Chapter 36
The Pragmatics of Political Deception on Facebook

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ABSTRACT

Facebook, an intrinsic part of 21st century social realities where cognitive-participatory activities are largely captured, is consistently explored for political deception. This chapter investigates how participants utilize language to deceive politically the Nigerian electorate on Facebook. For data, 250 Facebook posts on Nigerian politics were sampled, out of which 50 were purposefully selected for being highly rich in deceptive content in order to unpack online deception through multimodal critical discourse analysis. Four deceptive forms—equivocation of identity, exaggeration of performance, falsification of corruption cases, and concealment of offences—within two socio-political contexts—election and opposition—constituted the posts. These prompt an evocation of a messianic figure, blunt condemnation, and evocation of sympathy and retrospection to achieve the political intentions of criticism, self-presentation, silent opposition, and galvanizing public support. The chapter concludes that political propaganda taps into Facebook users to appeal to their political biases and sway their opinions.

INTRODUCTION

Facebook, an intrinsic part of twenty-first century social realities where actively cognitive participatory activities are largely captured, is consistently explored for deceptive engagements, especially in the political enterprise in Nigeria. The effect of technological advancement in communication and information sharing is significantly cognitive. This is noticeable in the political discourse through social networks. Hence, the high rate of political deception on this social media platform creates suspicion in the Nigerian political space, given the number of *Facebook* users in the country. Therefore, the strategic use of language and other semiotic resources in the new media such as *Facebook*, where anonymity and quick widest public coverage of communication are guaranteed by politicians, have moved politicking to another level. It is a level where the masses, who are mostly Facebook users, are largely engaged, and are carried away by

emotions and unalloyed loyalty for their political parties; thereby making online deception by politicians much harder to detect in most cases. Technically, this form of deception is usually done technologically using multimodal features and other fabricated means to exploit the cognitive system of the *Facebook* users for deceptive purpose. Another importance of *Facebook* as it relates to politics is that it facilitates the political messages to reach the target audience in the fastest way possible (ALsamydai and Rudaina, 2010) given the number of citizens who dominate the voting population that are on the social media. Therefore, understanding how political deceptive campaign is practised in Nigerian social-cyber space remains a significant challenge worthy of scholarly investigation. Hence, the aim of this study is to investigate political deceptive contents and pragmatic strategies in the sampled political *Facebook* posts.

Politics in Nigeria

Nigeria practices a democratic system of government which allows great involvement of citizens in politics. Politics in Nigeria is highly expensive and competitive with 'winner takes all' attitude which is why it is characterised by undemocratic tendencies such as violence, manipulation, bitterness, intimidation, vote-buying, ethnicity, coercion, deception, hatred, godfatherism, just to mention a few. Falade (2014) claims that "right from the First Republic, the Nigerian politics is characterised by greed, love of power, violence, assassination, thuggery and election rigging." It operates on a four-year term in the three tiers of government: local, state and federal. Nigerians are usually involved in political process and decision making by joining political parties, participating in electioneering campaign, voting during elections and other political activities. Recently, Nigerian politics has been greatly influenced by the social media like other nations (Araba and Braimah 2015 and Sule, Sani and Mat, 2018). This has enhanced more political participation of citizens where they are freely allowed to express their opinions about governance, political office holders, opposition and political campaigns. As a result, political opposition is massively done via the social media where deceptive information is spread to destabilise an existing government, which can either lead to an eventual overthrow of that government or force it to perform.

Facebook and Political Discourse

Social media is an internet informed network means of communication that reflect the social relations among people with common interests. Wang, Angarita and Renna (2018) view social media as the scene of three types of abuses: excessive use, malicious use of power, and unexpected consequences. This implies that the social media allows for the deception of information. In the same vein, Park, Choi and Park, (2011) claim that 'social media is a new paradigm for communications that is making surprising changes to the political and social landscape of the world. Immediate feedbacks prompt review of public attitudes, and expression of opinions of citizens on political communication (Emruli, Zejneli and Agai, 2011) are some of the surprising changes noticeable on social media when compared with other traditional media. A relationship between social media and politics has been established in the literature (Yousif and ALsamydai, 2012; Ineji, Bassey-Duke and Brown, 2014; Matei, 2016). Political discourse increases exponentially through the social media as political gladiators discover new manners in which this valuable tool can sway opinions, trends, options and, most importantly votes (Matei, 2016). The easy way of accessing account on the social media makes it easier for individuals to deceive others in the political arena.

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