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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## A pragma-semiotic analysis of 'Occupy Nigeria Group' online posts on the 2012 fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT



In response to the fuel subsidy removal by the Nigerian government on 1st January 2012, Occupy Nigeria Group, a protest movement, embarked on different mass strike actions and demonstrations including online activism. The civil resistant actions geared towards reversal of petrol pump price increase deployed certain verbal and visual means in portraying the government and its actions. Previous studies on online protest discourse in Nigeria have adopted sociolinguistic and discourse analysis approaches in examining issues of identity and self-determination with little attention paid to visual-pragmatic strategies in representing people and their actions. This article, therefore, undertakes a pragma-semiotic investigation of 'Occupy Nigeria Group' online posts on the 2012 fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria with a view to examining verbal and visual modes of representing people and their actions in the event. Seventy-two online protest posts purposively sampled from the groups' page are used to identify and categorize various pragma-semiotic elements and functions in the representations using insights from Mey's (2001) pragmatic act and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) multimodal discourse analysis. It is observed that the verbal mode complements the visual in projecting the demands and resistance of the group. The posts which are classified under six semantic fields, namely divine intervention, security consciousness, innovation, exaggeration, defamation and abusive placards have various visual-pragmatic strategies such as prayer, negative labelling, humour, mockery, abuse, passionate and fierce appeal, including photo trick. The strategies correspond to the dominant pragmatic acts such as demonstrative, assertive, suppository, condoling and stipulating. All these acts are presented within the Nigerian socio-political and linguistic context.

### KEYWORDS

Online activism; fuel subsidy removal; pragma-semiotics; multimodality

### Introduction

The 'Occupy Nigeria' group protest in January 2012 remains the most popular, potent and successful social activism in Nigeria's history. The mass protest organized by the civil group involving the Nigerian Labour Congress, Trade Union Congress and Civil Liberty Organization attracted support and solidarity of the majority of Nigerian people

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**Table 1.** Fuel pump price increases in Nigeria (1978–2012).

S/N	Date	Administration	Initial price	New price	Difference	% Change
1	1978	General Olusegun Obasanjo (Military regime)	8.4 kobo	15.37 kobo	6.97 kobo	82.9%
2	Jan. 1982	Alhaji Shehu Shagari (Civilian Regime)	15.37 kobo	20 kobo	4.63 kobo	30.1%
3	Mar. 31, 1986	General Ibrahim Babangida (Military Regime)	20 kobo	39.50 kobo	19.50 kobo	97.5%
4	Apr. 10, 1988	General Ibrahim Babangida (Military Regime)	39.50 kobo	42 kobo	2.50 kobo	6.3%
5	Jan. 1st, 1989	General Ibrahim Babangida (Military Regime)	42 kobo	60 kobo	18 kobo	42.8%
6	Mar. 6th, 1991	General Ibrahim Babangida (Military Regime)	60 kobo	70 kobo	10 kobo	16.6%
7	Nov. 8th, 1993	General Ibrahim Babangida (Military Regime)	70 kobo	N5.00	N4.30	614.2%
*8	Nov. 22nd, 1993	General Ibrahim Babangida (Military Regime)	N5.00	N3.25	N1.75	35%
9	Oct. 2nd, 1994	General Sani Abacha (Military Regime)	N3.25	N11.00	N7.75	70.4%
10	Dec. 20, 1998	General Abdulsalam Abubakar (Military Regime)	N11.00	N25.00	N14.00	127.2%
*11	Jan. 6th, 1999	General Abdulsalam Abubakar (Military Regime)	N25.00	N20.00	N5.00	20%
12	June 1st, 2000	General Olusegun Obasanjo (Civilian Regime)	N20.00	N30.00	N10.00	50%
*13	June 13, 2000	General Olusegun Obasanjo (Civilian Regime)	N30.00	N22.00	N8.00	26.6%
14	Jan. 1st, 2002	General Olusegun Obasanjo (Civilian Regime)	N22.00	N26.00	N4.00	18.1%
15	Jun. 23rd, 2003	General Olusegun Obasanjo (Civilian regime)	N26.00	N40.00	N14.00	53.8%
16	June 2007	General Olusegun Obasanjo (Civilian regime)	N40.00	N70.00	N30.00	75%
*17	May 2007	Alhaji Umaru Yaradua (Civilian regime)	N70.00	N65.00	N5.00	7.1%
18	Jan. 1st, 2012	Dr Goodluck Jonathan (Civilian regime)	N65.00	N141.00	N76.00	116.9%
*19		Dr Goodluck Jonathan (Civilian regime)	N141.00	N97.00	N44.00	31.2%

**Source:** Authors' compilation.

\*These are instances of reduction in fuel pump prices as a result of mass protests.

masses in every part of the country and in the Diaspora. The protest was mobilized by the Occupy Nigerian Group in order to kick against the Nigerian government's removal of oil (fuel) subsidy and to demand immediate reversal of the fuel pump price. Oil plays a central and crucial role in the socio-economic, political, educational, infrastructural, etc. life of Nigerians to such an extent that the entire nation depends on petroleum product for its survival. Hence, oil subsidy has remained the only direct government assistance that an average Nigerian enjoys and an increase in the cost of oil affects all sectors of the Nigerian economy. This, no doubt, explains the intensity and spontaneity with which Nigerian people masses collectively embarked on a massive protest on the streets and the social media to revolt against the subsidy removal which was announced in the heat of *Boko Haram* security tension and at the festive season when the cost of living is supposedly at its peak. During the protest, social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Blackberry* proved to be effective tools

for mobilization for support as well as for active participation of protesters for the social change. The social networks were used to enhance the anti-subsidy removal protests and to sustain the protesters quest for re-institution of the fuel subsidy. In essence, there were steady and uninterrupted flow of online readers' comments on blogs' reports, posts on various social media pages including humorous instant pictures and photos of daily statuses and updates on the protest from different locations. Particularly, the Occupy Nigeria Movement collective page on *Facebook* received numerous individual postings and photos from its large members and followers. The protest posts extends beyond revisiting the fuel-subsidy removal to issues bordering on failing economy, infrastructural decay, unstable power supply, lack of basic amenities, corruption, massive unemployment, continuous deterioration of the quality of education system, and security threats that still plague Nigeria – one of the largest producers of oil in the world. Thus, through online verbal and visual means, the protesters expressed a widespread lack of faith in the ability of the federal government under the administration of former President Goodluck Jonathan to meet Nigeria's economic and security challenges.

### *Fuel subsidy removal and activism in Nigeria: a brief historical review*

There is a close interconnection between fuel subsidy removal (fuel pump price increase) and mass protests in Nigeria. This is because series of increases in the pump price of fuel over the years have in most cases attracted wide protests and resistance. In Nigeria's socio-political history, different regimes both military and civilian have increased pump price during their administration.

**Table 1** categorises different fuel pump price increases and decreases over a period of 34 years, 1978–2012. The downward reviews were occasioned by mass protests and civil actions. For instance, the frequent increases of the fuel pump price by General Ibrahim Babangida' military regime triggered two different mass protests which finally led to the reduction of the pump price from N5.00 to N3.25 on 22nd November 1993. Also, as a result of mass protest, the General Abacha's military regime reduced pump price to N11.00 from N15.00. In the same vein, following a nonstop mass protest by the organized labour and the Civil Society Organizations, the General Abdulsalam Abubakar's regime was forced to reduce pump price to N20 from N25 on 6th January 1999. This was also experienced during President Obasanjo and Jonathan's civilian regimes who reduced the pump prices from N30.00 to N22.00 per litre and from N141 to N97, respectively, following series of massive strike actions and nationwide protests from the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), Trade Union Congress of Nigeria, PENGASSAN, Civil Society Organizations, Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the generality of Nigerians.

### *Review of Nigerian fuel subsidy removal*

In recent time, frequent fuel subsidy removal and protests have been a subject of scholarly discourse in Nigeria. Previous studies have focused on the social, political, historical and economic dimensions with little attention paid to language (verbal and visual means) which is the main tool deployed in the protests. For instance, Ering and

Akpan (2012) examined the politics of fuel subsidy and mass protest concentrating on the socio-economic implications of the removal on Nigerian people while Onyishi, Eme, and Emeh (2012) discussed the implications of the fuel subsidy policy on the Nigerian economy at the domestic and international levels. From the linguistic perspective, Agbedo (2012) analyzed language use in the placards of the 2012 fuel subsidy removal protests published in Nigerian e-newspapers. The study started by categorizing the messages on the sampled placards into five themes, namely fuel subsidy removal, corruption, crash in public expectation, quality and cost of governance and people power as precursor of revolution and then analyzed the data using insights from Halliday's theoretical concept of 'Register' classified as field, tenor, and mode. The article argued that the 2012 protests have transcended the narrow confines of hardships caused by the fuel subsidy removal to pertinent issues of official corruption, debilitating cost of governance, crash in public expectations of the immediate past administration headed by Goodluck Jonathan, and recourse to people power-induced revolution. Hence, the findings of the study revealed that the emerging pattern of civil protest in Nigeria interrogates a wide range of socioeconomic and political challenges plaguing the Nigerian nation. The article concluded that the fuel subsidy removal protests provided a teachable moment, the invaluable lessons of which need not be lost on the People's Democratic Party administration led by former President Goodluck Jonathan. However, although pictures play an essential role in the success of the protest, no attention was given to them

Furthermore, Onanuga and Ademilokun (2014) undertook a multimodal analysis of selected graphic protestation on fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria. The target of the study was to reveal that pictures are meant to convey surreal, realistic and humorous meanings. According to Onanuga and Ademilokun (2014), the protest pictures are targeted at ridiculing the government on the one hand, while still conveying the seriousness of the situation on the other hand. Based on the objectives of the study, the findings reveal that three major meaning-making strategies were used for expressing the protest situation, namely, surrealism, realism and humour. According to Onanuga and Ademilokun (2014), surrealism is used to portray a trend in Nigeria which is contrary to cultural expectation while realism aptly expresses the reality and the extent of the suffering inflicted on Nigerians. In addition, humour is deployed as a strategy of dousing emotions and mildly conveying the people's distaste for the actions of the former administration. The study concluded that in conflict-affected societies, humour has a significant potential to contribute to the escalation or reduction of conflicts.

Abioye (2014) examined discourse mapping of online news on fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to explicate 'the peculiar patterns of language use, its lexical relations, and the transitivity options of how social actors are represented' in the online news (Abioye, 2014, p. 304). Drawing from insights provided by critical discourse analysis, the study analyzed selected foreign and local online news reports on the subsidy removal. It asserted that the relevance of language as social discourse encompasses understanding, explaining and analyzing new phenomena in our sociopolitical system which are relevant to Nigeria's social transformation. It concluded that language can be used to achieve a range of objectives; for instance, it can be used identify the different roles of participants in a specific context, it can be used to

tease out hegemonic underpinning within interactions and the interpersonal relationships that are established in such interactions, and how the texts are organized into meaningful discourse.

Chiluwa (2015) is a critical discourse study of the *Facebook* post on the 'occupy Nigeria' fuel subsidy removal protests. The study examined discourse strategies (such as code-switching, Pidgin, etc.) deployed by the online protesters to articulate their arguments, demands and goals. The findings revealed that the strategies express diverse groups' identity, solidarity as well as loyalty to political in-group and ethnic interest rather than national interest. It concludes that 'despite the seeming effectiveness of the online protests via *Facebook*, the Nigerian protesters did not ultimately achieve their aim partly because the protests did not attract sufficient participation' (Chiluwa, 2015, p. 47).

The present study adopts pragmatics and multimodal discourse analysis approaches in examining issues of identity and self-determination paying attention to visual-pragmatic strategies which are pivotal in representing people and their actions. This study, therefore, undertakes a pragma-semiotic investigation of Occupy Nigeria Group online protest posts on the 2012 fuel subsidy removal with a view to uncovering the various pragma-semiotic patterns in language use in online activism in the Nigerian civil protest context. The specific objectives are (a) to find out visual-pragmatic strategies deployed in the protests posts, and (b) to discover and explain pragmatic acts and functions of the strategies.

### ***Theoretical framework: pragmatics and multimodal discourse analysis***

This article integrates insights from the theories of Mey's (2001) pragmatic acts and Kress and Leeuwen's (2006) multimodal discourse analysis. Mey's pragmatic act theory is concerned with explaining the way pragememes are represented in speech situations. It came as a reaction against speech act theory which Mey considers as non-situated (Mey, 2001). According to Mey (2001), speech acts are effective and successful only when they are situated. That is, 'they both rely on, and actively create, the situation in which they are realized' (Mey, 2001, p. 218). Thus, Mey (2001) opines that, there are no speech acts, but only situated speech acts, or instantiated pragmatic acts. Thus, in pragmatic acts theory, Mey concentrates on characterizing a general situational prototype (which he calls pragememe) that can be executed in any situation. A pragememe is realized through individual pragmatic acts in a context since pragmatic acts are situation-derived and situation-constrained. This view foregrounds the central role of context in every speech situation. According to Mey (2001, p. 217), "No conversational contribution at all can be understood properly unless it is situated within the environment in which it was meant to be understood." In addition, the context affects language use and also language use influences context.

Multimodal discourse approach of Kress and Leeuwen is one of the recent models in semiotic analysis. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) draws on Halliday's systemic functional linguistics in the analysis of semiotic language and its signification. As a semiotic approach, a multimodal analysis accounts for all modes in a communicative event and it encompasses the linguistic features of a text which are usually regarded

as speech acts, and non-linguistic features like images, symbols, pictures and colours. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), semiotic language performs three functions: organizational, interpersonal and representational. Representational function which is basically used to portray an experience or a version of reality is relevant to this article. Representation is a 'scale running from maximum abstraction to maximum representation of pictorial detail, [and that] [a]n image may show every detail of the represented participants: the individual strands of hair, the pores in the skin, the creases in the clothes, ... or it may abstract from detail to a greater or lesser degree' (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 161). Every image has a representative meaning which can be 'amplified, exaggerated, and more than real' (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 167). Images such as pictures are most often 'edited' and modified to suit users' need before publication. Thus, analysis of images does not end at identifying the meaning in the images but also uncovering elements of bias and distortion from either presence (or foregrounding) or absence (or backgrounding) of certain features. Such modifications could be in the colour, sharpness, size, shape or positioning of items in the pictures. Drawing insights from Halliday's concept of *transitivity process*, Kress and van Leeuwen, (2006) suggest that analysis of images in representational terms requires the identification of the represented participants, the process or the activity described and the qualities of the participants and the circumstances in which the action is being developed. The key aim of this research is to explore the ways in which the differing semiotic modes of the linguistic (spoken and written language) and the visual (images and graphics, facial expressions, gestures, etc.) contribute to processes of meaning-making in the representation of social actors in the fuel subsidy discourse.

### Methodology and data presentation

The study is dominantly descriptive. The data consist of both online linguistic (verbal) and non-linguistic (visual/pictorial, photos, image, colour, cartoons, etc.) posts collected from the Occupy Nigeria Group Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Occupy-Nigeria>). The analysis focuses on visual-pragmatic imports of the protesters' photo messages based on their verbal and non-verbal performances. Over 250 protest posts on the fuel subsidy are gathered from the Group's page. Out of these, a corpus of 72 is purposively selected and classified into the following semantic fields: divine intervention, security consciousness, innovation, exaggeration, defamation and abusive placards. The data is analyzed qualitatively. First, a content analysis is done to identify the semantic fields of the posts. This is followed by a frequency analysis and tabulation of the protest pictures in relation to their various semantic fields. Finally, a detailed qualitative pragma-semiotic analysis and interpretation is carried out using insights from Mey's (2001) pragmatic act and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) multimodal discourse to uncover underlying visual-pragmatic strategies and acts of the protest pictures. While the data is interpreted against Nigeria's cultural, political, social and historical context; the pragma-semiotic method aims at explicating the signification systems and meanings in the verbal and visual posts.

**Table 2.** Categorization of the protest pictures used by the occupy Nigerian group.

Types	Frequency	Percentage
A: Divine intervention	5	6.9%
B: Security consciousness	7	9.7%
C: Innovation	15	20.8%
D: Exaggeration	22	30.6%
E: Defamation	6	8.3%
F: Abusive placards	17	23.6%
Total	72	100

### *Data analysis and discussion of findings*

The pictures of the Occupy Nigeria Group on fuel subsidy removal are classified under six semantic fields, namely Divine Intervention, Security Consciousness, Innovation, Exaggeration, Defamation and Abusive Placards (Table 2).

#### *Divine intervention*

Divine Intervention pictures are photos deployed to seek intercession of God or supernatural deity in the events of the 'human' world. The religious undertone is to seek God to perform a miracle and intervene in the prevailing situation in Nigeria (Figures A1 and A2).



Figure A1 shows a young lady kneeling beside a bowl of water and holding a Bible and a pipe. In the picture, the lady is in a prayer mood and she is probably expecting a miracle from God to turn the bowl of water into a vessel of fuel. Just as it is recorded in the Holy Bible (John 2:1-11) that Jesus Christ turned water into wine, the lady seems to pray with faith (no doubt believing) for a repeat of such miracle in a difficult Nigerian situation. The high level of her faith is obvious as she holds the pipe close to an open fuel filler of a car. That is, at the end of the prayer, she expects to use the pipe (or tube) to convey the 'water turned into fuel' through the fuel filler into the car tank. The picture is a caricature of Nigeria, a nation blessed with abundant



fuel, which has run out of petrol to such an extent that its citizens now depend solely on divine intervention for better living.

In the same vein, just like Figure A1, Figure A2 also depicts divine intervention. In Figure A2, two young men are engrossed in 'fierce' prayers for a miracle. One common thing between Figures A1 and A2 is that the 'prayer warriors' have the Holy Bibles in their right hand while the left hands are deployed to command water to be turned into fuel. The Bible raised towards the sky (where God dwells) serves as a source of divine connection and power for the expected transformation. Bearing in mind that Jesus Christ has performed several miracles such as 'parting the red sea and converting it into dry land' and 'converting water into wine in Galilee', the two 'prayer warriors' are in a desperate prayer expecting a transformation of the two buckets of water into petrol (in Jesus name). They seem to be obeying to the popular Nigerian Pentecostal prayer maxim of 'Pray Until Something Happens (PUSH)'. Hence, the two young men seem to be in a serious business as there are about four gallons of water which they have to convert to gallons of fuel. The power generator besides the buckets aptly shows the purpose of the 'converted' fuel. However, the presence of a smile on the face of the younger man in A2, lends credence to fact that characters behind these pictures are making mockery of 'the giant' of Africa which is blessed with oil yet its citizens are living in wants. The surrounding walls – un-plastered and unpainted (in A1) and half-painted with a non-attractive colour (A2), depict the presence of poverty. The pragmatic acts of Figures A1 and A2 are demonstrative acts. The pictures are demonstrating the possibility of a repeat of Jesus' miracle of turning water into wine.

### *Security consciousness*

This involves precautionary measures taken by an individual or group to ensure safety of their valuable property. In the data, certain measures are taken by Nigerians to safeguard 'fuel' which has become a valuable item in Nigeria following the fuel subsidy removal (Figures B1 and B2).



Figure B1 shows a red vehicle which has its fuel tank completely 'secured' by three padlocks. Ordinarily, the fuel tank is usually locked by the central lock of a car. However,

to ensure additional security, the owner of the car considers it wise to add three extra locks to the fuel tank. Of all the parts of the fairly used car, the fuel tank seems to be the most secured from the picture. One understands the rationale behind this act when one considers the high cost of petrol occasioned by the fuel subsidy removal and the fact that low-key oil thieves such as auto mechanics are on the increase during this period. A case of hopelessness is further portrayed in this picture; as we see not just three padlocks, but a fourth strap without padlock. This probably entails the possibility of having as many locks as there are spaces for straps. The pragmatic implication here is satirical, who would want to siphon fuel from such a decrepit car?

Figure B2 shows a young man sleeping on a couch with chains tied to his 25 litre gallon of fuel. This act represents the popular maxim in Nigeria which is 'sleeping with one eye open'. The man does not want to take chances with his 'valuables' as co-tenants or uninvited visitors could dispossess him of his 'possession' as it has become difficult for Nigerians to purchase fuel at that time. Thus, he is on his guard and is certain that anybody who attempts to steal the fuel would have to cut off his hand or kill him before having access to the gallon. Again, we see a picture of abject poverty being portrayed by the faded colour and material of the couch, where maroon colour is almost mixed with black. This signifies that the people most affected by fuel subsidy removal are the low-income earners; which comprises more than 75% of the Nigerian population. Figures B1 and B2 are performing assertive acts. A sleeping man with iron chain securing his property and a triple padlocked unattended vehicle suggest self confidence and assurance.

### *Innovation*

Innovation here entails invention for survival. Since fuel has become a scarce commodity, through the process of invention, Nigerians have devised alternatives in order to survive. Through the pictures on Innovation, the Group is asking the government if it expects the poor masses to fuel their cars and generators with water or red oil from soup (Figures C1 and C2).



Figures C1 and C2 depict innovation in devising an alternative source of oil for petrol. In Figure C1, a young man has established his own 'petrol station' using water dispenser and a laptop as the converter and meter gauge while in C2, a woman is pouring 'refined' oil from a pot into a generator. Just like crude oil is refined to get premium motor spirit (fuel), the two pictures have shown the ingenuity of some Nigerians who can refine available fluid to survive the harsh economic situation in Nigeria. Specifically, with the knowledge that a computer can convert documents and files from one format to another (such as from PDF to MS Word and vice versa), the young man in C1 seems to be confident in converting water to fuel using his laptop. One actually sees the seriousness with which he gazes on the screen in the conversion process. Whereas in Figure C2, the two persons have through the process of boiling 'refined' the palm oil to 'petrol oil'. Thus, they have decided to power their generating set with the 'transformed oil'. The pertinent question is whether this is a dream or reality? C1 and C2 can be said to be metaphorical as well as rhetorical, asking 'which way Nigeria'? Figures C1 and C2 are performing a suppository act (conjecture), embedded in extreme irony. That water and vegetable oil could one day serve as petroleum in Nigeria, is presented as an unproven ironic fact; is in view as a result of the recurrent fuel crises.

### *Exaggeration*

Though most of the pictures can be classified as comic exaggerations, pictures under exaggeration involve the absolute use of photo tricks to ridicule the present situation in order to draw attention to the reality of the situation. Though the situations created under exaggeration seem impossible, the essence is to satirize, create humour as well as portray the facts of real situation (Figures D1 and D2).



Figures D1 and D2 are exaggerations created for humour. Figure D1 shows a young man corporately dressed in suit and holding files being transported to (the) office in a wheel barrow. In this age, wheel barrow means of transportation is for the wretched to transport goods not humans. The wheel barrow is furnished with a 'tyre' steering and

plate number to upgrade to a transport system for humans. However, it is unlikely for one dressed in this manner to go to work or travel in a wheel barrow. The implication of this is that this means of transportation has become an alternative since people could no longer afford to buy fuel to drive to their offices. Hence, the man who probably resides in the nation's capital (Abuja) is graciously being driven to office in it while he steers.

Figure D2 represents a situation where the scarce and expensive fuel is used for wooing and proposing marriage to ladies. In the picture, the facial expressions of the young man and lady call attention to the real situation. While the lady is beaming with smiles upon the receipt of twenty-five litres of fuel, the young man who is not smiling knows very well that he is parting with a scarce and precious commodity. The essence is to depict that fuel scarcity has reached an extent that it has become one of the most essential resources in Nigeria. Hence, the pictures create humour as well as ridicule the present Nigerian situation. Figures D1 and D2 – may be seen as performing a condoling act. The people ironically appear to have accepted their fate, and have adapted fully to the situation. Thus, going about their habitual affairs like going to work by wheel barrow is no news. The smile on the face of the passenger as well as the bold 'yes' by the lady, depict total acceptance of the status quo.

### *Defamation*

Figures E1 and E2 are offensive pictures of the former Nigerian president. The pictures are not only created for humour but also as a caricature against the present-day Nigeria and an insult to the number one citizen of Nigeria (Figures E1 and E2).

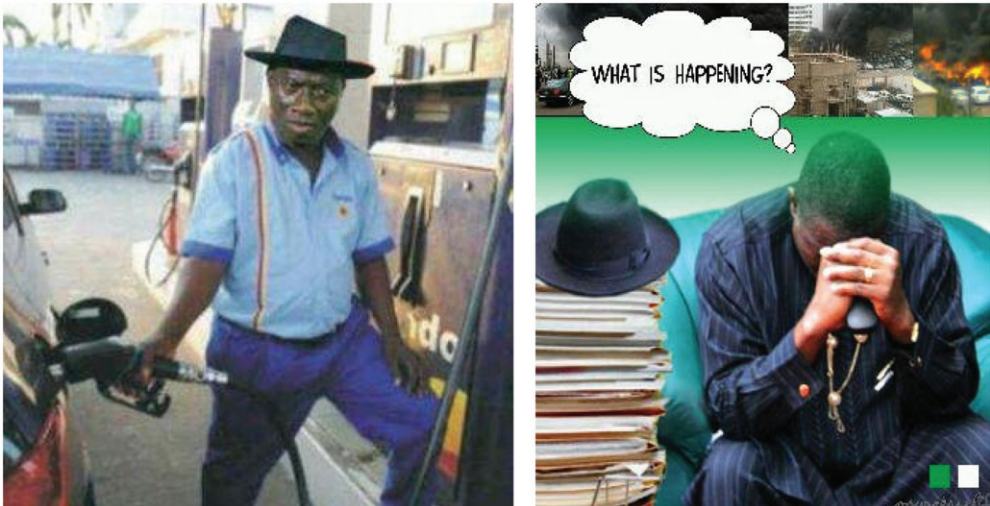


Figure E1 portrays former President Jonathan as an attendant in a petrol filling station, precisely Oando. He is dressed in the uniform of a petrol attendant and is refilling the fuel tank of an undisclosed customer. This picture, no doubt created through a Photoshop, is meant satirize the real situation of Nigerian workers. In the presentation, the President who has been reduced to an ordinary attendant does not have a wrist

watch and by extension, the basic necessities of life. This brings to mind, the humble and poor beginnings of President when he had no shoes, probably to remind Mr. President that he is hurting people of similar backgrounds.

Figure E2 foregrounds President Goodluck Jonathan as one who is in a state of confusion. Dressed in his usual deep blue native Niger Delta regalia, he is seated on a lighter shade of blue sofa with his head bowed, supported with both his fists which are intertwined as if in a dilemma. Enclosed in his joint fingers are his blue spectacle case, in all, he presents the countenance of one who is at the verge of caving in on the pressures tugging at him from every angle – right behind him are different shades of Mayhems probably the effects of the fuel subsidy fracas. The Nigerian nation which he is supposedly in-charge of is presented as ‘burning’ and he seems helpless. Mr. President’s predicament is captured vividly in a thought bubbles that asks a rhetorical question, “WHAT IS HAPPENING?” written in uppercase letters to show emphasis on the level of cluelessness the Present was in at the time. Beside him, to his right, is a high stack of office files, packed full with several layers of white papers which are probably memoranda, open letters, newspaper reports, impeachment notices and so on. His blue hat is placed on the top of the stack of files, which further depicts a grave state of resignation at the events around him. The President’s posture in E2 shows the reaction and state a typical Nigerian man assumes when he is in a dilemma. The significance of E2 is to portray that far beyond the confident appearances that the President put up for the press and public as the Commander-in-Chief of Armed Forces, he is in a tight fix and state of confusion as to how to tackle all the intrigues that accompany the fuel-subsidy saga. Figures E1 and E2 perform assertive acts. The President is as a self-assured and confident sales attendant in E1 and in E2, as a weakling who has lost control of the nation.

### *Abusive placards*

Abusive placards are also other forms of activism in Nigeria. Nigerians who are already tired of the negative socio-political and economic situation resorted to deploying offensive placards which have abuses in them. In this regard, the channel of communication is placards with different inscriptions that mirrored the peculiar mindset of the protesters and the communicative functions, which they intended the linguistic messages to achieve (Figures F1 and F2).



Figures F1 and F2 depict the use of placards in protesting against the fuel subsidy removal. The inscriptions on the placards are carefully written to denigrate President Jonathan. Figure F1 shows a rejection of President Jonathan who had an overwhelming victory in 2011 presidential elections and now a demand for him to vacate his office. Through a stylistic conversion of the president's name from GOODLUCK to BADLUCK, the demonstrators display that the man who they had perceived as a messiah with good fortune has not lived up to expectations but has brought them unpleasant experiences, disappointments and ill fortune by the removal of the oil subsidy. This inscription 'Go Jonathan Go' is a wake-up call and a passionate appeal to the President and the members of his economic team to leave office rather than subjecting Nigerians to adverse/harsh economic policies.

Figure F2 is also a rhetorical plea and call for help from oppression. Two groups of terrorists (oppressors) are identified in the placards – *Boko Haram* and *Jona Haram*. The first group is an identified terror group that has been terrorizing the Northern Nigeria while the second group (President Jonathan and his economic group) is seen as terrorizing the entire nation. Hence, there is special call to God Almighty or international organizations to save Nigeria from later group before the nation goes into extinction. Indeed, with what is playing out now the way the President has handled the 'Chibok Girls Kidnapping' case, it seems this is close to the truth. Figures F1 and F2 perform stipulating acts. Here, the people are categorizing stating or asserting that their expectations have been eroded; *Goodluck turning to Badluck* and Jonathan now a terrorist in the likes of Boko Haram hence *Jona Haram*.

## Conclusion

This article has analyzed different online posts on the 2012 fuel subsidy removal by the 'Occupy Nigeria' group. The findings revealed that the online activist group deployed different visual-pragmatic strategies in representing Nigerian people (including the Nigerian government) and their actions. The protest posts which are classified under six semantic fields, namely divine intervention, security consciousness, innovation, exaggeration, defamation and abusive placards have various visual-pragmatic strategies such as prayer, negative labelling, humour, mockery, abuse, passionate and fierce appeal, including photo trick. The dominant pragmatic acts include: demonstrative, assertive, suppository, condoling and stipulating. The demonstrative acts clearly depict the possibility of miraculously converting Nigeria's unfavourable situation to good while assertive acts portray self confidence and assurance in the disorderly circumstance. In the same vein, while suppository acts conjecture an ironic situation of water and vegetable oil serving as petroleum, condoling and stipulating portray total acceptance of the ugly situation and strong order for a change of the administration headed by former President Goodluck Jonathan. The hidden ideologies underlying the representations are nationalism and belief in the viability of transformed Nigeria. In effect, the protest posts are a call for the leaders to show a deeper sense of responsibility, patriotism and accountability. From all indications, these qualities seem to be missing. All of these acts are ironic within the Nigerian socio-political context they are presented. Therefore, this study has established some pragma-semiotic patterns in

verbal-visual posts in the context of Nigerian online protests. An awareness of the peculiar patterns and use of these patterns is crucial to the understanding and interpretation of socio-political realities of such news events by online consumers.

### Disclosure statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of this article.

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