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Linguistic Impoliteness and Interpersonal Positioning in Nigerian Online Political Forum*

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Abstract: Interactional positioning has to do with how people express their attitudes and dispositions to others (stance) and signal how they wish to relate with other participants in the discourse (engagement). These are closely connected with the extent to which impoliteness is expressed in discourse and the resources and strategies employed. This study investigates interactional positioning and impoliteness in two Nigerian political discussion sites, *Nairaland Forum* and *Gistmania*. The findings show that bald-on-record and negative impoliteness were predominant in the discussions. The common linguistic expressions of impoliteness were name-calling, vulgarism, cursing, dismissal and sarcasm. Participants also used questions, directives and reader pronouns *you* and *your* for face attacks and heightening of the effect of impolite expressions. Self-mentions and attitude markers, especially cognitive verbs, were used to convey feelings and attitudes towards other participants within and outside the discussion. The study concludes that impoliteness thrives in political debates online because of the uninhibited context, which gives freedom to participants to deliberately inject invective language in order to set the emotional temperature in the discussion and cause disaffection among the participants and the group they represent.

1 Introduction

Politeness and interpersonal positioning in discourse are two closely inter-related concepts. While interpersonal positioning has to do with the expression of personalities, and cognitive states in an ongoing discourse (Biber/Finegan 1989; Oyinlade/Taiwo 2018), linguistic politeness refers to the use of appropriate linguistic expressions in order to maintain interactants' face in communication. Interpersonal positioning can be construed as the conveyance of textual voices (stance) and the presupposition of the active role of the addressees (engagement) (Hyland 2005). The resources employed by discourse participants to express their positions and connect to the readers can sometimes be indicative of the extent to which they signal politeness in discourse. In any form of interactional discourse, such as online debates, interactants employ different linguistic means to indicate their awareness of the face or the public self-image, the persona of other participants (Myers 2010).

Communication in recent times has increased through the Internet, which is generally perceived to be a democratic space where discussions are free, thereby acting as an equalizer among people of different status

regardless of their social status, race, gender, or other characteristics (Groshek/Cutino 2016). However, while cyberspace is generally believed to increase people's participation in social and political processes and pave the road for a democratic utopia, online political debates are said to foster more heated discussion leading to incivility and impoliteness (Papacharissi 2004: 260). Despite the conceptual affinity between the last two concepts (incivility and impoliteness) and the generally perceived overlap in meaning, scholars have tried to draw the lines of distinctions (Rowe 2015). For Sifianou (2019), incivility is broader than impoliteness in the sense that it encompasses a lot that is non-verbal. She also believes that a linguistic form may be impolite, but not uncivil, especially in political discourse. Also, according to Papacharissi (2004), politeness is etiquette-related, while civility is associated with respect for the collective traditions of democracy. These distinctions notwithstanding, there is no way we can discuss politeness without a recourse to civility or vice versa. Extant studies have associated the tendency to be impolite and uncivil online with anonymity (Neurauter-Kessels 2011; Santana 2014). To buttress this, Lakoff (2005) observes that the combination of immediacy of talk and the distance of traditional writing with the anonymity of internet communication encourages uninhibited linguistic behaviours, such as flaming and trolling in online discourse.

Since political debates are ordinarily meant to enhance democracy, they require participants taking positions which may require their emotional and attitudinal investment on issues. It is also true that "attitude and stance toward interaction partners play a key part in the choice of actions and the way they are carried out" (Linssen/Theune/Heylen 2013). Such positions could sometimes violate the ideals of politeness. It is with this view that the present study identifies the connection between linguistic stance and engagement, which essentially communicate language users' dispositions and attitudes towards the issue being communicated, and (im)politeness. Basically, the study is aimed at showing how the indexicalities of interactional positioning could portray (im)politeness in online political debates by Nigerians.

Existing studies have documented adequate evidence of the connection between impoliteness and online discursive culture (Blitvich 2010; Neurauter-Kessels 2011; Angouri/Tseliga 2012; Sinkeviciute 2018). Such studies based on the Nigeria context have identified different forms of impoliteness in online discourses in Nigeria (Taiwo 2014; Oyebade 2018; Ajayi/Bamgbose 2019; Taiwo 2020). Oyebade (2018) is partly similar to this study in the sense that it investigated politeness in asynchronous computer mediated discourse in *Nairaland* Forum. However, looking beyond the expression of impoliteness, this study further explores the largely uncharted aspect of the nexus between the projection of participants' interpersonal positioning and their expression of (im)politeness, especially among Nigerian participants in online political forums.

2 Nigerian Politics and Citizens' Online Debates

Since 1999 when Nigeria returned to civil rule, there has been an increase in citizenship participation in politics and governance. The political space has been widened to engage not only individuals, but also political associations or groups such as civil right groups, social and professional groups, formed to actively participate in political process. In the area of information dissemination, apart from the conventional media, there is also an increase in the use of the new media which has greatly enhanced the participation of citizens in political process. The new media has opened so many possibilities for citizens to express themselves and to actively participate in governance. Many online discussion groups and platforms now exist with wide audience participants who daily engage in discussions on issues of public concern. Taiwo/Opeibi (2016) document the role the Internet plays in contemporary politics as the space for citizens' participation in the process of democratisation, as well as the key driver of change in many developing nations. Platforms such as online bulletin boards or forums are asynchronous in nature and they are known to promote citizens' debates, deliberations, agreement and/or disagreement, as well as collective actions. As a veritable means of engaging in public discourse, online communication is a platform for the enactment and legitimisation of ideologies and for the exercise of influence and control.

It should be noted however, that opinions and attitudes on online communication platforms are polarised; hence, discussions are often characterised by linguistic rudeness and impolite behaviour. Such behaviour includes all forms of verbal attacks, abusive comments/postings, uncomplimentary remarks and harassment of interactants and other individuals directly or indirectly connected with the discussion. In literature, such anti-normative hostile and insulting interaction are referred to as flaming, trolling, incivility, or cyberbullying (Stromer-Galley/Wichowski 2011; Hopkinson 2013; Hmielowski/Hutchen/Cicchirillo 2014). Although, some scholars have further differentiated these concepts, it is common in literature to use them interchangeably (Taiwo 2014; Zuselka/Seigfried-Spellar 2016). Comment sections in discussion boards will generally guarantee readers freedom of expression on social issues, however, the potentially severe harmful impact of such verbal aggression on its victims is in itself a social issue of serious concern. Insensitive and inconsiderate user comments make people angry and cause social conflict. Their linguistic realisations which often take the form of disagreements, criticism, and directives to addressees violate politeness norms.

This study aims at showing how stances and engagement in online interactional exchanges can lead to (im)politeness in the behaviour of the interactants. Specifically, it examines politeness phenomenon in the discourse on political issues in Nigeria in online media platforms with the view to accounting for the polite and impolite behaviour of participants and the strategies employed in realising them.

3 Politeness in Online Discourse

This study looks at politeness and interactional positioning in Nigerian online political discourse. It is therefore imperative that we take a critical look on previous studies undertaken on politeness and how they relate to or differ from the present study with a view to identifying the gap the present study fills in research.

On what politeness is, Locher/Watts (2005) are of the opinion that politeness is a discursive concept and by this they mean that what is polite or impolite should not be determined by analysts. But rather, researchers should focus on the discursive struggle that interactants engage in. From this viewpoint, politeness is thus reduced to a smaller part of face-to-face dynamics but rather more on the interpretations which consider behaviour to be merely appropriate, neither polite nor impolite. These authors propose a “relational work” concept where the work individuals invest in negotiating relationships with others becomes useful in helping to investigate the discursive struggle over politeness.

Another definition of politeness by Sara Mills is that it is the expression of the speakers’ intention to mitigate face threats carried by certain face threatening acts towards the listener (2003). In other words, politeness helps to tone down any perceived threats through “face” acts during conversations (Mills 2003). According to William Foley (1997), politeness theory accounts for the redressing of affronts to a person’s “face” by face-threatening acts. The issue of “face” was first introduced as a term by the Sociologist Ervin Goffman where “face” in the context of politeness describes the wish of every member of a community to guard his or her face from possible damage through social interferences. Put in another way, one is either saving or losing “face” if politeness is poorly managed in any given communication process.

Closely following this, Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1987), two great linguists distinguished in the subject of politeness, developed a major framework that combined both negative and positive politeness strategies. While negative politeness strategies are performed to avoid offence through difference, the positive politeness strategies are performed to avoid offence by emphasizing friendliness. Thus, through the negative face, there is a wish not to be impeded by others in one’s actions while through a positive face, there is a desire to gain approval of others.

In one study on the civility, politeness and the democratic potential of online political discussion groups, Papacharissi (2004) examines the level of civility in 287 discussion threads in political newsgroups. He argues that civility and politeness should not be used interchangeably as this conflation does not take into cognisance the democratic merit of robust and heated discussion. To take care of this lacuna, Papacharissi redefined civility in a broader sense as civil behaviours that enhance democratic conversation (260). Following this redefinition of civility, his study results show that most messages posted on political newsgroups were civil. He also suggests that because the absence of face-to-face communication

fostered more heated discussion, cyberspace might actually promote the vision of democratic emancipation through disagreement and anarchy (Lyotard 1984). Papacharissi's study therefore supports the internet's potential to revive the public sphere as long as there is greater diversity and volume of discussion.

Looking at Papacharissi's redefinition of civility as "civil behaviours that enhance democratic conversation," the term "civil behaviours" becomes relative as it was not further explained by Papacharissi for scope and clarity. This means anyone adopting it would equally need to adapt it for one's own use as peculiar to one's research purpose. Furthermore, the importance of face-to-face influence in discussions crops up in Papacharissi's study. There is a tendency for discussions to be more polite and civil in a face-to-face discussion.

In another related study on social media as a catalyst for online deliberation, Halpern/Gibbs (2013) assessed the potential of social media as a channel to foster democratic deliberation. In doing this, they examined whether the types of discussion maintained by citizens on Facebook and YouTube (managed by the Whitehouse), meet the necessary conditions for deliberative democracy. These authors predicted that political discussions in Facebook presented a more egalitarian distribution of comments between discussants with a higher level of politeness in their messages. The results from their study confirm that Facebook "expands the flow of information to other networks and enables more symmetrical conversations among users, whereas politeness is lower in the more anonymous and deindividuated YouTube."

On the level of politeness between these two most used social media (Facebook and YouTube), it follows that the issue of individuation plays an important role here. Where individuals are known, especially by their actual names, there is the tendency for discussants to be polite, or at least display some level of politeness, as against YouTube where people there are generally anonymous and can thus get away with unacceptable comments. Halpern/Gibbs (2013) emphasized the importance of topics in their study as sensitive threads triggered more impolite messages.

On being polite while fulfilling different discourse functions in online classroom discussions, Schallert et al. (2009) were interested in the naturally-occurring discourse that came up as part of synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated discussions. To this end, the authors analysed messages contributed by members of a graduate course for the kind of discourse functions and the kind of politeness strategies they displayed. One of the results showed that the two modes were proportionately similar in how politeness was expressed. Furthermore, the authors found that in relating politeness with function, there were more politeness indicators when students "were posting messages with such functions as positive evaluation and group conversation management, functions that carried the potential for face threat, and the least politeness associated with messages serving the function of experience sharing" (Schallert et al. 2009: 722).

Schallert et al.'s results above appear to corroborate that of Halpern/Gibbs (2013) in the sense that the authors agree that the level of politeness in face-to-face discussions is much higher than in online discussions. From these studies, it would appear, that participants in various online discourses express a higher degree of politeness when there is the risk of face-to-face threat.

Still in another related study, Yeweon/Herring (2018) investigated how the politeness strategies of readers who comment on online news articles influenced the participation and politeness behaviours of subsequent readers. Their results revealed that the politeness of comments did not affect the frequency of replies, and violations of replies were prevalent in replies to all types of comments and addresses, especially in threads with mostly male participants. Their study further showed that significant differences were found in responses to polite comments in maledominated versus female-dominated discussions. These authors also revealed that polite comments served as a catalyst for active participation by repliers, but only when men dominated the discussions and that these comments elicited harsh replies. Similarly, this study also showed that replies tended to use more polite language only when women participated more and that was only when addressing the original commenter. In essence, this study shows that politeness could contribute to some extent, to active participation of repliers in online discussions.

4 Interactional Positioning in Discourse

Naturally occurring language is characterised by expressions that show interlocutors' construal of their world. Such expressions portray the "attitudes, feelings, judgements or commitment towards the propositional contents of a message" (Biber/Finegan 1989: 124) as well as how they construct the active role of other participants. A vast body of works has captured and explained the linguistic expression of stances in written and spoken discourses (Hyland 2005; Biber 2006). Stance, according to Ochs (1996) can be divided into affective stance, which deals with "mood attitude, feeling and disposition as well as degree of emotional intensity" and epistemic stance, which refers to knowledge or belief bordering on some focus of concern, which includes "some degree of certainty or knowledge, commitment to truth of propositions and sources of knowledge" (Ochs 1996: 410). Research on stance taking in discourse have been extensively done in the area of academic discourse (Hyland 2002, 2005; Hewings 2012).

With the advent of digital discourse, scholarly studies are unfolding in the area of stance taking in blogs, which are a kind of online discourse in which writers present and position themselves in the cyberspace for some kinds of deliberative discussions. Myers (2010: 1) demonstrates how writers mark their stances in public discussion blogs by "signalling a relation to others, marking disagreement, enacting surprise and ironising previous contributions". Rahimpour (2014) following Myers' work investigates the frequently used vocabulary that mark stance

of writers' discussions of academic issues in selected weblogs in the field of education/applied linguistics. He demonstrates that stance plays crucial roles in mediating relationship between writers' intended arguments and the positioning of the online discourse communities (ibid: 1506).

Other scholars have worked on stance taking in other online forums, such as jobs and career portals (Taiwo 2015, 2016; Oyinlade/Taiwo 2018); online debates (Chandrasegaran/Kong 2006; Somasundaran/Wiebie 2010); social media campaign discourse (Chiluwa 2015; Johnson/Goldwasser 2016); and electronic newspapers (Osisanwo 2016; Yan 2018; Ajiboye/Abioye 2019). The present study is unique in the sense that it draws insights from Hyland's (2005) model of stance and engagement as well as Culpeper's (1996) impoliteness strategies to determine how attitudes, judgements, commitments and dispositions of writers online exert influence on their tendency to be (im)polite in their communication.

5 Methodology

The data for this study were drawn from online political news items and the readers' comments from two Nigerian websites: *Nairaland Forum* and *Gistmania*. Forty (40) posts together with their comments totalling sixty-five thousand, five hundred and sixty-two (65,562) word were elicited from the politics sections of these websites between December, 2019 and January, 2020. Posts within period, which featured a range of political topics were purposively chosen to represent the posts and discussions on politics, which feature daily on these platforms.

Nairaland Forum was created in 2005 and it is reputed to be the largest and most popular online community for discussing Nigerian issues. *Gistmania* is an online news publication run by *Naijapal*, which is a social networking site created in 2008. The two websites have different sections on religion, politics, fashion, business, romance, culture, education, and so forth, where participants are allowed to make postings and comment on them. However, this study drew its data from the sections on politics. The data were drawn from the multiple threaded discussions in which participants post comments on topics and reply to others' posts/comments. Any reader can log in to read and submit a comment or reply to others' comments. Thus, this article examines the news items and the comments as well as the replies to posts by other participants on the platforms. The two forums are moderated by their founders.

The data were subjected to analysis using Culpeper's (1996) impoliteness strategies. Culpeper (1996: 356) proposed impoliteness super strategies as the following:

- a) Bald on record impoliteness: the face threatening act (FTA) is performed in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way where face is not irrelevant.
- b) Positive impoliteness: the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee's positive face wants.

- c) Negative impoliteness: the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee's negative face wants.
- d) Sarcasm or mock politeness: the FTA is performed with the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere, and thus remain surface realizations.
- e) Withhold politeness: the absence of politeness work where it would be expected.

For interactional positioning, the study adopted Ken Hyland's model of stance and engagement, which was originally designed for academic discourse evaluation, but has been found quite useful for analysing other kinds of discourse. The model identifies writer-oriented features, which deal with "the ways writers present themselves and convey their judgements, opinions, and commitments" (Hyland 2005: 176). They are hedges, boosters, self-mentions and attitude markers. The second strand of the model is writers' alignment and engagement strategies, which has to do with how writers connect with others in the discourse. They are reader pronoun, questions, directives, shared knowledge and personal asides.

The analysis drew out the linguistic items chosen in the discussion to deduce the extent to which participants' dispositions and attitude were portrayed. It also identified and discussed how participants pull one another into the discourse as well as their expression of (im)politeness and the strategies they employed in doing so.

6 Analysis and Discussion

For the purpose of investigating the impoliteness strategies used in the data, Culpeper's impoliteness strategies were adopted (Culpeper 1996, 2005). Impoliteness in the data was mostly performed directly and clearly, for instance, participants threaten one another's face with maximum efficiency. Of the one hundred and seventy (170) impolite utterances identified in the data, one hundred and seven 107 (63%) employed the bald on record strategy in which participants directly attack the faces of other participants and some public figures, typically politicians for their statements and actions. Following from a distance is negative impoliteness with thirtynine (39) occurrences 23%. This strategy enables participants to ridicule others and refuse to maintain the expected discursive distance. The discussions display members' tendencies to defy the expected norms in communication with unfamiliar people. Even when dealing with people known to be high on the social hierarchy, participants were casual and they discountenanced identities and social divisions. Hostilities and prejudices were freely expressed. Below are examples of some bald on record and negative impolite responses:

D1: This man is a calm liar. There is nothing worse than someone who can lie calmly.

SMH (2020)

[66 Likes, 4 Shares]

D2: Dont mind the idiot. A man who only have NEPA certificate and don't value education. Foolish president

subzero047 (2020)

[5 Likes]

D3: Tell the dullard from daura nobody believes him not to say believe in him...

Stupid people everywhere

zombieHUNT (2020)

[1 Like]

D1 – D3 are instances in which some statements were credited to President Muhammadu Buhari in news reports in some Nigerian newspapers. Such statements generated debates in which some participants directly and unambiguously attacked the president's face by calling him names such as *calm liar*, *idiot*, *foolish president* and *dullard from daura*. Instances like these abound in the data in which face attacks take their roots from disagreements degenerating into angry exchange of insults, which could be targeted at individuals or group members or an external member whose statement or action led to the discussion and debate.

The contention in D1 is the debate on whether President Buhari was fighting corruption or not. The statement credited to him was meant to portray him as an incorrupt person. However, many Nigerians believe that some purported cases of corrupt practices around the president would make it difficult to completely absolve him from corruption. In D2, the poster of the abusive expression linked the President's inability to produce his secondary school leaving certificate when being screened by the country's electoral body in 2015 to the statement credited to him, and felt that the president could not be sincere with his statement. The implication of the statement is that the President could not give what he did not have. In D3, the writer resorted to name-calling, describing the president as the "dullard of daura". This alliterative expression, which includes Daura, the president's home town, was popularised in online discussions as a way of humourizing and ridiculing the intelligence of the president and calling to question his ability to rule the country successfully.

The next excerpt, D4 came as a follow up to a post asking for the whereabouts of the Vice President, Yemi Osinbajo. The poster theowise (2020) posted:

D4: The Nigerian vice president has over the weeks, been nowhere to be found.

Stupid people everywhere

theowise (2020)

This simple question by an inquisitive Original Poster (OP) was construed as offensive by another participant, okefrancis, who started off with a bald-on-record impolite response, referring to the question as "stupid" in "Hahaha, what brings about this **stupid** question, so our vice president must not rest again" (Re: Where's Prof. Yemi Osinbajo? 12:47am On Jan 11, 2020). Culpeper (2011) proposes that one key factor that underpins the degree to which offence may be legitimately taken is related to the activity type. Studies have underscored how sometimes honest airing of political and religious views online often generate inadvertent acts of offence which ultimately result in different forms of

impolite expressions (Tagg/Seargent/Brown 2017). In the exchange that follows, it was observed that a participant took offence from an utterance, which ordinarily should not have caused an offence, that is, construes the utterance of the OP as offensive (Haugh 2015).

D5: Hahaha, what brings about this stupid question, so our vice president must not rest again.

okefrancis (2020)

D6: Do you want to kidnapped him? jumper524 (m) (2020)

The response in D6 to the question that started the thread is incongruous with the question. The interpretation is implicit because it would involve a lot of inferencing on the part of the target, who would need to discern the meaning of the utterance within the wider pragmatic context of the country. This is a humorous or an entertaining impoliteness in the context of the contemporary Nigerian social discourse in which kidnapping is a visible topic.

D7: Fake pastor

NimrodEndOfDays (2020)

D8: If Osinbajo were to be your father will you call him fake pastor or disrespect him the way you always do, I can see you're a useless children [sic!] to your family

Lydia696 (2020)

D9: If he is not fake, why has he not spoken out against the evil in the Land? Is it until they kill someone close to him maybe his son or Daughter that he would know there is trouble? Since he supports Evil and bad things by keeping quiet. Then he is a fake Pastor. If He doesn't want insult he should resign and o back to stealing people's money through tithe.

Shooye (2020)

As can be observed, subsequently, there was a transfer of insults to the Vice President, the subject of the original post, when NimrodEndOfDays in D7 described him as "Fake Pastor". This utterance is a direct attack on the quality face the Vice President, Professor Yemi Osinbajo, one of the distinguished pastors of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, a church reputed to have the largest congregation in the country. Drawing attention to social expectancies with regards to personal social entitlements and fairness, Lydia696 responded in D8 by attacking the equity rights of NimrodEndOfDays. The response "If Osinbajo were to be your father will you call him fake pastor" is a direct challenge of personal/social entitlements of the poster. These entitlements include fairness and consideration (Spencer-Oatey 2002).

Cyberspace is an argumentative place where people argue passionately, creatively and compulsively. In support of NimrodEndOfDays and a bid to mark some ideological territory, Shooyie in D9 above employed two questions (whand polar) to further engage Lydia696's and others who challenged the perception of Osibajo as a "fake pastor". The questions were engaged to further open up the discussion. These face-threatening strategies provide justifications for regarding the Vice President as a "fake pastor", thereby further aggravating the quality face attack.

Disagreements, which may start with mere differences in opinions on any issue, often snowballed into a flame war (heated and lengthy arguments that result in personal attacks, profanity and exchange of abusive messages), which eventually derailed the topic under discussion. Flaming, which initially targets individuals, could be extended to their ethnic groups. For instance, in one of the threads a statement (Nairaland Forum 2020) was credited to Anthony Sani, the Secretary General of Arewa Consultative Forum (a political and cultural association of leaders in Northern Nigeria), that the Igbo people of the Eastern part of Nigeria should review their agitation for a separate state for them to aspire for the presidency of Nigeria. The topic generated a lot of debate because it focused on two contentious issues (a) the agitation for a separatist state for the Igbo and (b) their agitation for the presidency of the country. People with different angles to the topic brought in their perspectives, but not in a civil way. As the discussion progressed, participants resorted to linguistic categorisation in order to express their critical stances. The rhetorical tools of Othering and Labelling were engaged in the representation of ethnic groups. Some of the stereotypical derogatory labelling employed, which have been popularised on the internet over the years are also impolite ways of referring to the major ethnic groups in Nigeria. Below are some of the stereotype expressions:

The Hausa/Fulani people *Aboki illiterates, gworo-chewing misfits*
Banza terrorists

The Igbo *Flatino, yanmiri, Ipob*

The Yoruba *Afonja, fulani slaves, brown roof tribe*

The word *aboki* in Hausa means ‘friend’, but over the years it has become a pejorative linguistic label by other Nigerians for identifying the Hausa/Fulani people. The word is often used to demean the target as a stupid person. The expression *gworo-chewing* is a derogatory way of describing the love of the Hausa people for kolanut (*gworo*), while *banza* in Hausa means ‘stupid’. The word *flatino* was invented as derogatory way of referring to the Igbo, whose heads are said to be flat. They are also called *yanmiri*, a mimic of Igbo expression *ye m mri* (‘give me some water’) and *ipob* is the name of an Igbo group demanding for a separate state to be called Biafra. The word *Afonja* was also popularised on the Internet as a negative evaluative description of the Yoruba. *Afonja* was a warrior in the Old Oyo Empire based in Ilorin, who rebelled against the empire in favour of the Fulani jihadists. The name became a derogatory metaphor for the Yoruba people, portraying them as treacherous and coward people. The Yoruba are also negatively evaluated and labelled in connection with the brown roofs that characterised some of their ancient towns like Ibadan.

Other well-established impolite forms in the discussion threads are: name-calling, vulgarism, cursing, dismissal and sarcasm. Some excerpts are presented below.

Name-calling – calling people offensive and rude names

D10: They’re all bunch of fools, but the former is even worst updatechange (2020)

D11: Buhari is just a silly animal

BlackSeptember (2020)
[13 Likes]
D12: Arewa group are bastards
Okemmanwu (2020)
[1 Like]

Vulgarism – using crude, obscene and offensive expressions

D13: kiss my black a\$\$, poor broke boy.
Rick kid, I pay my bills. You pay yours. So Bleep yourself!
eDeity (2020)
D14: Both the OP and all the thieves on that list can fvck off
SaintHilary (m) (2020)

Cursing – invoking or using curse on someone

D15: Thunder shall do the needful on the Northern lazy youth, who can not look into local security outfit in the North to fight boko haram. but are fast to condemn the security measures of others.
Pentasoft1978 (2020)
[1 Like]
D16: Thunder fire you pa Buhari okpalaAnambra (2020)
[17 Likes]
D17: May God punish all these kinds of people. They are true enemies of Nigeria.
May they all end miserably along with the thieves, looters, criminals and fraudsters they support.
The will never escape the evil coming their way..... as long as they looted and raped our darling nation and telling us to face that STEALLING IS NBOIT CORRFUPTION....What insolence
Mipem23 (2020)

Dismissal – shutting someone up

D18: shut up u dey talk rubbish.ur belle for there!
You're the one sounding stupid and dull. Get lost!
EjaikreTheViper (2020) D19: This man should just shutup

Sarcasm – using mock to convey contempt (mock impoliteness)

D20: Lion to provide 20 million antelopes with food in 2020...
Come to the den and collect yours socialmediaman (2020)
[235 Likes, 17 Shares]
D21: Niajapals why are we not believing, he is answering is name! For god sake lie mohammed
Izorrr (2020)

When taking stance in political discussions, participants appear sometimes to be more concerned about how to advance their positions in relation with those of other participants. They hardly hedge or boost their arguments, rather, they engage self-mentions and attitude markers which assist them to convey they feelings and attitude towards the discussion and other participants. Below are some instances from the data.

D22: I can see your reasoning is that of a grandpa since I reason like a kid.
LegendHero (m) (2020)
D23: I know some olodos came here to see if the FG would provide 100million jobs in Shell, Chevron and Mobil. lazy yoots
diegwu02 (2020)

8 Likes, 2 Shares

D24: You people in Myetti are very stupid. I wonder what you will do when Buhari gets out of power. Keep digging your grave.
baby124 (2020)

The attitude markers used in the extracts above are verbs of cognition or cognitive verbs. They typically occupy positions very close to the pronoun representing the speaker (., in these instances). Self-mention and cognitive verbs here further indicate *presence* and *affect*, two major components of stance in discourse. The cognitive verbs *see*, *know* and *wonder* indicate different degrees of the commitment of the writer to the propositions – perception of the reasoning of another participant; awareness of the possible dispositions of other participants to the topic posted and the thought of what happens to the Presidential spokesperson after the president's exit of power respectively. The goal of engaging these cognitive verbs was to ridicule the targets earlier mentioned, most especially their cognitive capacity.

Participants in online political discussions do more than just projecting their ideas in arguing a position, they also engage other participants and pull them along their lines of thought. In fact, the whole idea of engagement starts with the original posting (OP), which is done to invite comments from other participants. Most times, the first few responses to the OP determine to a large extent the direction of the argument. In order to engage other participants, questions, directives and reader pronouns were employed. Any of these engagement strategies could signal face attack of participants. For instance, questions like the ones in D25 and D26 were framed straightforwardly with no hedging for direct face attacks.

D25: Read what you wrote yourself. Does it make sense?

Yommen (2020)

D26: Wetin Musa no go see for gate....stop comparing Apple with Orange
Maxymilliano (2020)

The questions were deliberately used to ridicule the cognitive perspectives of the other participants they were directed to, thereby attacking their negative face. They were constructed to denigrate cognitive capacity with such lexical items as *normal*, *stupid* and *sense*. In D26 however, the Nigerian Pidgin expression *wetin Musa no go see for gate* (What will Musa not experience at the gate) is a common saying portraying a condescending view of the Hausa as inferior people, who are only suitable for menial jobs like guarding the gate. In this context, it is an indication of contempt for the perceived bizarre reasoning in the discussion. Musa is a metaphor for the gatekeeper in the discourse of gatekeeping constructed here. There is an ideological construction of a territorial space in the discussion context where some participants felt they possess the power to determine who and what merit social inclusion and exclusion within the online discussion community.

Directives have a way of undermining interpersonal relationships because they are a rhetorical feature that often signal bald-on-record threat to the target's face. For instance, dismissals such as we have in D18

and D19 are extreme impolite ways of asking someone to stop talking. Some examples of directives in the data are.

D27: **Stop making your ignorance fashionable.**

Afamed (2020a)

D28: Another dumb follower. How can a ward suspend a National officer? Not even a President/PMB can suspend Oshiomole. **Read before you expose your ignorance.** Afamed (2020b)

D29: Pls be careful of that midget. He is very dangerous. [1 Like]

Firo08 (m) (2020)

D30: **Better keep quiet or find another work if you don't like Amotekun**

AgentNairaland (2020)

All the directives above could be perceived to be clear face threatening acts done with different strategies. For instance, the message in the directive lies in the incongruity between the noun *ignorance* and the adjective *fashionable* which is meant to paint the picture of the oddity in the argument of the person who is being addressed. Likewise, the idea of “exposing of ignorance” is an impolite ridicule of the target. Referring to the Vice President, Yemi Osinbajo as a *midget* is an attack on his positive face in order to discredit him. This could be likened to the idea of “hitting below the belt” by stressing the inherent personal physical features which are extraneous to the argument – an unfair way of trying to win an argument.

In spite of the fact that the kind of political debate we are dealing with here took place in a virtual space, there were adequate evidence of features on interpersonal relations that show that participants were conscious of one another. The use of reader pronouns signals the consciousness of other participants and their involvement in the discourse and creating the impression of a connected community. The second person pronouns, thereby predominantly used in online discussions to address the other participants either alone or as a group.

D31: Do you know that some North Central states like Plateau have already keyed into it

If I hit your flat head hard now, the mods will come and ban me... 7 Likes

Donaldoni (2020)

D32: Do you have any evidence to support this stupid claim. You need that advice more, think before you comment!

eDeity (2020)

D33: I don't know that you can be this senseless we are talking about realities you are busy saying jargons, after reading the truth

Omluch (2020)

The use of reader pronouns sometimes creates the impression of proximity where there is really none. Take for instance the second clause in D31, where the poster is talking about “hitting” another participant’s “flat head”, which is an action that is impossible in a virtual discourse context. It could also be a derogatory way of referring to the earlier poster that he/she is not well informed or not thinking right. However, in the imagination of the writer there exists a participant whose flat head could be hit but for the risk of being banned by the moderator.

Other expressions like *shutup* (D18), *keep quiet* (D30) are indications of their awareness of a virtual reality context. Participants in online discussions have to believe in the reality of the interactive virtual context they are operating and get immersed in it to be able to do all they do, such as expressing their attitudes, employing impoliteness strategies through their arguments and pulling other participants into the discourse. The whole idea of participants' positioning means that their senses have adjusted to online political debate context as a real experience worth investing their time and other resources on.

In online political contexts, there are all manners of participants, such as sociopaths, paranoid, narcissists personalities who just want to argue for the purpose of hurting, causing trouble and pumping up their self-esteem with inflated opinions. Such personalities are only able to express these attitudes online and they always take advantage of discussions to inject hatred, invectives and insults and set the emotional temperature for the rest of the comments even when participants are making efforts to be civil in their discussion. Impoliteness could be deliberately enacted by such characters described earlier or induced vitriolic comments.

This study has been able to show how the disinhibition effect of the online context coupled with interactants positioning encourages the expression of impoliteness, most especially bald on record and negative ones. In the data analysed for this study, such impolite forms were targeted at participants, and groups represented by the participants as well as public figures who are connected with the topics being discussed. Linguistic manifestations of impoliteness include, name-calling vulgarism, cursing, dismissal and sarcasm. Questions and directives were engaged to threaten the face of other participants, while reader pronouns heightened the effect of impoliteness in the discussions.

7 Conclusion

This study has investigated the expression of interpersonal positioning and impoliteness in political debates online by Nigerians. The study demonstrates how pointed criticism and exclusion strategies emerged as conventionalised means of expressing impoliteness. Likewise, impoliteness is often evoked through common semantic mechanisms of othering such as stereotyping, overt and covert insulting and provocation of ethnic strife with demeaning powerful linguistic expressions and images. However, all these are traceable to the consciousness of participants to position themselves in terms of the way they express their attitude cognition and dispositions as well as their awareness of other participants. The study concludes that the disinhibition effect of the online contexts makes it almost impossible for participants not to be impolite even when they position themselves with the right attitude. This is so because some of them deliberately engage in injecting of vitriols that lead to vulgarity and stereotyping and ultimately flaming that have the tendencies to derail the topics.

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Notes

- * According to the wishes of the authors, there are no detailed links given to the online sources quoted in the text.