates the relationships that the speaker establishes with his addressees, and second, the system of 'modality' which expounds the relationships the speaker establishes with the content of his message (Banks, 2019; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Li, Lui & Fung, 2020). Emphasis was placed on whether the analyzed extracts are indicative (declarative and interrogative) or imperative. The study also attempted to indicate infelicities in the Hausa extracts and rewrote them based on principles of Standard Hausa syntax.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Content analysis

Excerpts from https://hausa.legit.ng/1323795-yanzu-yanzu-cutar-covid-19-ta-bulla-jihar-filato.html (23 April 2020)

The headline from Legit reads:
Original: Cutar Covid-19 ta bulla Jihar Filato
English Translation: Covid-19 case recorded in Plateau State

Below are some of the responses to the headline and the analyses:
Data 1:

Original: Akan bakayi Imani da Allah ba ko, mutum ne ko jarrabawa daga Allah,
Edited version: *A kan baka yi imani da Allah ba ko? Mutum ne ko jarrabawa daga Allah?*
English Translation: Because you do not believe in the will of God. Is it man-made or a test from God?

The post is a reply to a post. The response is written in a way that does not conform to the orthography of Hausa. For instance, 'a kan' was written as a single word 'akan'. In addition, 'baka yi' was written as 'bakayi'. The response is badly punctuated. The comma was used where the question mark was supposed to be used when one compares the original and the edited versions. Based on the principle of systemic functional grammar, both sentences belong to the indicative type. They are interrogative. However, the interrogative sentences are rhetorical as used in this context thus indirectly declarative.

The use of "Akan bakayi Imani da Allah ba ko," [*A kan baka yi imani da Allah ba ko?*/ Because you do not believe in the will of God.] flouts the principle of politeness thus not a type of peaceful communication. Communicating peacefully requires that one does not

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assume the state of self-righteousness. It is apposite to underscore that strategic systems of politeness are characterized by how one uses language to actualize one's objective of communicating via mitigating face threats and assuring empathy or respect for the worth and dignity of the fellow interlocutor (Mills, 2017). Given that the interlocutor whose post received the analyzed response felt that their face was threatened, they replied in Data 2.

Data 2:

> Original: Hmmm ima muna malik, Shugaban masu imani, Amma ai jami'an tsaron Plateau kar ban kudi sukeyi awuce koh, Lauyan security
> Edited version: *Hmmm Imamu na Malik shugaban masu imani. Amma ai jami'an tsaron Filato karban kudi suke yi a wuce koh. Lauyan security.*
> English Translation: Hmmm Iman Malki, leaders of the faithful. Security actors in Plateau State accept bribes to allow people to flout the restriction order. The counsel of security actors.

The original post has a lot of grammatical infelicities. For instance, 'ima muna' was written instead of "Imamu na", 'malik' was written instead of 'Malik', "kar ban" was written instead of 'Karban', 'awuce' instead of "a wuce" etc. when one compares the original and the edited versions. Based on the principle of systemic functional grammar, all the sentences belong to the indicative type. They are declarative sentences.

The use of "Hmmm ima muna malik, Shugaban masu imani" [*Hmmm Imamu na Malik shugaban masu imani/*Hmmm Iman Malki, leaders of the faithful.] and "Lauyan security" [*Lauyan security.*/The counsel of security actors.] indicate that the interlocutor felt their face being threatened thus replying in a way that does not engender peaceful communication. Given that impoliteness attempts to damage a fellow interlocutor's identity or identity, it can trigger negative responses like anger, disgust, upset, etc. (Culpeper, 2011). This can be the reason that informed the impolite response from the interlocutor in Data 2. This implies that communicating non-peacefully can trigger impolite responses sometimes beyond the proportion of what is being replied to.

Data 3:

> Original: … idan ta ko inaa gaskiyacee ta kano karya cee mu munsan halin gwamnan muu akan kudii.
> Edited version: *... idan ta ko ina gaskiya ce, ta Kano karya ce. Mu mun san halin gwamnanmu a kan kudi.*
> English Translation: … even if the cases reported in other states are true, that of Kano is not true. Because we know our governor's greedy tendencies.

The original post was written in such a way that the orthographic rules of Hausa are flouted. For instance, 'ina' was written as 'inaa', "gaskiya ce" as 'gaskiyacee', "mun san" as 'munsan' etc. when one compares the original and the edited versions. The sentences are declarative thus they belong to the indicative type of systemic functional grammar.

The use of "… munsan halin gwamnan muu akan kudii" [*Mu mun san halin gwamnanmu a kan kudi/*Because we know our governor's greedy tendencies] is not an act of peaceful communication because it threatens the face of the subject (governor) in questions. As it is with impolite utterances, it may trigger negative feelings in the minds of the supporters of the said governor. This is because, in principle, individuals crave the recognition, appreciation, and approval of their self-image or personality and feel comfortable when their rights are not imposed upon thus having the liberty to act freely as well as to claim their own space (Hyland, 2019; Warner, 2023). Only peaceful communication can enhance this. In the case of Data 3, the analyzed excerpt is impolite and could affect the worth and dignity of the governor.

Data 4:

Original: Ba abinda zamucewa gwamnatin pilato sai allah ya isa an kulle mu agida dan zalunci dama sunaso sushigo da itane in ba hakaba taya za ayi ankulle adiga barin anashigowa sunasane.

Edited version: *Ba abin da zamu ce wa gwamnatin Filato sai Allah ya isa. An kulle mu a gida dan zalunci. Dama suna so su shigo da ita ne. Idan ba haka ba ta yaya za a yi an kulle a dinga bari ana shigowa suna sane.*

English Translation: All we have to say to the Plateau State Government is God shall judge them. The lockdown has been imposed on us unjustly. They want an outbreak of the pandemic in the state. If not why is it that despite the lockdown people are allowed to enter the state?

The original post in Data 4 contains a lot of structures that do not conform with the orthography and grammar of the Hausa language. For instance, "abin da" was written as 'abinda', "zamu ce wa" as 'zamucewa', "a gida" as 'agida' etc. when one compares the original and the edited versions.

The use of "Ba abinda zamucewa gwamnatin pilato sai allah ya isa" [*Ba abin da zamu ce wa gwamnatin Filato sai Allah ya isa/* All we have to say to the Plateau State Government is God shall judge them] flouts the principle of peaceful communication. This is because it threatens the face of the government depicting it as insensitive and non-responsive. Audiences respond to news discourse differently. This is because news discourse can modify the behavior, ideas, and beliefs of the audience, government, and key institutions based on their disposition to the piece of discourse (Bednarek & Caple, 2019). For this reason, it is expected that the audience when posting in response to a news discourse or co-audience's posts should use a legitimation strategy. Legitimation strategy is a process that involves making a piece of discourse seem reasonable, normal, or right through the use of tactful linguistic instruments (Baker, 2023). The writer of excerpt 4 did not use a legitimation strategy. This can stir backlashes that engender divisive tendencies thus endangering peaceful co-existence.

Excerpts from https://www.bbc.com/hausa/labarai-52090113 (30 March, 2020)

Original Version: Sheikh Jingir ya sauya matsayinsa kan coronavirus

A baya dai Ash-Sheikh Jingir a wani bidiyo ya soki matakan da gwamnati ta dauka na hana Sallar Juma'a da ma rufe Ka'abah da Saudiyya ta yi, yana mai cewa Yahudawa ne suka kirkiro coronavirus domin hana Musulmai aikin Hajji.

English translation: Sheikh Jingir Changes Position on Corona Virus

Ash-Sheikh Jingir has recently in a video criticizing the government's order banning congregational Friday prayers and the closure of Ka'abah by the Saudi government stating that the Jews created the coronavirus to stop Muslims from performing Hajj.]

Below are some of the responses to the headline and the analyses:

Data 5:

Original: Andai ji kunya wallahi yakamata yagane cewa babu wani malami da yafi karfin hukuma sannan in yanajin shi wani mai karfi ne toh yafito ranar juma'a mai zuwa yayi sallar juma'a mugani in kuma yakasa toh yanuna cewa yana tsoron gwamnati.

Edited Version: *An dai ji kunya. Wallahi ya kamata ya gane cewa babu wani malami da ya fi karfin hukuma. Sannan in yana jin shi wani mai karfi ne to ya fito ranar juma'a mai zuwa yayi sallar juma'a mu gani in kuma ya kasa toh ya nuna cewa yana tsoron gwamnati.*

English translation: What a shame. To be candid, he should note that no one is above constituted authorities. In addition, if he feels he is above the law, he should lead congregational Friday prayer next week. If not, he is a coward.

The original post in Data 5 has some orthographical and grammatical infelicities as far as the Hausa language is concerned. For instance, 'Andai' was written instead of "an dai", "yakamata yagane" instead of "ya kamata ya gane", "yanajin" instead of "yana jin" etc. when

one compares the original and the edited versions. The sentences are declarative thus part of the indicative type of systemic functional grammar.

The use of "Andai ji kunya" [*An dai ji kunya./*What a shame.] flouts the principle of peaceful communication even in intercultural settings. In addition, the remaining sentences are irrelevant to the subject (field) of discourse. This implies that some members of the audience do not take time to read the contents of the news discourse or the post of co-audience before posting the comments. Social media can be used as a counter-narrative concerning fake news and the mobilization of offline activism and protest for a just cause (Mayr, 2019). Even though, conspiracy theories through hate speech claim to distort reality, they can be deconstructed through counter-narrative by applying the power of knowledge. This is because knowledge produces power effects which can be translated into making a person control their behavior more meticulously against delusional positions (Hristov, 2019). But then, it has to be done based on the principle of tact. This is because language is culture-sensitive (Bennet, 2013; Pennycook & Otsuji, 2020). In Hausa culture, an Islamic scholar is supposed not to be addressed in a language that appears to lampoon him. Such is impolite.

Data 6:

> Original: Dama Yana neman ajishi ne a duniya kawai ba wani abuba, dama irinsu sunaso ne asan sunada mabiya saboda idan akwai abinda za'a samu na gudumawa ya shigo to hannunsu kawai…
>
> Edited Version: *Dama yana neman a ji shi ne a duniya kawai ba wani abu ba. Dama irinsu suna so ne a san suna da mabiya saboda idan akwai abin da za a samu na gudumawa ya shigo to hannunsu kawai…*
>
> English translation: This indicates that he was just seeking cheap relevance and recognition. The motive of his type is to show the world that they have a cult followership to attract humanitarian support.

The original post in Data 6 flouts a lot of Hausa grammatical and orthographical principles. For instance, "…Yana neman ajishi …" was written instead of "…yana neman aji shi …", 'sunada' instead of "suna da" etc. as well as punctuation infelicities when one compares the original and the edited versions. The sentences are of the indicative type (declarative) in systemic functional grammar.

The use of the assertion "Dama Yana neman ajishi ne a duniya kawai ba wani abuba" [*Dama yana neman a ji shi ne a duniya kawai ba wani abu ba./* This indicates that he was just seeking cheap relevance and recognition.] is speculative and flouts the principle of peaceful communication. In Hausa culture, it is threatening to speculate on what one is not certain about. Hausa is the language of wider communication in the northwest and northeast of Nigeria and some parts of north-central Nigeria. As such, it provides an opportunity for people from diverse ethnolinguistic backgrounds to experience communicative unity and display their attitudes, feelings, and emotions. But then, it has to be done within the dictate of Hausa culture to ensure peaceful communication (Jaszczolt, 2023).

Excerpts from https://www.bbc.com/hausa/labarai-51889772 (14 March 2020)

> Trump ya ce a koma ga Allah kan Coronavirus
> Corona Virus: Trump calls on people to turn to God.

Below are some of the responses to the headline and the analyses:
Data 7:

> Original: Hmmmm abin mamaki, shin dama Donald trump yasan allah?
> Edited Version: *Hmmmm abin mamaki, shin dama Donald Trump ya san Allah?*
> English translation: Hmmmm, amazing! So Donald Trump knows God exists?

The original post has two grammatical and orthographical infelicities as far as Hausa language is concerned. They are 'yasan' was written instead of "ya san" and 'allah' was written instead of 'Allah' when one compares the original and the edited versions. The sentence is interrogative in the indicative type of systemic functional grammar.

The use of "shin dama Donald trump yasan allah?" [*shin dama Donald Trump ya san Allah?/* So Donald Trump knows God exists?] flouts the principle of peaceful communication because it is hate speech. The fact that Donald Trump uses brash, insulting, and aggressive language (Sclafani, 2018) does not mean that one should threaten his face. The implication of hate speech and non-peaceful communication is it stirs further non-peaceful communication. This can lead to the formation of hate ideologies and their expression through supremacist talks and narratives. It should be noted that ideologies are formed in various forms of action and interaction, and their reproduction is often embedded in organizational and institutional contexts (Van Dijk, 2005), That is why posts or audience responses could be antagonistic manifesting simple belligerence, negative and sarcastic reformulation, devil's advocacy including the *agent provocateur* tactic, embedding (hiding) the accusation or dogged insistence (Partington, 2003) which endanger peaceful communication.

Data 8:
> Original: Ai ka ji irin ta shi karamin ja'irin da zarar ya ji wuya sai kaga ya koma ma Allah dole, mu tuni muka miƙa lamarin mu ga Ubangijin talikai.
> Edited Version: Ai ka ji irin ta shi ƙaramin ja'irin da zarar ya ji wuya sai ka ga ya koma ga Allah dole. Mu tuni muka miƙa lamarinmu ga Ubangijin talikai.
> English translation: The shameless, he doesn't remember God until he is in trouble. As for us, we have since committed our situation to God.

The use of 'kaga' instead of "ka ga", "lamarin mu" instead of 'lamarinmu' and poor punctuation in the original post when one compares the original and the edited versions indicate infelicities in grammar and orthography of the Hausa language. The sentence is declarative. So it belongs to the indicative type of systemic functional grammar.

The use of "ƙaramin ja'irin" [*ƙaramin ja'irin*/The shameless] for a President flouts the principle of peaceful communication. For an audience to call a serving President 'naughty' and one who "doesn't remember God until he is in trouble" is impolite. Nonkilling linguistics promotes the use of objective facts. If the audience presents objective facts and relies on what they saw and heard, then the true situation becomes clear and undeniable (Benjamin, 2008). In the case of the original post in Data 8, how sure is the audience that Donald Trump doesn't remember God until he is in trouble? This is a fake and unverifiable narrative that flouts peaceful communication.

CONCLUSION

This study is an attempt to analyze hate speech in responses to two Hausa online media outlets on the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Eight (8) responses were analyzed and were found to have flouted the underlying principles of Hausa orthography and grammar as well as politeness through peaceful communication. This study concludes that given that social dynamics can trigger the projection of conspiracy theories-guided interests on social media, applied peace linguists in the classroom and on other platforms should attempt to identify and deconstruct any discourse that is implicitly or explicitly a manifestation of hate speech through using the strategies of peaceful communication. This will make the audience identify the ills of hate speech that divide and misinform and then prompt them to use language that would enhance peaceful communication in social interaction, especially in humanitarian and emergency (including pandemic) contexts.

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