The Discourse of Terror Threats: Assessing Online Written Threats by Nigerian Terrorist Groups

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ABSTRACT

Online threats by terrorist groups are viewed as a special type of discourse that sends menacing explicit messages, expressing not only an intention to cause a direct physical harm to the threatened, but also to show a commitment to destroy public property or cause a change of system or government. This study applies critical discourse analysis with some insights from pragmatics to analyze the discourse-pragmatic contents of terror threats by two terrorist groups in Nigeria—Boko Haram and Ansaru. Explicit and implied threats are examined from seven online publications by these groups written between 2009 and 2012. This study shows that terror threats by Nigerian terrorist groups are intertextually and ideologically related to threats associated with Al Qaeda and global *jihad*, which also goes further to establish their strong link and influence with other terror groups around the world. The findings also show that the structure of terror threats is significantly different from the conventional formula for verbal threats.

Online Discourse by Terrorist Groups

A good number of studies in communication and social security have established that terrorist groups utilize the Internet for the purpose of propaganda, recruitment, incitement, and radicalization.[1] Extremist groups also utilize social media platforms to issue warnings and threats, as well as disseminate hate speech and linguistic violence against institutions and governments accused of undermining their rights to exist.[2] Anne Aly describes the Internet as "an important tactical tool in the terrorists' repertoire" that constantly provides information and inspiration for radicalization of Internet users—"radicalization" being a "process by which individuals progress from a passive or inactive belief in a particular political, social or ideological dogma to extreme or violent action."[3] This is so, because the Internet has revolutionized communication by dramatically reducing its cost, making the exchange and dissemination of information virtually free. It has also enabled unlimited access to much of the world's knowledge and organizes it systematically, making it easier to find people and create networks among like-minded individuals across geographical boundaries. Online communication has also

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"lowered the threshold for engaging in 'risky' or 'embarrassing' behaviour because it helps to conceal users' identities."[4] According to Anthony Bergin et al.,[5] the Internet facilitates understanding between people of different cultures, but at the same time it serves as a powerful instrument for terrorists to promote their extremist ideology and hatred. Their regular online postings have targeted teenagers and older youths who are the more users of the Internet, and are regularly and systematically being recruited, trained, and radicalized. Various Web forums and chat rooms have also been used to entice and recruit supporters and identify prospective members who out of curiosity and sympathy for extremist groups have been influenced in one way or another. Bergin and colleagues further observe that the writings of terrorist leaders are frequently posted on popular websites and bomb-making information is freely available on some websites.[6] Very often, websites by extremists suddenly emerge, and their formats are also frequently modified, and then suddenly disappear. In some cases, it is the online addresses that change but much of their original contents are retained.[7] These websites generally target current and potential supporters, international public opinion, and enemy publics; and extremist activities on the websites range from psychological warfare and propaganda to fundraising, data mining, and coordination of actions. And as *jihadists* (old and new) grow their online presence and extensively use the Internet, they have used this opportunity to plan and prepare terrorist attacks.[8]

In another study, Tolga Koker and Carlos L. Yordan[9] argue that terrorist groups are "pressure groups with an inner hard core of activists and an outer ring of non-activists. By definition, hardcore activists seek recruits by propagating their views in order to win more support for their particular cause. Recruits, who tend to be non-activists at the time of recruitment, increase the organization's power base. The resulting collectivity professes support for a specific cause, thus forming a pressure group."

The Nigerian Islamist militant groups have used Twitter to spread threats and hate speech as well as linguistic violence. *Boko Haram* for example, has used Twitter to enunciate their ideological position and accuse northern Nigerian governors of compromising Islamic teachings. They have also applied Twitter to assert their identity and goals as well as mobilize supporters.[10] According to Neal Ungerleider,[11] radical groups and terrorist organizations like *Al Shabaab* of Somalia have utilized the Internet to recruit and radicalize young Americans and their forms of activism have involved the use of social media to manage their public diplomacy and confront regional enemies.[12]

In spite of the growing literature on Boko Haram and their global terrorist connections, questions are still being asked about the power of the group's links, influences, and funding. This question has been examined by scholars researching in global peace and security studies.[13] Contrasting Boko Haram (BH) from the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), and the Movement for the Actualization for the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), which are essentially ethic militia groups in terms of scope and objectives, Shannon Connell likens BH to Al Qaeda splinter groups such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and Al Shabaab of Somalia, which have increasingly become radicalized.[14] The current study joins other studies in security research literature to establish the global terrorist affiliations of BH from the linguistic structures of online terror threats. Hence, this study examines (1) the evaluative structures of terror threats issued by *Boko Haram* and *Ansaru* to the Nigerian government and newspaper organizations in the country;

(2) how these terror threats are intertextually related to global *jihadist* ideology; and (3) the discourse-pragmatic structures and functions of the terror threats as they contribute to further worsening the security situation in Nigeria.

Nigeria's Boko Haram and Ansaru

Boko Haram and Ansaru are two extremist groups that have claimed responsibility for a series of terrorist attacks in northern Nigeria in the last couple of years. They are seeking the creation of an independent Islamic state in northern Nigeria solely administered by *Sharia* laws. They are also asking for the unconditional release of their members imprisoned by the Nigerian government. They claim to reject Western civilization, including education and social lifestyle, and have carried out attacks on schools and beer halls.[15] They have mainly targeted Christians, the Nigerian police and security agents, as well as international interests including the bombing of the UN building in Abuja in 2011 in which over twenty people were killed. BH, for example, has been responsible for several bomb attacks that destroyed entire villages and rendered several thousands of people homeless and have kidnapped and killed school children in many part of northeastern Nigeria.[16] The kidnap of over 200 school girls at Chibok in Borno State in April 2014 is an example. Up until the time of this research, the kidnapped girls have not been rescued. In another school attacked on 10 November 2014, a suicide bomber believed to be a BH member had disguised himself as student and blew himself up during a morning assembly at the Government Science Secondary School at Potiskum in Yobe State, killing forty-seven students and injuring another seventy-nine. The group is said to have split into three factions operating in Cameroon, Chad, and Niger with some possible links to some terrorist groups in North Africa. One of these factions is the Ansaru.

Although an offshoot of BH, Ansaru's activities appear to portray a wider regional focus. They criticize BH for their indiscriminate extreme actions and the killing of Muslims. While the U.S. State Department describes BH as "a Nigerian-based militant group with links to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) that is responsible for thousands of deaths in northeast and central Nigeria over the last several years including targeted killings of civilians," Ansaru is said to focus on Nigerian military and Western targets.[17] They took responsibility for the abduction of seven European and Middle East construction workers in Bauchi State, who they later claimed to have killed, to avenge "transgressions" by European nations in Mali and Afghanistan, where Western forces were battling Islamist insurgents.[18] From time to time these groups issue online written warnings and threats to the government and security agents; at some other times the threats are verbal with accompanying video recordings on YouTube displaying some kidnapped victims or their bombing activities.

The two groups are affiliates of global *jihadist* movements. Under the late Ibrahim Yusuf, BH sought to create an Islamic State in Northern Nigeria after the model of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Yusuf believed that the Islamic State should be established in Nigeria and possibly the whole world through the preaching of the "faith" (*dawa'a*). Under Abubakar Shekau, however, BH has sought to achieve this objective not only through *dawa'a*, but also through violent *jihad*. Boko Haram's name since July 2010 (i.e., *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad*) incorporates both the terms *dawa'a* from Yusuf and *jihad* from Shekau. In English, the name translates to "Sunni Group for Preaching and Jihad."[19] Pérouse de Montclos argues that "the potential for Boko Haram to evolve from being a local to a regional or

global threat is clear, and there are signs that several Boko Haram factions have already abandoned Nigeria-oriented objectives in favor of embracing transnational militant objectives" (137). The group, which has established funding, training, recruiting, and logistical networks with other Islamist groups in Africa (particularly in northern Mali and Somalia), had in April 2012 allied with the *Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa* (MUJWA), AQIM, and *Ansar Dine* in northern Mali, and has fought alongside these groups since, 2013.[20] Boko Haram's strong connection and funding was further confirmed in 2015, when Al Qaeda was said to donate $500 million (N80 billion) to BH prior to the Nigerian general elections, in order to support their efforts to remove the "infidels" in government and install Muslim candidates from the North. The money was meant for the purchase of arms to begin strategic attacks ahead of the 2015 elections.[21] Members of the group recruited from Nigeria, Chad, Benin, and Cameroon are referred to as the "Nigerian Taliban" due to their adherence to the theology of the Taliban in Afghanistan, which BH has often cited as their source of inspiration along with Osama bin Laden.[22] BH's anti-Western and anti-education positions stem from the fear that Muslims in northern Nigeria were fast losing their Muslim identity to Christianity and Western influences. Besides, the failure of the Nigerian government to provide infrastructure and social services to the people of Northern Nigeria did not warrant the peoples' allegiance (so BH claimed). BH wants Northern Nigeria to return to the rule of a Caliphate, as it was prior to the Amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914. Northern Nigeria, southern Niger and Cameroon were then under the rule of the Sokoto Caliphate between 1850 and 1960.[23] This is similar to the goal of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—to establish a Caliphate of all Muslims under one supreme leader. A caliphate is a traditional Muslim form of government, in which the leader (or *caliph*) is viewed as a political and religious successor to the Prophet Muhammad. Presently, the Islamic State's caliphate is thought to include several cities across northern Iraq and Syria.[24]

In November 2012, the BH leader, in a 39-minute video entitled: "glad tidings, o' soldiers of Allah," posted in a *jihadist* forum, praised *jihadist* movements across the world and in particular, labeled the United States, Britain, Israel, and Nigeria as enemies of Islam. Shekau further pledged solidarity with Islamist fighters everywhere. According to Reuters (UK), the message was rendered in Arabic and translated by the SITE monitoring service. Part of the announcement reads: "Nigeria and other crusaders, meaning America and Britain, should witness, and the Jews of Israel who are killing the Muslims in Palestine should witness … that we are with our Mujahedeen brothers in the cause of Allah everywhere."[25]

In a similar message, Shekau, on behalf of BH, joined other terrorist groups in Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia to pledge their allegiance to ISIS on 17 March 2015. In the message, he told Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (known to his followers as "Ibrahim Caliph"): "we announce our allegiance to the Caliph … and will hear and obey in times of difficulty and prosperity. We call on Muslims everywhere to pledge allegiance to the Caliph."[26] Al-Baghdadi quickly accepted Shekau's pledge of allegiance, formalizing a strong alliance between the two ruthless groups. Apart from the Al Qaeda leader (Ayman al-Zawahiri), who has not pledged his allegiance, al-Baghdadi, in November 2014, had accepted similar pledges of allegiance from *jihadists* in Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia.[27] According to Jim Muir (a BBC news correspondent in Beirut), this alliance means that BH has become a global franchise. Unfortunately, the Nigerian government had viewed this development as a sign that BH was defeated—a spurious claim that the current Buhari government has maintained since it came to power on 29 May 2015. To prove them wrong, however, BH has

carried out series of attacks, some of which have been their "deadliest" in northern Nigeria since the new government was sworn in.[28] According to Amnesty International, about 1,600 people have been killed since June 2015 in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon.[29] Before Buhari was elected, he had claimed that no government would claim to have defeated BH if the over 200 kidnapped Chibok schoolgirls were not found. As of the time of this research, the girls were still missing.

Interestingly, Ansaru, who had not been in the news for a long time, surfaced briefly on YouTube in March 2015 with an 18-minute production that accused the Nigerian government of carrying out illegal killings and victimization of *jihadist* movements. Some of the scenes in the videos allegedly showed soldiers beheading Muslims and Christians burning Muslims alive. The video director therefore urged Muslims in Nigeria to support Ansaru and join the war against non-Muslims. The video further argues that: "inactiveness can no longer help. God has brought a solution to your problem, and that solution is Ansaru. Its role is to enlighten and wage jihad in the cause of God. It is also to protect Muslims' lives and property."[30] It ended by denouncing BH as being anti-Muslim. Ansaru's *jihad* was said to be different from that of BH, which attacks Muslims and mosques. So far, Ansaru *jihadist* activities have not been as profound as that of BH. They appear to have gone underground in the last couple of years, although they have issued several online threats.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Terrorism Discourse

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is both theory and method of the study of language use that shows how language works in sociocultural and political contexts, focusing on power relations and ideological positions reflected in discourse texts, and their wider implications for the society. As a theory, CDA draws on the neo-Marxist/heuristic position of the Frankfurt School, which argues that all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are socially and historically situated; facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription, and that language is central to the formation of subjectivity.[31] CDA is equivalent to content analysis as is used in communication studies and other social science—about the examination of contents, in terms of themes, patterns, and biases.

According to Teun van Dijk, CDA primarily centers on the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context.[32] Hence, CDA identifies social problems expressed or reflected in texts (such as terror threats) as one of its main objectives and the possibility of finding solutions to them.[33] However, solutions to certain social problems are very difficult to find, especially those that are systematically sustained by cultures and religions, and have been accepted as the norm, where a problem no longer appears as a problem. Such problems are often learned, memorized, defended, and adopted as a life-style. For example, religious extremism is not usually viewed by terrorists as a social problem, rather as a religious responsibility and sacrifice that attracts divine blessings. Thus, ideologies of religious radicalism and terrorism are viewed as divine and unchanging. Terror threats express ideologies of religion; in the current study, all written threats in the data are intertextually related to some global threats associated with Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. Also, terror threats (as in this study) reflect the identities, personalities and potentials of the threateners. They further express

evaluations and stances that reflect the positions of the threateners in relation to the threat-ened and the wider society. Hence, the structure of threats in terrorism discourse is slightly different from the conventional conditional formula of threats already established in the tra-ditional pragmatics literature.

Methodologically, CDA (as this study shows) adopts a linguistic analytical approach that examines the social character of texts. This approach was developed from the Systemic Func-tional Linguistics (SFL) particularly associated with Michael Halliday.[34] It is concerned with the relationship with language and other aspects of social life, particularly illustrating the social functions of linguistic elements within discourse texts in some particular contexts.

Ruth Wodak's discourse-historical approach (DHA) (which is also relevant to this study), highlights the relationship between language and the historical context of texts, and how texts draw on existing (or previous) texts in an intertextual relationships.[35] For instance, this study shows that significantly, the main arguments of Al Qaeda's *jihadism* are re-enacted, re-echoed, and recontexualized in the Nigerian situation by Boko Haram and Ansaru. And these are expressed in the threats under study. In the context of this study, the understanding of a terrorist group's identity as the agent and their social class or social history, education among others, becomes crucial to the interpretation of the threats the group produces. Also, a prior understanding of the Nigerian social and cultural context becomes very important to the understanding of the situations of the threatener and the threatened and the demands of the terrorist group in question vis-à-vis their threats.

Threat as a Discourse-Pragmatic Concept

Verbal threats are intentional acts that use language to send a message "conveying both the intention to perform an act that the addressee will view unfavourably and the intention to intimidate the addressee."[36] They are like any other pragmatic/commissive act that depends on the illocutionary force of the utterance. According to Antonio B. Salgueiro,[37] threat and promise are the two sides of the same coin since they "constitute an inseparable pair" and perform "directive-commissive acts."[38] However, threatening is viewed as an "intrinsically hostile act,"[39] while promising is not. Bruce Fraser also distinguished between promising, warning and threatening as different types of commissive acts. Interestingly, in the context of terrorism discourse, threats sometimes appear as promises, where the actual word "prom-ise" is used, but the content and structure of the message is a threat. And as John Searle pointed out, most of our communicative encounters are realized indirectly;[40] thus, threats in this context not only perform commissive acts, but also other speech/pragmatic acts identi-fied by Searle (e.g., representative–informing, asserting, stating); directive (i.e., ordering/commanding); and declarative (i.e.. making pronouncements).

Antonio Salgueiro, however, argues that "the most interesting promises and threats are those in which the main objective of the utterance is not commissive (i.e. to commit *S* condi-tionally or unconditionally to do something), but directive (to get *R*, the receiver, to do something)."[41] Hence, he distinguished between "commissive-conditional promises or threats" and "directive-commissive conditional promises or threats." "In a commissive con-ditional promise or threat, the speaker's future action is conditional on the satisfaction of some condition, but the main objective of the promise or threat is not to get *R* to bring about the satisfaction of that condition, which it is typically not within the receiver's power to do."

This proposition follows the general traditional understanding of threats as a type of commissive promise that takes place in normal everyday life.

Not many studies have examined threats from a background where violence and threats of violence is linked with some cultural and historical reasons—where terrorism and religious extremism are viewed as a revenge act for some perceived victimization that happened in the past. In this context, threats assume a new meaning and new pragmatic structures. Interestingly, the present study will show that threats by terrorist groups do not necessarily anticipate the performance of certain conditions; they appear rather like simple commissive acts, where the speaker commits himself to the performance of a future act. In other words, the threatened future action is detrimental to the receiver and/or is at least believed to be so by the threatener, the receiver, or both. Here, warnings or threats are handed down like an unconditional promise, where the performance of the threat is viewed as retaliation to a perceived injustice, or denial of some rights. Because threats by terrorist groups often appear like a commissive promise or a mere information of a predetermined future action, the threatened sometimes questions what the conditions are to be met in order to the avoid the threatened outcome or what the threatener really wants.

Online Written Threats

A written threat has been defined by Sharon S. Smith as any "written information which implies or explicitly states the potential of harm delivered to targets or victims, or agents acting in their behalf."[42] This will include letters, cards, or notes that communicate threats that intimidate the receiver or place the threatened in fear. James R. Fitzgerald (a former Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] Supervisory Special Agent), further defines a threatening communication as "a verbalized, written, or electronically transmitted statement that states or suggests that some event will occur that will negatively affect the recipient, someone or something associated with him/her, or specified or non-specified."[43] The California State Penal Code Section 422 gives a more comprehensive definition of threat, which covers the definition used in the present study. It views a threat as a "willful" act, where a person or group,

> … threatens to commit a crime which will result in death or great bodily injury to another person, with the specific intent that the statement, made verbally, in writing, or by means of an electronic communication device, is to be taken as a threat, even if there is no intent of actually carrying it out, which, on its face and under the circumstances in which it is made, is so unequivocal, unconditional, immediate, and specific as to convey to the person threatened, a gravity of purpose and an immediate prospect of execution of the threat, and thereby causes that person reasonably to be in sustained fear for his or her own safety or for his or her immediate family…[44]

In computer-mediated communications (CMC), written threats may come in form of e-mails, text messages, tweets, blogs, or Facebook posts written to individuals or groups. It may also include stalking, where mobile technology or social networking sites are used to track a victim involving some resemblances of writing. In the context of the present study, online written threats include all forms of written threatening communication on the Internet targeted at individuals, governments, or institutions expressing a resolve or commitment of the threatener to harm, kill, or destroy the threatened. Some of such messages threaten to overthrow governments or make certain countries or states ungovernable in an effort to

cause a desired result, challenge authority, show intent of purpose, to further negotiations, or to attract media attention.[54]

Some studies in psychology and security studies have questioned whether all threateners indeed have the capacity and resources to carry out their threats since people hardly always say what they mean and do not always mean what they say (or write). Sharon Smith, for instance, examines whether certain threatener characteristics relate to the danger associated with the threat; whether or not targeted violence is likely to occur and how using some valid predictors can enable security agents to identify and possibly arrest certain threateners and protect the threatened. The study concludes that although there are no social, demographic, and psychological characteristics of the threatener associated with the outcome of threats, there are social and demographic characteristics of the victim or target associated with the outcome of a threat. The research further argues that there are language features, document features, and methods used to communicate threats associated with the outcome of a threat case.[55] In the Nigerian situation however, with a close examination of the activities of the Nigerian terrorist groups, any observer is likely to conclude that the Islamist groups may be identified with some obvious social and psychological characteristics contrary to the position of Smith's findings. For instance, Boko Haram and Ansaru generally appear reclusive and are full of hate for opposing views; they appear unsociable and averse to social change; they are also intolerant to contrary religious positions and practices. The sects have also consistently carried out their threats, while the performance of certain threats is still in progress. Interestingly, these Islamists are said to be better armed than the Nigerian armed forces and possess a very strong funding base for their activities.[56]

Methodology

The data for this study are online written threats contained in seven online publications referred to as "statement," "message," or "open letter," accredited to Boko Haram and Ansaru. Most of these online publications (published between 2009 and 2012) were originally written in Hausa and translated into English, most likely by some educated (English-speaking) members of the groups. According to Daniel Agbiboa (a researcher in international affairs at the University of Oxford), membership of the sects is varied, including university lecturers, bankers, political elites, and so on from northern Nigeria, Niger, and Chad.[57] This crop of educated members could have provided some forms of translation of the online messages where necessary. As at the time of the research, the seven postings were the only English translations of the threats that the researcher could find, since more of the online public statements of the groups are made via videos. The current study concentrates only on written statements and not videos but it is also possible that the sample statements are written versions of what could been shown in videos. The data therefore represent what terror threats by the Nigerian terrorist groups look like. The data are culled from the following online publications:

- Boko Haram's open letter to the Kano State Governor (August 2011) (see http://muhdlawal.wordpress.com/2012/01/22/bokoharams-open-letter-to-kano-state-governor-august-2011/
- Boko Haram's statement (9 August 2009) (see Vanguard, 9 August 2009)
- Boko Haram's statement (published in Leadership, 25 April 2011)

- Boko Haram Leader's (Imam Abubakar Shekau) message to President Jonathan (12 January 2012)
- Boko Haram video transcription (1 May 2012). (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDqv6srmoI4)
- Why we kidnapped the 7 foreign workers—Ansaru (see http://www.africanspotlight.com/2013/02/18//why-we-kidnapped-the-7-foreign-workers-new-terror-group-ansaru)
- Copy of Statement: Ansaru group claims it killed 7 foreign hostages, states reason (see http://www.africanspotlight.com/2013/03/09/video-copy-of-statement-ansaru-group-claim-it-killed-7-foreign-hostages-states-reason/)

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of data is essentially qualitative, an approach involving some descriptive and critical interpretive CDA. Some consistent linguistic structure of terrorist threats is described alongside their discursive-pragmatic functions. Implicit threats are also identified and analyzed. However, only a few of the threats in the data are reproduced in the analysis. "SP" stands for "sample."

Evaluative Structures of Terror Threats

Evaluation in the context of this study is used in two senses, namely, expressing positive and negative judgments, and expressing the point of narrative (i.e., what the narrator is getting at).[58] As a discourse structure, some of the threat messages appear as narratives, where the writers explain the reason(s) for some previous and future actions. In these narratives, the actions of the threatener as the agent are usually positively constructed, and in most cases, instances of victimization are cited as the justification for the threatened action. Some of the messages that contain threats (as narratives) begin with self identification of the writer or other affiliated sources. Some examples from the data are shown below:

   SP1. This is a message from jamaatu ahlis sunnah lil daawati wal jihad, and we wish to inform Nigerians our reasons for attacking some media houses…
   SP2. This is a message from the public awareness department of the Jamatu Ahlis sunnah lil daawati wal jihad, a group engaged in jihad in Nigeria…
   SP3. I, Sheikh Muhammed Abdulazeez Ibn Idris, the 2nd Commander in charge of southern and northern Borno after Imam Abubakar Shekau of Jamaatul Ahjlil Sunna lidawati wal Jihad otherwise known as Boko Haram…

This structure of introductions tends to give the messages and threats the tone of confidence and certainty. It also tends to erase any doubt about the sources and authenticity of the messages. The writer also probably relies on some presupposed (illocutionary) force of the message; for example, sending fear on the mind of the reader. Already, the name "Boko Haram" sends a chill on the spine of some northern Nigerians. Hence, messages that come with a formal announcement about their sources (i.e., from the dreaded group) tend to win an emotional war in advance. In the same vein, some of the threats are introduced as a confident follow-up on a previous message or action of the group, making some of the introductions sound blatant and arrogant. For example:

SP4. having got the clear picture of what happened, it have come our notice that the present police commissioner, director state security service (dsss) and ward heads have jointly started arresting our members in your state (Kano) known to you or not, a situation which we will not take lightly by the grace of Allah.

SP5. We want to reiterate that we are warriors who are carrying out Jihad (religious war) in Nigeria and our struggle is based on the traditions of the holy prophet… (Boko Haram, 2011)

In the examples above the introductions comprise implied threats from the start. In **SP4** above, the police commissioner is accused of arresting some sect members and should expect some forms of retaliation. A message introduced this way, already suggests that the threatener is not ready for any form of negotiation. The content of the "message" simply narrates instances of attack on sect members and what the group was ready to do.

Interestingly, while the threat narratives contain openings and introductions, there is no consistent structure of closing in the messages. Even those that start with formal introductions lack formal closings or sign offs; most of them simply end as either implied or explicit threats such as: "we do not believe in the Nigerian judicial system and we will fight anyone who assists the government in perpetrating illegalities." However, two of the messages in the data by Boko Haram contain religious sign offs, as shown below:

SP6. This is what God has told me to explain. Allhamdulillah!

SP7. Al Hakubarah

As part of their evaluative structures, the threat messages present points of view or stances, where the threateners position themselves as victims of brutality by the Nigerian government or their agents. The Nigerian government and security agencies are represented as the actual terrorists, who harass sect members at will. In the following samples from the data, the writers explicitly and implicitly state that Muslims were arrested and killed by the Kano state government.

SP8. We want to make it clear that the country called Nigeria belongs to Allah; same thing Kano and we are servant of Allah. Therefore our members should allow to stay where ever they wish. We did not touch you, therefore our members (Muslims) should not be touched…

SP9. This is almost 11 yrs. our members are being killed! Anything people want to say or do, we say enough is enough!

SP10. These same security agents attitude made MAIDUGURI, which is known as home of peace before to what it is today because they know is not their home town. Therefore these their URGLY ATTITUDE MUST be check and stop with immediate effect and all those arrested should be released immediately, otherwise, I SWEAR WITH ALMIGHTY ALLAH who created Heaven and Earth… (Boko Haram's letter to the Kano state governor, 2011).

In SP8 above, the writer further implies that Muslims were discriminated against and probably hindered from occupying certain territories in the north east. These claims and accusations are serious and the writers deliberately take the stance of people in a revenge mission. The claims therefore make an emotional appeal to the reader, especially those targeted as potential Islamist recruits, and Boko Haram's attacks are to be viewed as a legitimate reaction to intimidation, arrests and killing of Muslims. The claimed police harassment of Muslims is referred to in SP10 as the "ugly attitude" of security agents. Curious enough, prior to these accusations, there were no reports either from the media, or from any section of northern Muslims that certain Islamic sects were ill-treated. Although it has been argued that part of Boko Haram's insurgency is caused by poverty and unemployment,[59] the issue

of exclusion of Muslims from certain regions of Kano state has never been raised. Yet, the writers representing all (radical) Muslims are constructed as victims of state marginalization and attack. Interestingly, however, most liberal Muslims in Nigeria have denounced and distanced themselves from the extreme position and activities of Boko Haram.[60]

Intertextuality and Ideology in Terror Threats

Although Boko Haram did not appear to make any clear demand before the beginning of heavy bombings and gun attacks in northeast Nigeria, it is clear that all terrorist groups are governed by the religious ideology of "just war" or "defensive *jihad*" originally espoused by Al Qaeda leaders.[61] This is embodied in the word "*Jihad*" (in SP13 below), referred to as "holy war" or "just war."[62] Hence, the structure of BH threats is intextually related to the threats that are well associated with Al Qaeda.

Intertextuality of texts means that texts are connected with other texts both past and present, either through explicit reference to a topic or main actor; through references to the same events; by allusions or evocation, or by the transfer of some main arguments to new contexts (i.e., recontextualisation).[63] Threats issued by the Nigerian terrorist groups re-echo similar threats by Osama bin Laden. The late Al Qaeda leader and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri had for instance, made the ideological position and political demands of the Islamist *jihadists* very clear. In his "declaration of jihad against the United States and its allies"—including "alliances of Jews, Christians and their agents" in 1996, bin Laden had called on Muslims all over the world to "kill the American and their allies, civilians and military … and fight the pagans all together … until there is no more tumult or oppression…"[64] The "oppression" in question is the American "aggression" in the Arab world. This call has remained the overriding framework upon which terrorist movements carry out their activities. Some of Boko Haram's statements have also re-echoed this ideological goal. For example, their declaration of *jihad* in Nigeria is in order to "Islamise Nigeria and ensure the rule of the majority Muslims in the country."[65] Although they had made some allusions to the "killing of Muslims" in the north by security agents in one of their threats, the most specific reason for their threats and attacks is the killing of their leader (Mohammed Yusuf) by the Nigerian police in 2009. They hinted this in the preamble of one of the statements: "For the first time since the killing of Mallam Mohammed Yusuf our leader, we hereby make the following statements:."

Thus, rather than the conventional linguistic formula for threats in everyday discourse (i.e., "if you do this, I'll do this…" or "you do… or I'll do…"), the structure of threats in the discourse of terrorism as in the present study will appear like the following: "Because you've done this, I/we will do this…" or "I/we will do this, because of this…"

The assumed action of the threatened that warrants the threat is sometimes not clearly stated, and in some cases, they appear like mere accusations. Some few instances of threats by the terrorist groups however, give reasons for their actions and threats. In what appears like a condition, the threat in SP14 below for instance, adds a clause like "as long as the government does not retract on its policies." In other words, the attack promised the French government might be suspended if the French government changes its policies in the interest of Muslims living in its territory. In a similar, earlier threat by Ayman al-Zawahiri to the United States and its allies in 2005, the threatening statement gave the reason for the threatened terrorist attacks and ended with certain "conditions" for peace in the following words:

> **SP11.** You shed rivers of blood in our land so we exploded volcanoes of anger in your
> land. … Our message to you is crystal clear: Your salvation will only come in your with-
> drawal from our land, in stopping the robbing of our oil and resources, and in stopping
> your support for the corrupt and corrupting leaders.[66]

Notice the same structure: "you did that, so we did this…" Interestingly, threats by terror-
ist groups are issued in the name of God since *jihad* is viewed as God's war. Osama bin
Laden had also employed some well known Quranic injunctions against failing to contribute
to "the cause of God" to appeal to Muslims to support Al Qaeda and its *jihadist* affiliates in
Iraq politically, financially, and militarily.[67] Boko Haram also intertextually enunciates this
assumed divine mandate in the following words:

> "… we are warriors who are carrying out Jihad in Nigeria and our struggle is based on the tradi-
> tions of the holy prophet. We will never accept any system of government apart from the one
> stipulated by Islam because that is the only way that the Muslims can be liberated…[68]

> We follow the tenets of the Quran and anybody that thinks he can fight God shouldn't think his
> prayer or praying in the mosque can save him. … We follow the teachings of the Quran. This is
> what God has told me to explain…[69]

According to Christopher Blanchard "Bin Laden and other leading Al Qaeda figures have
referred to their public statements as important primary sources for parties seeking to
understand Al Qaeda's ideology and political demands…" and terrorism analysts believe
that these campaigns have been designed to elicit psychological reactions and communicate
complex political messages to a global audience as well as to specific subpopulations in the
Islamic world, the West and Asia and these "messages contain signals that inform and
instruct operatives to prepare for and carry out new attacks" (1); thus, making the cam-
paigns/messages potential threats.

Interestingly also, threats by other terrorists group in Africa (e.g., Somalia) follow sim-
ilar linguistic structure as identified above. The example below (i.e., SP12) is a threat by
the *Al Shabaab* of Somalia. This threat was part of a statement in which they vowed to
revenge on the United States for the death of one of its top leaders in an American air-
strike that also killed a number of civilians outside Mogadishu in September 2014.[70] The
declaration was made "for the sake of God." Compare SP12 with SP13; the latter is a
threat (or warning) issued by bin Laden to the United States in 2006 in which he
"informed" the United States that Al Qaeda was preparing new attacks.[71] Both threats
appear as declaratives.

> **SP12.** If you think jihad will stop after killing men, we say, that is a lie. … You non-
> believer Obama, we tell you now is the time for war for the sake of God.
> **SP13.** The operations are under preparation and you will see them in your houses as soon
> as they are complete, God willing. … The proof of that is the explosions you have
> seen in the capitals of European nations.[72]

It is quite clear therefore, that Boko Haram's position and ideology are a reflection and
recontextualization of Al Qaeda's overall goals and activities. Their structure of threats is a
replica of those issued by Al Qaeda leaders (living or dead), as well as other terrorist groups
operating in Africa, which also reflects Boko Haram's ideological origin and identity. Boko
Haram had since declared it allegiance to Al Qaeda and in March 2015, the group also

officially swore its allegiance to and support for the Islamic State (ISIS), which rules a self-declared caliphate in parts of Iraq and Syria.[73]

Discourse-Pragmatic Structures of Terror Threats

Threats are traditionally structured as conditionals (i.e., the conditional "if you do/don't do…I'll do…" or a disjunction "you do…or I'll do…").[74] Although, it may be argued that threats are not conditionally structured across cultures; however, it is certain that threats are a universal currency that has similar structure and import across cultures. For instance, a threat such as "we shall make your cities ungovernable" may be rendered in different languages or perceived differently by individuals and groups, will stand as a threat in most places. In Nigeria, for instance, in spite of our divergent cultures and demographical differences, we perceive threats the same way, especially those posed by Boko Haram and Ansaru. The Boko Haram attacks for the first have brought Nigerians together speaking with one voice in commendation of the attacks.[75]

However, many terrorist threats in the data appear as simple/complex declarative sentences that simply give information, make claims and assertions; thus they perform John Searle's "representative acts."[76] SP14—SP15 are examples from the data:

SP14. We are informing the government of France that we would continue to attack its citizens anywhere in the world as long as the government does not retract on its policies.[77]

SP15. We follow the tenets of the Quran and anybody that thinks he can fight God shouldn't think his prayer or praying in the mosque can save him! Any Muslim that cheats and hides under the cloak of religion, if we know such person, we won't hesitate to eliminate him.[78]

While the above examples give information and express the intention to perform actions, some others in the data, make declarations and pronouncements. Such pronouncements or "statements" are often introduced by—*that clause* as in the following examples:

SP16. "For the first time since the killing of Mallam Mohammed Yusuf, our leader, we hereby make the following statements:

That we have started a Jihad in Nigeria which no force on earth can stop…

SP17. *That* from the Month of August, we shall carry out series of bombing in Southern and Northern Nigerian cities, beginning with Lagos, Ibadan, Enugu and Port Harcourt…"

SP18. *That* we shall make the country ungovernable, kill and eliminate irresponsible political leaders of all leanings, hunt and gun down those who oppose the rule of Sharia in Nigeria and ensure that the infidel does not go unpunished…

SP19. *That* very soon, we shall stir Lagos, the evil city and Nigeria's South West and South East, in a way no one has ever done before. Al Hakubarah.[79]

Since a threat is understood as any information that explicitly or implicitly states the potential of harm to a target or prospective victim, the above declarations are viewed as expressing both explicit and implicit threats. SP8 (part of the open letter to the Kano state governor) for instance, makes an implicit claim that Muslims are not allowed to stay anywhere they wish in Kano, thereby establishing the reason for the threat. The writer (or speaker), however, did not explain in the "open letter" his reasons for the threat other than the repeated statement that Kano/Nigeria "belongs to Allah." But the statement implies that

Muslims in Kano are either victimized or denied certain rights as citizens of the state. Unfortunately, threats issued by Boko Haram often suggest that the threatened does not have to commit any offense or is required to perform some conditions other than being a Muslim. In other words, the only condition to avoid being attacked is to accept Islam as a religion especially in the northern states.

Moreover, in explaining "commissive conditional promise or threat"[80] Antonio Salgueiro argues that the speaker's future action is conditional on the satisfaction of some condition, but the main objective of the promise or threat is not to get the promisee or the threatened to perform that condition, which it is often not within his power to perform. For instance, (using Salgueiro's example):

(i) If I win the lottery, (I promise that) I'll buy you a car
(ii) If they make me head of the department, I'll make life impossible for you[81]

In either the promise or threat above, neither the promiser nor the threatened can influence the performance of the condition in order to enjoy the fulfillment of the promise or suffer the performance of the threat. In example (ii), the threat may never even be carried out since it depends on a condition beyond the threatener and the threatened. In the same vein, the Nigerian security situation is more complex in the sense that where Boko Haram or Ansaru puts up a condition or a demand at all, such conditions are generally not within the power of the threatened government or the institutions to perform. Take the following directive-commissive threats for example:

We are informing the government of France that we would continue to attack its citizens anywhere in the world as long as the government does not retract on its policies. (SP14 above)

SP20. We do not believe in any system of government, be it traditional or orthodox, except the Islamic system which is why we will keep on fighting against democracy, capitalism, socialism and whatever. We will not allow the Nigerian Constitution to replace the laws that have been enshrined in the Holy Qur'an; we will not allow adulterated conventional education (Boko) to replace Islamic teachings. We will not respect the Nigerian government because it is illegal…[82]

In the two samples above, the threats, "…we would continue to attack its (French) citizens anywhere in the world…" and "…we will keep on fighting against democracy, capitalism, socialism and whatever…" are commissive acts whose conditions are impossible to meet. For instance, Ansaru's threat to continue attacking French nationals anywhere in the world is intended to force France to change its policy against Islamist extremism. One of such "policies," which Ansaru had earlier explained as their reason for killing some French construction workers, was to avenge "transgressions" by European nations in Mali and Afghanistan, where Western forces are battling Islamist insurgents.[83] France had led a military operation that toppled the proposed Islamic state of northern Mali in April 2012 and had announced that its military offensive that freed northern Mali would be replaced by an operation spanning the entire Sahel region to combat extremist violence.[84] Since it is impossible to cooperate with Islamist extremist to achieve a *jihad* around the world or to allow Boko Haram to destroy democracy in Nigeria in other to establish an Islamic state governed solely by *Sharia* laws, their threats and attacks are most likely to continue. In the example below, Boko Haram was

asking for the release of their members in police custody in Kano state as a condition for peace, again this was difficult to be carried out.

> **SP21.** …all those arrested should be released immediately, otherwise, I swear with Almighty Allah who created Heaven and Earth. … We may be force to deploy our men to your state Kano and make it worse than Maiduguri by the grace of Allah.

Threats as directive-commissive acts in this context show that they are pre-determined without conditionals and where conditions occur at all, they are either not intended to be performed or they are impossible to be carried out. This leaves a very grim and unlikely future of peace in Nigeria as long as the Nigerian government is not prepared to accede to the (almost impossible) demands of the extremist groups.

Interestingly, one of the conditions for a speech act to count as a promise according to Searle is that the promise must be in the advantage of the "promisee," and the difference between a promise and a threat is that "a promise is a pledge to do something *for* you, not *to* you … a threat is a pledge to do something *to* you, not *for* you…"[85] In the context of terrorist threats however, a "promise" by Boko Haram or Ansaru on the surface appears as if it is *to do* something *for* you when in actual fact, it is meant to do something *to you*. In SP22 below, the "promise" in question is actually a threat.

> **SP22.** We *promise* the West and Southern Nigeria, a horrible pastime. We shall focus on these areas which is the devil empire and has been the one encouraging and sponsoring Western Civilization into the shores of Nigeria.

Going by Searle's distinction between a promise and threat, although the Promiser may use the word "promise" as in the above example, there is no promise unless it is to the advantage of the Promisee. And because it is not often conventional to say: "I/we threaten you," terrorist groups (e.g., Boko Haram) would prefer to use the expression: "we promise," when in actual fact, they mean "we threaten." A similar example in SP23 below is a threat where again the word "promise" is used.

> **SP23.** We promise to demolish 500 buildings for any one of our houses that the government destroys.[86]

Similarly, warnings by the groups manifest as threats both in their linguistic and discursive forms. In SP24, the threat of harm to some kidnapped persons came as a warning with a condition such as "should there be any attempt by force to rescue them…" where the structure of the warning is typical of a conventional threat (i.e., "should you do that … I will do this"). However, the linguistic and discursive structure of most of the warnings in the data follows the earlier identified structure (i.e., "because you did that … or have done that. … We did this or have done this…"). Notice the structure of the warning in SP25. Although the warning later gave a condition, it first identified what a "Sahara Reporter" had done to Islam.

> **SP24.** As it may be recalled that JAMBS announced the capture of seven Christians foreigners and warned that should there be any attempt by force to rescue them will render their lives in danger…[87]

> **SP25.** There is an online medium know n Sahara reporter who have their office in New York, and who have made their site as a platform for attack against Islam. So we are warning them to stop making their site an avenue for attacking Islam, otherwise we will find a way of attacking them."

Conclusion

I conclude therefore that discourses associated with the Nigerian terrorist groups are inter-texually related to those of Al Qaeda and global *jihadism*. Thus, their evaluative structures construct BH as heroes that are fighting a just war. This is so because in the context of conflict or terrorism discourse, violence and threats of violence are viewed as retaliation for some perceived social wrongs done to individuals or groups. BH and Ansaru claim their right to carry out *jihad* in Nigeria in order to establish an independent Islamic state similar to that being currently pursued by ISIS in Syria and Iraq. While BH accuses the government and public institutions (e.g., newspaper houses) of attacking and killing Muslims, it is quite clear that the Nigerian terrorist groups are pursuing the general goal of *jihad* against non-Muslim nations. This declaration of Jihad has earlier been made by Al Qaeda leaders. The evaluative and discourse structures of their threats are re-enacted and recontextualized in the threats by the Nigerian terrorist groups.

Warnings and threats in this context perform the same functions having the same linguistics and discursive structures. These structures are slightly different from the familiar and regularly cited conventional conditional formula for threats. In the terror threats, the performance of the threat is not conditional; they appear as mere commissives, where the threatener commits himself to carry out the threat as a form of retaliation.

Moreover, the discourse structure of terror threats shows that first, they are (poorly) written translations of their oral and video equivalents; secondly, they appear as narratives with openings and a few closings. I believe that the written translations of the terror threats are likely to convey stronger pragmatic force since they emanate from an established violent terrorist group like the BH or Ansaru. The perception of a written statement as conveying a serious threat to life will naturally cause more serious fear of sudden attack, insecurity, and (in an extreme case) depression than the verbal threat. This is because written/documented communication is generally more associated with longevity and permanence than oral communication. When certain promises are documented they are often viewed as more certain and sure. This is probably the reason why "night letters" are still quite popular and prevalent in Afghanistan; these are threatening/warning letters used by the *mujahedeen* insurgents, which are hand-delivered by night to individuals or communities or posted to a door or mosque at night for the attention of the local populace.[88] Night letters are said to be the primary method of Taliban communication.

Written terror threats in the context of computer-mediated communication are asynchronous digital communications that have an additional advantage of being stored or archived and retrieved at a later date. And each time, they are retrieved; their (illocutionary) force is reenacted, re-invigorated, and perceived afresh. Thus, the threatened people and institutions tend to perpetually live in fear as most of the threats are still being carried out. This way, BH and Ansaru appear to win a psychological war in Nigeria and this worsens the security situation in the country.

The question about why the Nigerian government has not been able to defeat BH has puzzled the mind of everyone who is interested in the security situation in Nigeria. Some of the reasons given have been lack of intelligence on the part of the Nigerian government about BH. The government of Goodluck Jonathan was criticized for having no idea of the reality and strength of its enemy; for instance, the Jonathan's government still referred to the group as "faceless," or "ghost."[89] Moreover, the politicization of BH undermines the

government antiterror efforts. Interestingly, the BH crisis coincided with the fierce political battle between the northern and southern elites over the rotation of state power. When Jonathan became president following the death of Musa Yar'Adua in 2010, the north saw the zoning formula as distorted and the general belief was that BH was politically motivated in order to discredit the Jonathan administration. Jonathan himself admitted during a radio interview that his cabinet had been infiltrated by BH.[90] And there was also the belief that the Jonathan government was behind the BH attacks in other to accuse the northern Mafia, and saw the reason to further destroy the economy of the north since the Joint Military Task Force only attacked and killed innocent people.[91] The present Buhari government appears to be in a hurry to announce the defeat of BH even when it is quite clear that BH is still very much powerful. Luckily, foreign nations such as the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Israel, and Australia among others have promised to support the combined forces of Nigeria, Chad, Benin, and Cameroon against BH. As of February 2016, when the German president Joachim Gauck visited Nigeria, the European Union still pledged the sum of $50 million to assist Nigeria in the fight against terror groups in the country.[92]

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