



## EUPHEMISTIC DISCOURSE: A VOYAGE IN THE PRAGMATICS OF ETHICAL APPEAL FOR GLOBAL PEACE

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### **Abstract**

This study explored values in the use of euphemistic expressions designed to persuade the target audience towards achieving intended purposes. The study employed a multi-modal theoretical approach featuring the pragmatics of indirect speech acts, rhetoric and positive politeness strategy to expatiate on the efficacy of pleasantness of utterances at the expense of commanding, authoritative and confrontational expressions. Ten euphemistic statements purposively selected were considered. While expressions that have positive affect and appeal to the emotions of the target audience were found to be ingredients of a peaceful and stabilized human co-existence, hate speeches were fast becoming unpopular and disintegrating to the body polity of a vibrant nationhood. It was discovered that utterances bothering on ‘warning’ utilized space manipulation aside the selective diction to achieve some entrepreneurial goals. The study therefore concluded that the citizenry should make concerted efforts in maintaining zero tolerance for hate speech or utterances that could infringe on individual’s self-esteem and integrity via guided communicative strategies.

**Key words:** Euphemism, appeal, peace and stability, positive politeness, indirect speech.

### **Introduction**

This paper got its impetus from a sticker in which was inscribed:

**“Thank you for not smoking”**

with the semiotic sign X placed over a stick of cigarette indicating that smoking was prohibited. It was inside a traveller or commercial bus. It then occurred to the writer of this paper that some statements or discourse especially written notices are capable of generating tension in others if not properly crafted. Some individuals are easily irritated by statements that are imperative, regarding such as “attacks” on their public self-image or personality (a face threatening act); they always want to question the rationale for such orders and at times behave to the contrary.

A similar scenario played itself out especially in politics. Writing under the headline:

**“Heated polity: Can the media reduce the tension?”**

Tonnie Iredia in the *Sunday Vanguard* (July 9, 2017 p.3) raised the question of the media’s capability to douse the tension in matters of politics. As it has always been experienced in

Nigeria, most often politicizing and contestations get to a feverish pitch, thus putting the nation in political fireworks while real governance suffered. A lot of instances could be cited. For instance the lingering disagreement between the Federal Executive's nomination of Ibrahim Magu as the Chairman of EFCC and the Senate which turned down its confirmation as a substantive Chairman of the commission was one case too many. Another one was the saga of Senator Dino Melaye's recall attempt by the Kogi people that elected him. If the senate could say the electoral body should be left to waste its time by releasing the timetable for the recall process and verification of signatories to that effect, Nigerians may begin to prefer an alternative system of rule. It is a fact that, like any other politician, Senator Dino Melaye who represented Kogi West constituency had his own political adversaries and they were the ones at work, not the electoral commission being addressed. This is where the media can greatly help to reduce Nigeria's political tension through crafty construction of newspaper's headlines. To give credence to the crux of this discourse was another practice of the deployment of military personnel in peacetime for police duties which informed the caption in *The Nation* (July 8, 2017 p.3).

**“Fed Govt should heed Dogara’s warning”**

Honourable Yakubu Dogara, the speaker of the House of Representatives had thought about an issue which most Nigerians and the federal government seldom talk about or have considered to be normal and routine: the deployment of military personnel in peacetime for police duties. Going by his statistics, he warned that the deployment of the military in 28 states out of the whole 36 states already signposted the declaration of a state of emergency in Nigeria This practice was fast becoming the least line of resistance in solving the nation's increasingly intractable security problem. In a situation where the power that should proffer scientific solutions, the government, has opted for heavier firepower in arresting the drift towards anarchy, the Armed Forces of Nigeria should only act in aid of civil authorities rather than becoming the civil authorities. Section 217 of the constitution spells out their duties and responsibilities which include ‘...defending Nigeria from external aggression; maintaining Nigeria's territorial integrity; and securing Nigeria's borders from violation from land, sea or air, suppressing to restore order when called upon to do so by the President.’

The lesson here is that certain actions taken through pronouncements either by the government or individuals are rather unethical if critically considered. It is held that ‘command tones’ like the mention of soldiers on the street tend to make some nerves shrivel, but criminal elements nowadays now seem inoculated against all these scare tactics. In the face of monitoring challenges to peace and stability, logical presentation of ideas should be the order of the day. Everybody wants his ‘public self-image’ or ‘face wants’ respected, which Leech (1996:62) regards as ‘a person's wish to be well thought of’. The manifest of this idea is what euphemistic discourse takes to be paramount in maintaining good human interaction and relationship.

### **Communication effectiveness**

Socio-culturally, no human community or organization can survive without adequate provision for information dissemination and exchange. A break in communication is a prelude to the collapse of interaction likewise the inability to construct appropriate discourse for a given situation. Though an age-long submission, Charles (1968:4) posited that:

The flow of information is not a luxury. It is a life and death necessity; life and death for industries, for communities, for nation's economy health, for survival, for deterrence of war, for progress, for prosperity...

Adequate provision for information services is traceable to the library and archival services, the press, other information agents including the present day globalized world of internet facilities, different manufacturing outfits and their agents however have some cultivated habits in disseminating information for public consumption. Such is the example of manufacturing companies whose products have some constraints in the slogan for their advertisement. The mutual nature of communicative essence recognizes both the source and the receiver of information, whereby the two ends must see the need to honour each other. If information is lopsided and not guided by ethics, there cannot be mutual understanding. Therefore, exercising power with the use of language at all times may yield no positive result. What a command may not achieve, an appeal is a laudable option. Imagine the feat recorded among the Niger Delta agitators through the appeal championed by the Vice President of Nigeria, Prof. Yemi Osibanjo as against the period when militancy was the order of the day. The transactional and interactional capabilities of language must be fully explored for effective communication. While the transactional function of language focuses on information dissemination and exchange, the interactional concentrates on using language to establish social ties (Odebunmi, 2001a). Inappropriate utilization leads to the heightening of tension, and for people that are bound to give statements of warnings in advertisement especially, lack of pragmatic application to constructions may deny such of the much expected solidarity, commitment and patriotism.

A lot of information is circulated through unofficial channels. A good example is the issue of a sticker on prohibition of smoking earlier mentioned. Much of such information is yet to attract scholarly attention; this is the trust of this paper. Oyewo (2014) observes that communication is informal when information about, within and concerning an organization is circulated through unofficial channels, for example notices on signposts, building walls, leaflets, etc.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

The theoretical framework for this study is situated in speech acts, deeply rooted in Conversational Analysis or Discourse. A speech act in linguistics and the philosophy of language is an utterance that has performative function in language and communication.

According to Bach (2014), almost any speech act is really the performance of several acts at once; distinguished by different aspects of the speaker's intention. The contemporary use of the term is traceable to Austin's (1962:1) development of performance utterances and the theory of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. More germane to the thrust of this paper is Searle's (1975) conceptions which emphasized a psychological interpretation captured in the theory of indirect speech acts, "In indirect speech acts, the speaker communicates to the hearer (or reader in case of writing) more than he actually says by way of relying on the mutually shared background information, both linguistic and non-linguistic, together with the general powers of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer" with his doctrine of indirect speech acts, Searle attempts to explain how it is possible that a speaker can say something and mean it, but additionally mean something else. The question of euphemism arises when an expression that should be rendered imperatively is constructed in form of a declarative or a harsh expression substituted by a subtle one, thus making it more pleasantly internalized by the hearer. But the illocutionary force of the speaker remains to achieve the expected intent. Whether speech act or discourse comes about directly or indirectly, both are stylistic devices for conveying messages, one is only prone to arousing more psychological tension than the other.

### **Euphemistic discourses**

The school system is undoubtedly an essential aspect of socialization; and experiences have shown that disruption to peace emanates from attitudes of school pupils/students irrespective of level. Ewing (2000) who works on the efficacy effect of zero tolerance policy in schools found that, removal of students who violate school rules will create a school climate more conducive to learning for those students who remain. Concerned with the impact of zero tolerance on students of color and students with disabilities, Casella (2003) believes that by removing subjective influences or contextual factors from disciplinary decisions, such policies would be fairer to students.

Gardner & Steinberg's (2005) research among others show that before the age of 15, adolescents appear to display psychosocial immaturity in at least four areas: resistance to peer influence, attitudes toward perception of risk, future orientation and impulse control. The case of psychosocial immaturity during adolescence is also supported by evidence from developmental neuro-science indicating that the brain structures of adolescents are less developed than previously thought (e.g. Nelson, 2003; Sowell, Trauner, Gamst, & Jernigan, 2002). Their findings show that if a particular structure of the brain is still immature, then the functions that it governs will also show immaturity. In essence, adolescents are more likely to take greater risks and to reason less adequately about the consequences of their behaviour. This is an area where the use of ironic utterances to immature children may be counter-productive, whereby the resulting behaviour poses a threat to safety. There can be no doubt that many incidents that result in disciplinary infractions at the secondary level are due to poor judgment on the part of the adolescent involved.

## **Hate speech**

Hate speech is speech which attacks a person or group on the basis of attributes such as race, religion, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, disability, or gender (O'Neil 2016). In the law of some countries, hate speech is described as speech, gesture or conduct, writing, or display which is forbidden owing to the fact that it incites violence or prejudicial action against a protected group or individual on the basis of their membership of the group, or because it disparages or intimidates a protected group, or individual on the basis of their membership of the group. Many developed countries like Canada and much of Europe have passed laws that criminalize certain speech deemed hateful. The U.K has imprisoned people for offensive tweets.

Attempts to control hateful speech especially on social media platform, like Face book and Twitter, resulted in bans of feminists for saying that "all men are trash." Hateful rhetoric associated with Trumpism is equally on the rise in recent times. But what sense does it make to give the government of a nation more control over speech, when the government of the U.S is run by people like Donald Trump? A similar scenario of hate speech in government circle was the altercation between a Senator of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, representing Bauchi Central under the All Progressives Congress, APC, Senator Isa Misau. The APC Representative, Isa Misau alleged that:

**"IGP ( Ibrahim Idris) Makes 10 Billion Naira Monthly".**

He equally alleged the Nigeria Police of Promotion racketeering. In a quick response, (because it was a live programme on Channels TV on 27th August, 2017 at 8PM) the Police Public Relations Officer reacted:

**"Misau is a deserter', 'Misau has pending disciplinary cases.'  
'This letter was fraudulently obtained within 6 working days'".**

The letter which the Senator showed was to prove that he resigned accordingly from the Nigeria Police before he contested for election as a senator. This kind of confrontation demonstrated lack of respect for the individual's integrity as well as a show of shame by people who are expected to lead by example. Reaction to Governor Isiaka Abiola Ajimobi of Oyo State installation of 19 OBAS in Ibadan cannot be overemphasized; another instance of hate speech. The following reactions from the people through the social media captured the scenario:

So the Governor now makes kings?  
Where was the oracle?  
Where were the kingmakers?  
When did they attend the pre-king rituals in Ipebi?  
Where was the tradition?

If none of these was accomplished, then they are nothing like Obas but a mere government appointed staff of Ajimobi, they will soon wither away and be forgotten animals! The *Vanguard* (August 25, 2017 pp28-29) caption epitomizes the issue:

**“Olubadan-in-council divided as Ajimobi, monarch flex muscles”**

**Freedom of speech debate**

Debate over the issue of freedom of speech has been unending. While some aspects of legislation curtail such practice of hate speech, some critics have argued that the term ‘hate speech’ is a means to silence opposition, especially in a multiparty system of government. It is on record that the UN group urges Tokyo to curb hate speech’ going by Korea *JoongAng Daily*, (24 May 2013).

In Japan, a committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Economic and Social Council was concerned about the lasting negative effects on the exploitation to which ‘comfort women were subjected on their enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights and their entitlement to reparation. The committee resolves and recommends that the state party take all necessary measure to address the lasting effects of the exploitation and to guarantee the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights by ‘comfort women’ as well as to educate the public on such exploitative tendency and prevent hate speech and other manifestations of hatred that stigmatize the people.

The question, should hate speech be discouraged? The answer is easy-- of course! However, it is held that ‘developing such policies was the risk of limiting an individual’s ability to exercise free speech. On which is more important, protecting community interest or safeguarding the rights of the individual \_ the resolve is that a balance must be found that protects the civil rights of all without limiting the civil liberties of the speaker. Derogatory words without social value, directed to a specific individual that would provoke a reasonable member of the group about whom the words are directed should be guided against in the interest of peace.

Hateful ideas are real and corrosive. It is an indication of ‘things not going well’ in any human circle. The *Vanguard* (June 25, 2018 p.8) captured the unfriendly atmosphere between the executive and legislative houses of the Federal Republic of Nigeria over the 2018 budget. With the headline, “ULC blasts Presidency, NASS over 2018 budget”, no one was left in doubt regarding the issue of ‘padding’ that had been raised even with the previous year’s budget. That probably gave a political party, the United Labour Congress of Nigeria the audacity to condemn the action between the Presidency and the National Assembly. A similar incidence of hate speech manifestation was the statement directed to the former President of Nigeria, President Olusegun Obasanjo by one time Lagos State governor, Senator Bola Ahmed Tinubu concerning the letter the former president wrote to President Muhammadu Buhari not to re-contest in 2019. The *Nation* (June 25, 2018 p.6) carried the caption:

**“Tinubu to Buhari: Ignore Obasanjo”**

saying further that, ‘the former president is a busybody... who had no democratic credentials to ask Buhari not to run’. Tinubu maintained,

“I remember one Uncle backdoor, who had been a General himself and who has been elected President, I call him election rigger”.

These were recent incidents of hate speech among statesmen which should not be allowed to thrive in the interest of Nigerian populace.

### **Discussion**

Discourse issues emanating from the randomly selected and purposive texts above range from habit formation which captures act of smoking in public, defecating indiscriminately, impatience, inordinate ambitions or get-rich-quick tendency, taking undue advantage in the name cheap commodity purchase to gullibility. The texts which were sourced from notices, including sales jingles from local marketers are discussed below to explicate the necessity for imbibing the culture of euphemism and positive politeness in every speech act whether at the domestic level or the official level. The ten purposively selected speech regarded as texts are listed before the discussion that follows:

1. Thank you for not smoking
2. Urinate here please, the herbalist only need a little of your deposit.
3. Always in a hurry? Just overtake. Undertakers have you at the bottom of their hearts.
4. Smokers are likely to die young
5. You are looking for a greener pasture abroad? Apply for a quick visa through our company. Applicants above 25 may not apply.
6. Electronics at give-away prices. 50% off. No testing.
7. Comfort car park. ₦200 daily. Car parked at owner’s risk.
8. House 4 sale. Expect no receipt
9. Don’t doubt its efficacy. It’s all (diseases) curing herb mixture. So cheap, 1 for ₦100, 3 for ₦250
10. Thank your star that malaria is your problem. Many have failed to identify the source of their ailment, blaming it on headache, body pain. The ever efficacious herb is now within your reach. Take this advantage and get rid of all ailments.

With regard to smoking in the public, it is an act common among the youth, maybe out of youthful exuberance; though some adults equally engage in it. Some locations like motor parks, restaurant and eateries are noted for this, while anyone travelling by public transport is likely to meet a smoker among the passengers. With the common knowledge in recent times that smoking is injurious to the body system, compelling or commanding a person to stop the act may trigger off misunderstanding. Though the agency safeguarding the health of the nation, the National Agency for Food Drugs Administration and Control (NAFDAC) compels manufacturers to include the warning:

**“Smokers are likely to die young”**

some commercial vehicle operators find solace in a more friendly sticker which reads,

**“Thank you for not smoking”** (Text 1)

pasted in a conspicuous place within the bus. Similar to the above is the habit of urinating just anywhere in residential areas. It is no news that Nigeria has not developed to the extent of making provision for public toilets in every community, except in some few developed settlements in the cities. Where such practice is common, residents have discovered that such notice as:

‘Do not urinate here’

is becoming less effective. But, where a text reads:

**“Urinate here, please, the herbalist is in need of your deposit (urine)”**

the perlocutionary essence of that information is result-oriented, given its logical semantic interpretation. This is against the backdrop of the knowledge of witchcraft peculiar to the black.

A peculiarity of many Nigerian road users is the issue of overtaking an upfront moving vehicle, not minding the narrow road or the dangerous bends.

‘Do not overtake’, or a road sign implying such a message is becoming negligible. But with a notice like,

**“Undertakers love overtakers”**

the sensibility of the driver (and even the passengers who care to notice such roadside messages) become more activated knowing quite well that the word “undertakers” identify those who carry casket or coffin for ceremonial display at funerals.

Text 5 concerns the issue of human trafficking. A few of the companies in Nigeria have taken advantage of the desire by many youths to travel abroad for greener pasture. Many jingles on radio are heard on daily basis with crafty language use meant to influence the youth who believe that travelling abroad has more prospects than staying in their own country. A message like:

**“A quick visa through our company...”**

is no doubt a welcome news. But many applicants may not realize the import of the age-limit, which implies getting the best service out of the youth individuals. Experience of



deportation from foreign countries has shown that the youths who were captivated in the first instance and were not lucky enough to have a breakthrough regretted in the end.

Nigeria is a giant of Africa in terms of population; but not as a developed economy. Owing to the level of poverty, indulgence in consumption of used materials is still rampant. The crazy for used electronic gadgets are no exception. Imagine purchasing an electronic gadget at give-away price of **-50% off**. The sellers or vendors of such goods are so crafty that, they maintain the information: **No testing**. Despite this warning, locations of such practices are always crowded with ready buyers, especially in the cities.

Text 7:

**“Comfort car park ₦200 daily  
Car parked at owner’s risk”**

The captions bring to the fore another instance of euphemizing a scenario. The branding of the business with the word ‘comfort’ is enough attraction. But considering the issue of ‘car parked at owner’s risk’, one sees that there is still the possibility of the “comfort” being turned around to suggest “discomfort” in the end.

The signal of ‘prohibition’ that characterizes the message about urination also informed the type of notices placed on controversial landed properties for sale, especially buildings. A notice like text 8:

**“House 4 sale: Expect no receipt”**

is enough information to a discerning mind. But the first part of the information is so pleasant to a prospective buyer before the latter clause that is cautionary.

The last two texts 9 and 10 present yet another instances of euphemistic discourse. Marketers or sales agents of local herbs have devised means of hawking their products through slow moving motor cars or buses with megaphones mounted on their roofs to catch target audience’s attention. In text 9, the business strategy of ‘discount’ in buying great quantity is emphasized. Apart from this, the herbal mixture ‘is said to be ‘all curing’ in spite of the ‘cheap’ price.

Text 10 equally opens with a clause that paints a source of worry (malaria) as something worth celebrating, in view of the notion which suggests that ‘identifying a problem is problem half solved.’

The *Nigerian Tribune* Editorial (Wednesday, 7 March, 2018) captioned:

**“IGP on cattle ranches”**

is of the opinion that, the police, contrary to constitutional mandate, demonstrated a critical party to the ‘raging herdsmen/farmers’ clashes across Nigeria. The Editorial maintains further that the Inspector General of Police (IGP), Mr. Ibrahim Idris in particular, has been

a passionate critic of any legislation that targets open grazing. The point was that a few days before the editorial comment, the following statement was credited to Idris at a security meeting with Northern leaders in Kaduna State:

“To reduce the incidence of clashes between farmers and herders, state governments should endeavour to establish grazing ranches in their various states before enacting laws to prohibit open rearing and grazing”.(p.13)

The truth is that some states had witnessed more brutal clashes before the advent of the laws (the anti-open grazing laws have been passed and are being implemented by three sub-national governments of Ekiti, Benue and Taraba). In view of the fact that ‘it is not the duty of the police to tell which law is good or bad, more so in a federal system, the *Nigerian Tribune* Editorial submits that, “It is most unfortunate that the Inspector General of Police, IGP, appears to have willfully descended into the political arena.” It is the duty of the police to ensure diligent and dispassionate enforcement of duly enacted laws by all levels of government with the judiciary in place.

The Nigerian Tribune editorial comment is a good idea of objectivity and adherence to the euphemistic type of discourse that is the thrust of this paper. The editorial is diplomatic in language use on the personality of the IGP; and name calling had been avoided unlike the hitherto headlines commonly found on the pages of newspapers, believing that all cattle-rears or herdmen are of Fulani origin.

This may have informed the caption:

**“Buhari impressed with Taraba governor’s handling of herdsmen’s crisis”-Aide.**

This is not to say that the President was unaware that his tribe’s men ( the Fulanis) engage more in cattle rearing. The president was very direct when he said, ‘Any Fulani herdsman caught with AK-47 should be arrested immediately (*Nigerian Tribune*, 7 March 2018, p.38), while commending Governor Ishaku for handling the issue ‘with stoic maturity and effective diplomacy.’

At the global level, World leaders are quite aware of the consequences of inflammatory statements. The 44<sup>th</sup> American President, Barrack Obama, despite his understanding of Trump’s character, commented while making a fare-well tour of Europe that:

Trump, the Candidate, would be vastly different from  
Trump, the President, the latter being more temperate,  
presidential and humble but more determined to promote  
world peace and not provoke a world war. He said  
campaign sound bites were entirely different from governance.

(*The Guardian*, March7, 2018. p.9)

The assurance became necessary because Trump had vowed during the campaign not to have anything to do with other world bodies.

Nigerians would have been highly disenchanted had Leonard Karshima Shilgba had not reacted to a publication by a U.S mainstream national newspaper that:

**“Nigerians are receiving expired education, says US varsity VC”**

The instant reply by Leonard Karshima Shilgba was that, “Education does not expire” (p.18) and that “academic curricula are not regularly reviewed in Nigeria” was erroneous on the part of the VC.

**Conclusion**

In the foregoing, issues that usually build up tension become trivialized through the mechanism of euphemism, which in other words present harsh or hard conditions in a rather subtle and pleasant manner, with a view to creating a peaceful environment among individuals and communities. The campaign to usher in global peace and stability should start from interpersonal interaction which translates into the family, the community, the nation and ultimately, the world.

The issues discussed may be domestic, which are nonetheless essential to our corporate existence as a nation. If the logic imbedded in this interactive device of euphemizing situations could translate into formal platform, the problem of heating up the body polity in the name of politics among the diversified ethnic groups in Nigeria would soon become a thing of the past. Objective and non-partisan news reporting on the part of the media is a key factor in ensuring a nation’s stability. The game of casting aspersions, trading blames and name calling among politicians especially should be de-emphasized, because genuine national development can only be guaranteed in an atmosphere devoid of rancor; this is the essence of euphemistic discourse. Many cultures in Nigeria embrace the use of euphemism when reporting bad incidents and in name calling; a lot of lives have been saved with ordinarily addressing a group of bandits as ‘gentlemen of the road’. In view of the thrust of this paper zero tolerance policies should be applied with greater flexibility; the media should intensify effort regarding jingles on the essence of face saving strategies between interlocutors, and legislative initiatives should guide use of foul utterances and misuse of position of authority. It is the duty of every individual or group to respect ‘the other’, and ensure the safety and integrity of those ‘others’.

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