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Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Pictorial Depictions of Nigerian Socio-political Issues on Facebook

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Abstract

This study applies Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) to explore how pictures are used to depict social and political issues on Facebook. To achieve this aim, the study identifies the multimodal resources contained in the selected data with a view to examining how information is configured through the selection of modal resources; explore the functionality of the modal resources in the selected texts; and investigate how visual modes or pictures are used to enhance visual representations of messages. The analysis shows that multimodal discourse on Facebook embodies various resources or modes including language, image, and colour. In terms of functionality, the various modes work together as multimodal ensembles to identify participants, phenomena and circumstances in the social issues depicted. Visual images are used without the spoken form of language to convey messages. The study concludes that exploration of meaning in multimodal texts requires a consideration of both language and semiotic resources.

Key Words: Semiotic resources, multimodal discourse analysis, ensembles, Facebook.

Introduction

The world has come to a communication obsessed stage where social sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc. provide a platform for its inhabitants to get connected with one another. Through these social networks, communication is transmitted at the click of a button in a cell phone or device and in

a twinkling of an eye, the target audience receives the message. Page et al. (2014, p. 5) assert that "social media delivers content via a network of participants where the content can be published by anyone, but still distributed across potentially large-scale audiences". Social media is used in many domains of human activities. For instance, religious faiths, political ideologies, national news, and social events are conveyed through social media to the potential audience. Social media also provides a means for different social organisations and professionals such as health workers, engineers, lecturers, scientists, etc. to create a network for different communities where members exchange information, make comments, advertise their products and share opinions. Thus, there is hardly any human activity in which network communication is not involved.

The employment of linguistic resources and certain semiotic modes such as image or picture, sound, music, etc. delineates information on social media, especially Facebook, as a multimodal discourse. Miri (2016, p. 2) corroborates this view when he submits that "traditional forms of language and communication found in the media, academia, and social exchanges have shifted from being one-dimensional and highly text based and are now highly multimodal." However, the perception of fuller meaning in a text containing many modes may be highly challenging because of the tendency of the audience to focus more on particular modes. Also, language researches on communicative texts have focused more on speech texts with little attention on the information by other semiotic resources such as colour, visual image, etc. to convey meaning.

In recent times, there is a shift in how we look at language because of technological advances. Therefore, some relevant research works, in the field of linguistics, which employ the resources of multimodality to analyse chat room exchanges include those of Jepson (2005), Johnson (2006); while Lee (2011) and Gouws et al. (2011) analyse Facebook statuses. Using examples from video conferencing, Norris (2016) also works on the concepts in multimodal discourse analysis. More recently, Ariyo (2017) employs multimodal theory to analyse discourse on TELL magazine. In spite of these previous studies on communication

patterns in the social media, there is the need to further investigate the identifiable patterns of modal affordances of Facebook texts/posts involving pictures that are used to create a sense of community for the users viewing the contents. This can be done by identifying the functions of non-verbal modes such as gesture, colour, proxemics, visual and aural art, image, sound and music, which have social and practical implications for objective analysis. The researchers' intention in this study therefore is to employ multimodal theory to explicate the interplay between or among different semiotic resources which are used to construct meaning of social and political issues posted on the Facebook.

The study aims at employing Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) theory as a theoretical framework to explore how pictures are used to depict some social and political issues posted on the Facebook. To achieve this aim, the study identifies the multimodal resources contained in the selected data with a view to examining how information is configured through the selection of modal resources and explores the functionality of the modal resources contained in the selected texts.

Methodology

The research methodology is essentially descriptive and analytical. The data consist of seventeen (17) materials which were garnered from different posts on the Facebook. Specifically, some data on political issues were collected from a Facebook suggested group named "Buhari 2019 support project". To enhance systematic analysis, the data were grouped into different social domains such as political, religious, marital, etc.

Literature Review

According to Cheng and Liu (2014, p. 191), "Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) focuses on how meaning is made through the use of multiple modes of communication as opposed to just language". Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001) and Jewitt's (2008) produce publications which are trailblazing and good examples of researches in which MDA has been employed. The emergence of this field in linguistic analysis of language and communication has opened a new vista of enquiry beyond mere looking at language

resources. The framework provides the opportunity of analysing texts through a critical consideration of interaction of different modes. Hong (2012, p. 320) sees MDA as an offshoot of Systemic Functional Linguistics. According to him,

the theoretical basis of multimodal analysis theory is systemic functional linguistics developed by Michael Halliday. Specifically speaking, multimodal discourse analysis theory advocates that other sign systems apart from language are also sources of meaning. In the interpersonal communication, when one single mode cannot specify the speaker's meaning, other modes are needed to enhance and add more information to make the speaker's presentation of the meaning much clearer and more detailed, reaching the goal of being understood by the listener (Hong, 2012, p. 320).

Van Leeuwen (2005, p. 3) also corroborates this view when he submits that "multimodality originated in the work of Halliday who argued that the grammar of a language is not a code, not a set of rules for producing correct sentences, but a resource for making meanings". Cheng and Liu (2014, p. 193) also point out that:

with the publication of *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* by Kress and Leeuwen (1996), which is based on Halliday's (2004) *Systemic Functional Grammar* for linguistic analysis, as well as with O'Toole's (1994) multimodal analysis of paintings, sculpture and architecture, MDA has become a new research subject for linguists.

The appropriate text for which multimodal discourse techniques could be employed is the one containing more than two semiotic resources. O'Halloran, Tan, and Smith (2011, p. 68) submit that "multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) is "an emerging paradigm in discourse studies which extends the study of language to the study

of language in combination with other resources, such as images, colours, scientific symbolism, gestures, actions, music and sound". In their comments about social semiotics, Bezemer and Jewitt (2010, p. 183) also assert that "representation and communication always draw on a multiplicity of modes, all of which contribute to meaning."

Certain concepts which are germane to the theory of multimodality in linguistic enquiry about language are succinctly captured in the following words of Bezemer and Mavers (2011, p. 191):

Four core concepts are common across multimodal research: mode, semiotic resource, modal affordance and inter-semiotic relations...a mode is understood as an outcome of the cultural shaping of a material through its use in the daily social interaction of people. The semiotic resources of a mode come to display regularities through the ways in which people use them and can be thought of as the connection between representational resources and what people do with them. The term modal affordance refers to the material and the cultural aspects of modes: what it is possible to express and represent easily with a mode. It is a concept connected to both the material as well as the cultural and social historical use of a mode. Modal affordance raises the question of what a mode is 'best' for what. This raises the concept of inter-semiotic relationships, and how modes are configured in particular contexts.

Other concepts are captured by Miri (2016, p. 3) when he asserts that "multimodality provides a broader scope than conventional linguistic approaches and allows modal affordance, metafunctions and inter-semiotic/intermodal relationships to be examined". As garnered from the various submissions above, MDA is concerned with concepts such as semiotic resources (modes),

materiality, modal affordance, multimodal ensembles and meaning functions. Each of these is discussed as follows.

According to van Leeuwen (2005, p. 285), “[s]emiotic resources [modes] are the actions, materials and artefacts we use for communicative purposes”. Mode, according to Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), refers to a set of socially and culturally shaped resources for making meaning: a ‘channel’ of representation or communication. In other words, a mode is a channel (e.g. writing, posture, colour, gesture, proxemics, etc.) that is mutually shared and recognised for communication among people.

In terms of materiality, the multimodal theory maintains that all modes have intrinsic materials which people use to reshape information from one mode to another through the process of transduction. For instance, working sound is a material of human speech to produce music. This is why Bezemer and Jewitt (2010, p.186) asserts “multimodality assumes that all forms of communication (modes) have, like language, been shaped through their cultural, historical and social uses to realize social functions.”

The term “modal affordance”, according to Bezemer and Jewitt (2010, p. 188), “is a concept describing what is possible to express and represent easily in a mode”. In other words, modal affordance refers to selectional possibilities and constraints on modal resources for constructing meaning. For instance, a part of modal affordance of human speech is that language users are provided an opportunity to make choice of words from the lexicon of the language to construct meaning; however, words cannot be combined anyhow without obeying grammatical rules regarding word combinations.

The concept of “multimodal ensembles” concerns how several modes can be integrated to produce a message in a communicative event. Bezemer and Jewitt (2010, p. 188) point out that “modes have different affordances, people always use different modes simultaneously to orchestrate complex, multimodal ensembles”. Thus, message of a multimodal discourse can be seen across all modes that are combined together to realise meaning. For instance, the message in a political pamphlet may be simultaneously represented through both a written mode and a

visual/pictorial mode. Thus, each mode carries a different part of the message.

The notion of “meaning functions” or “functionality” concerns how a mode used in a text is associated with a specific purpose. For instance, the purpose of a text may be to state a fact, to evaluate a concept, etc. Since MDA originated from Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar, the functions of modal resources are explained in terms of metafunctions namely: the ideational, interpersonal, and textual. According to Lin and Peng (2006, p. 332) and Bloor and Bloor (1997, p. 9), ideational metafunction or content meaning concerns how people select modal resources to represent the world and their experiences, which can be described functionally in terms of participant/phenomenon, process and circumstance. The interpersonal metafunction relates to how modal resources are articulated for social interaction. The textual metafunction concerns how modal resources are organised to realise meaning. The analysis conducted in the next section is a utilisation of these concepts to explicate how messages are configured on the Facebook, through visual images and other modes.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Pictographic Depiction of Political System as a Contest and Foul Play



Figure 1

In Figure 1, three modal resources which work together as a multimodal ensemble to construct the message are mode of writing, image and colour. The expression: “2019: The challenge of CHANGE” is a writing mode. In terms of modal functionality, the date “2019” is a circumstantial element situating the political contest into spatio-temporal location. The expression “The challenge of CHANGE” fulfils ideational function by drawing attention to different reactions from opponents of APC, the ruling party in Nigeria. The second modal resource in figure 1 is a visual image which presents the objects of three persons engaging in a rope-pulling contest with another three persons at the other end. In terms of modal functionality, the objects, which are signifiers, perform ideational function of identifying the prominent participants in Nigerian politics.

The visual image also contains the pictures of the bunched party logos (PDP, AD, ACP, ADPM, etc.) which are set in opposition to the APC logo. The coagulation of party logos signifies how different political parties are forming alliance in hope to defeat the ruling party in the forthcoming election. The mode of colour in the figure also has informative value. The dark background in particular is indicative of many conditions associated with Nigerian politics. Colour black conveys a message that the audience is in the dark since no winner is yet determined. It may also suggest concealed foul practices (e.g. rigging, corruption, etc.) which characterise the political system in Nigeria.



Figure 2

In figure 2, the message is predominantly presented through visual mode. The picture ostensibly presents the scene of combat between two characters. This performs ideational function of identifying the participants: President Muhammadu Buhari, in a standing posture, and the former President, Goodluck Jonathan. In terms of functionality, the pictures perform evaluative function by assigning strength, vitality and vigour to the character in standing position and depicting the opponent as weak and feeble. Close to the weak character is the picture of the Former President, Olusegun Obasanjo who is the umpire of the contest. Behind the contestants are many people watching the contest. The pictures of the flags of the two popular political parties have informative function of identifying both APC and PDP as the political parties in the contest.



Figure 3

The message is predominantly conveyed through the visual mode in figure 3. This presents the image of an eagle and a venomous snake engaging in combat. On the eagle, there is the APC logo while the logo of the main opposition party, PDP is inscribed on the snake. The mode of writing performs the ideational function of identifying some entities: two political parties. The eagle is depicted as capturing the “power point” of the snake, while the snake also coils on one leg of the eagle. The informative value of this depiction is that the eagle appears

stronger than the snake. Thus, without the use of writing mode the message is conveyed to the target audience.

Figure 4

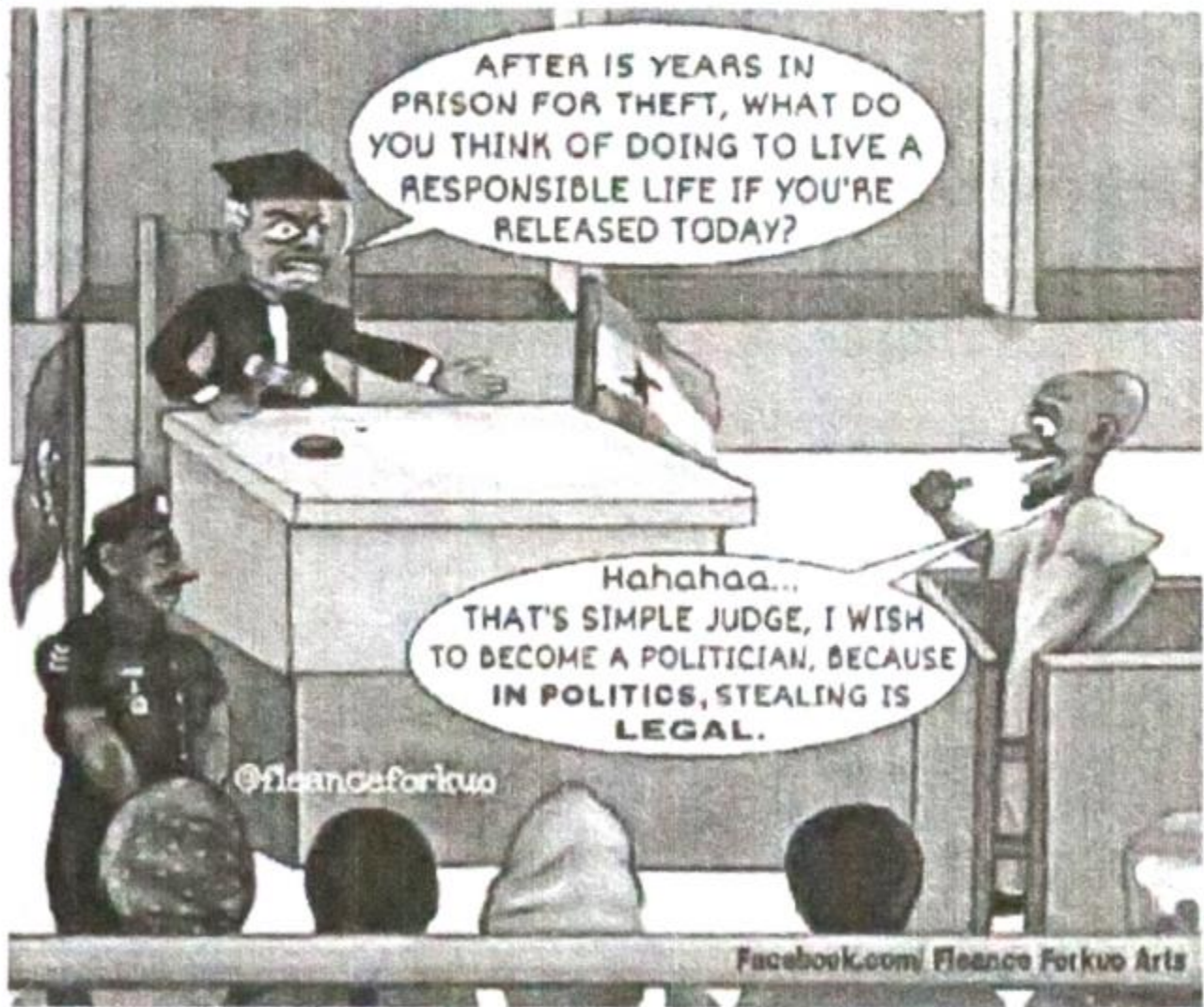
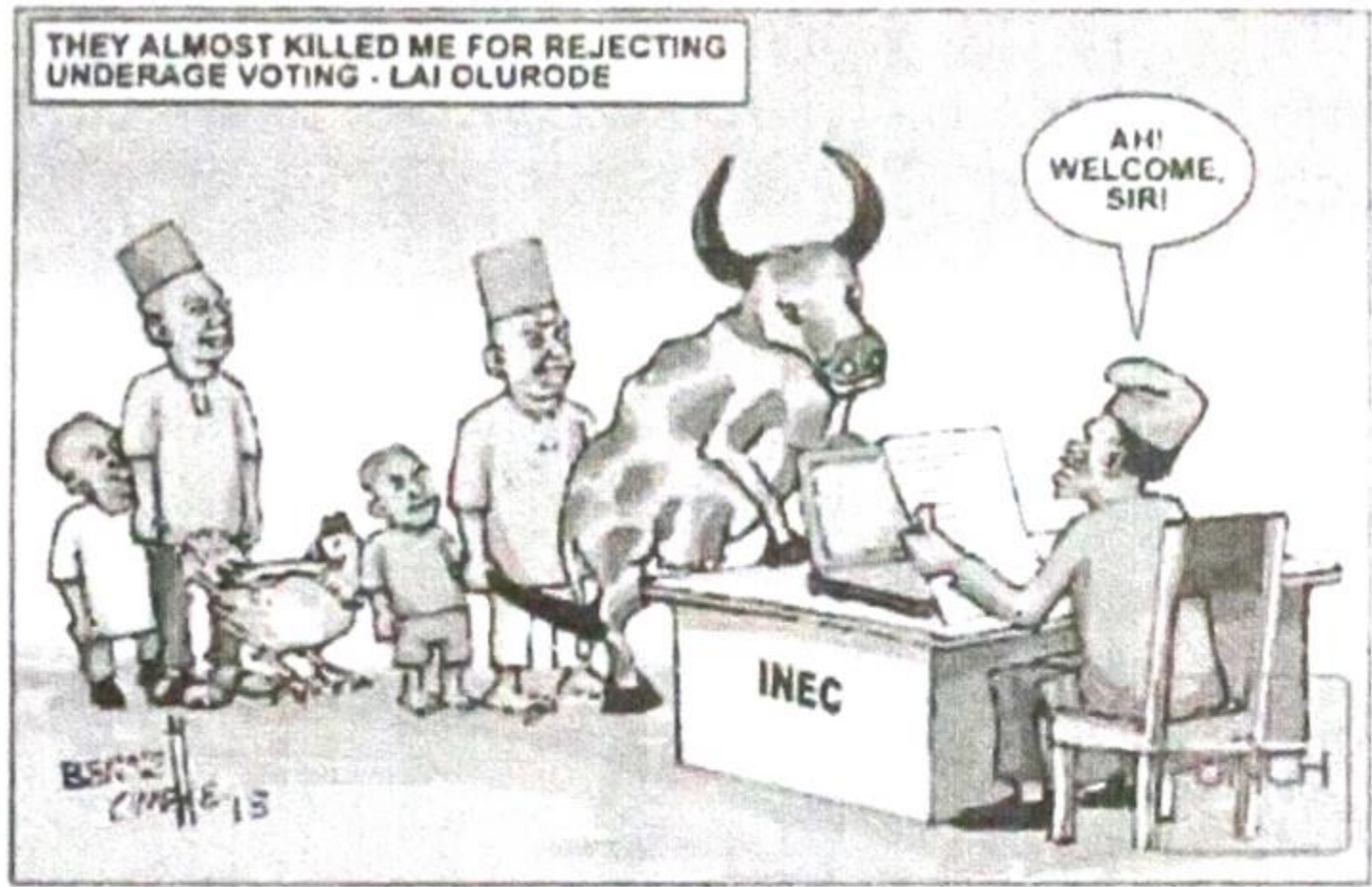


Figure 5



Three semiotic resources are used as multimodal ensembles to convey the message in figure 4 above. The mode of writing is combined with the visual mode in order to present a scene of interaction in a court session, thereby fulfilling an interpersonal function. The third mode is colour. The prisoner wears a blue dress typical of a Nigeria prisoner's dress. The police man wears a black

uniform typical of a Nigeria police uniform. The mode of colour therefore fulfils ideational function by contextualising and situating the social event to a spatio-temporal location of Nigeria. The Judge asks: "After 15 years in prison for theft, what do you think of doing to live a responsible life if you are released today?" The freed prisoner replies: "Hahahaa...That's simple Judge, I wish to become a politician, because in politics, stealing is legal." The prisoner's response parodies or satirizes the impure motive of some corrupt politicians. Thus, the text is designed to depict politics as a platform to get illegal wealth.

There are some signifiers in figure 5 above. There is an image of a man working on a table with the written mode: "INEC" (acronym for Independent Nigerian Electoral Commission). This expression fulfils ideational metafunction by situating the event to a spatio-temporal location. Before him is a procession of images of a cow, a man, boy, a hen, a man, and a boy. Each image represents a certain participant or phenomenon. The images of animals are significant to convey a message that the electoral process is a foul play to accommodate unqualified participants. The image of boy is a lampoon on the electoral process that permits underage participants. The mode of writing: "They almost kill me for rejecting underage voting...Lai Olurode" conveys the message that the electoral officer is working under the atmosphere of insecurity and he has to illegally accommodate all participants to save his life. Thus, the text is designed to depict Nigerian electoral process as a foul play.

Pictographic Depiction of Actions and Reactions to Political Personalities

Figure 6

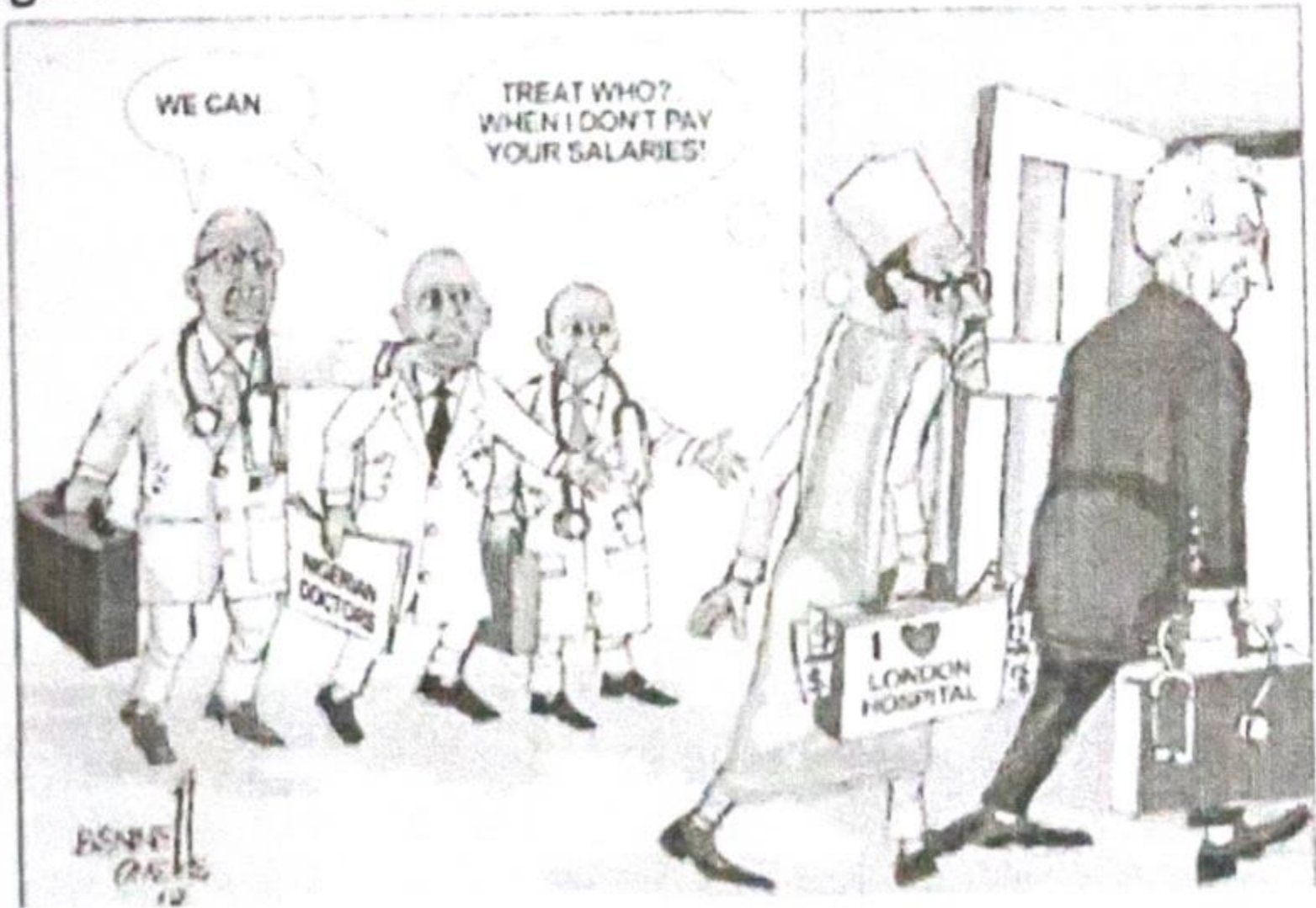
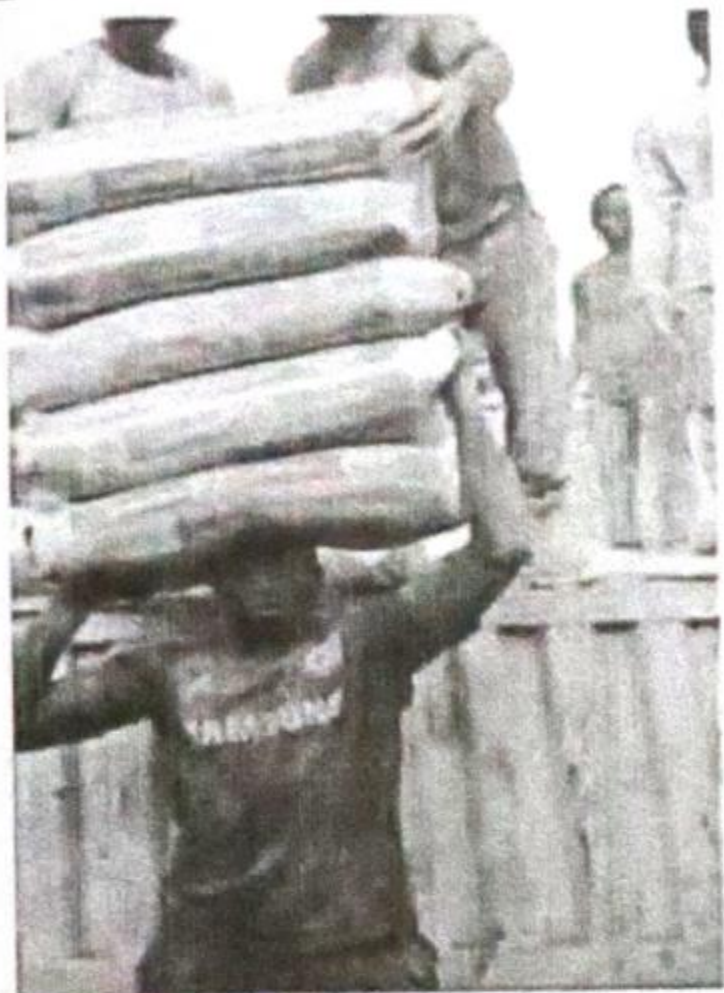


Figure 7



After all these suffer, somebody will now go and tell the world that we are lazy people waiting for freebies... E dey pain me

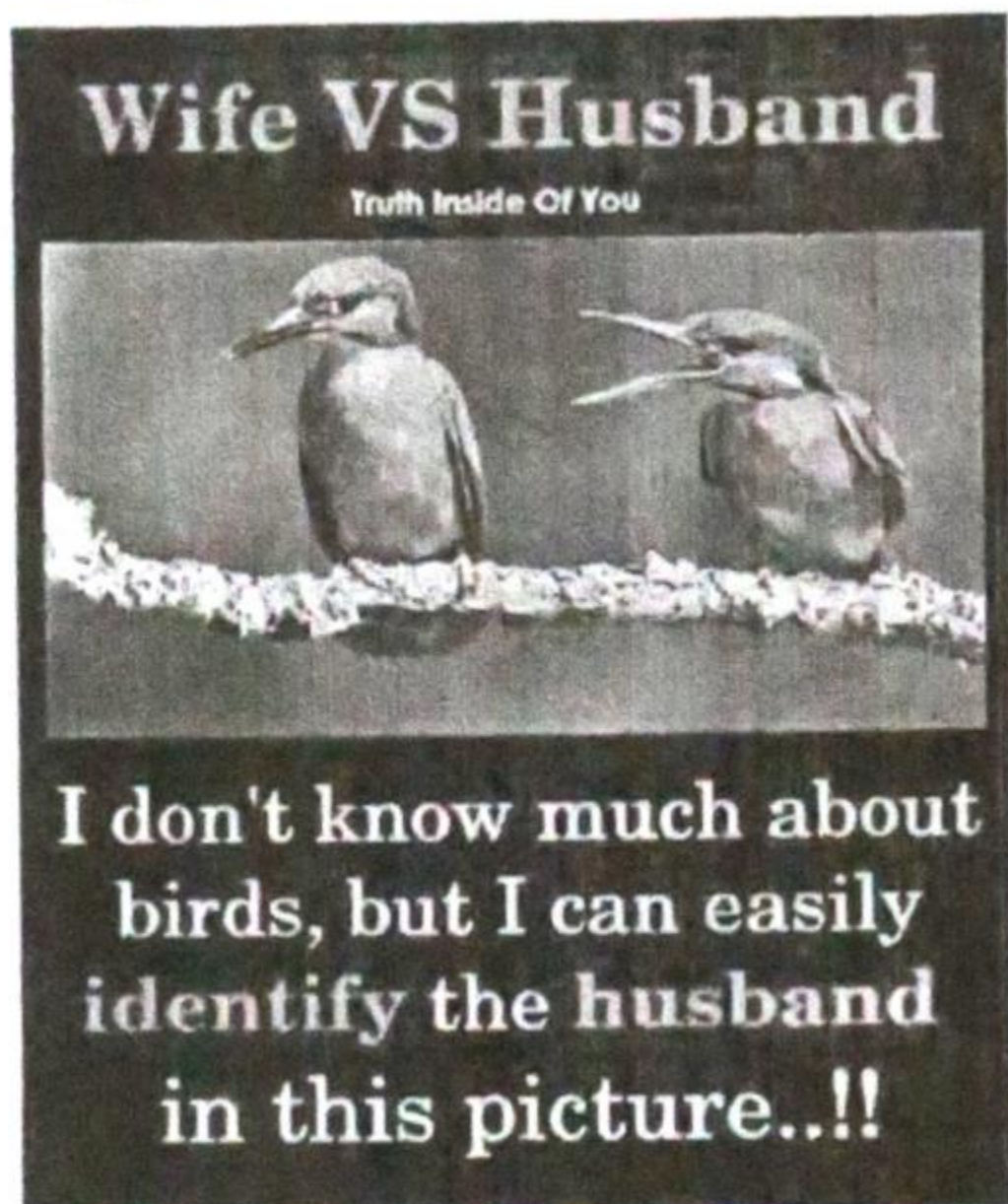
ro

IG@correctbro

Twitter@iamcorrectbro

The informative value of figure 5 is configured through the selection of the two modes. The mode of writing: “We can...”; “Treat who?... When I don’t pay your salaries!” and a visual mode.

Figure 10



Two semiotic resources which work together as a multimodal ensemble to construct the message in figures 9 and 10 are mode of writing and visual images. In figure 9, the writing mode contains three sentences. The first two: "His wife gave him money to buy TV stand. He spent it on beer" express the precondition; while the third sentence "Now he is TV stand" expresses the result or effect of the condition stated. The text is designed to scornfully deride an authoritative woman and a husband who succumbs to his wife's dictate on ground of his irresponsibility. Thus, the visual image working as a modal resource ostensibly captures the message of the written mode.

In figure 10, the writing mode: "Wife VS Husband" presents two participants. The mode of writing: "I don't know much about birds, but I can easily identify the husband in this picture..!!" represents a state of affair identifiable through the picture. The visual image contains pictures of two birds. One of the birds opens its mouth as though it is talking while the other seems to snub it by looking the other way. The text is designed to capture a calm reaction of a participant to a nagging or babbling participant in a provocative moment. The text designer uses the image to represent

two attributive values of calmness in the face of nagging or complaining; and leaves the readers to use their experiences of the world to assign these attributes to husband and wife.

Pictographic Depiction of Socio-Economic Realities

Figure 11

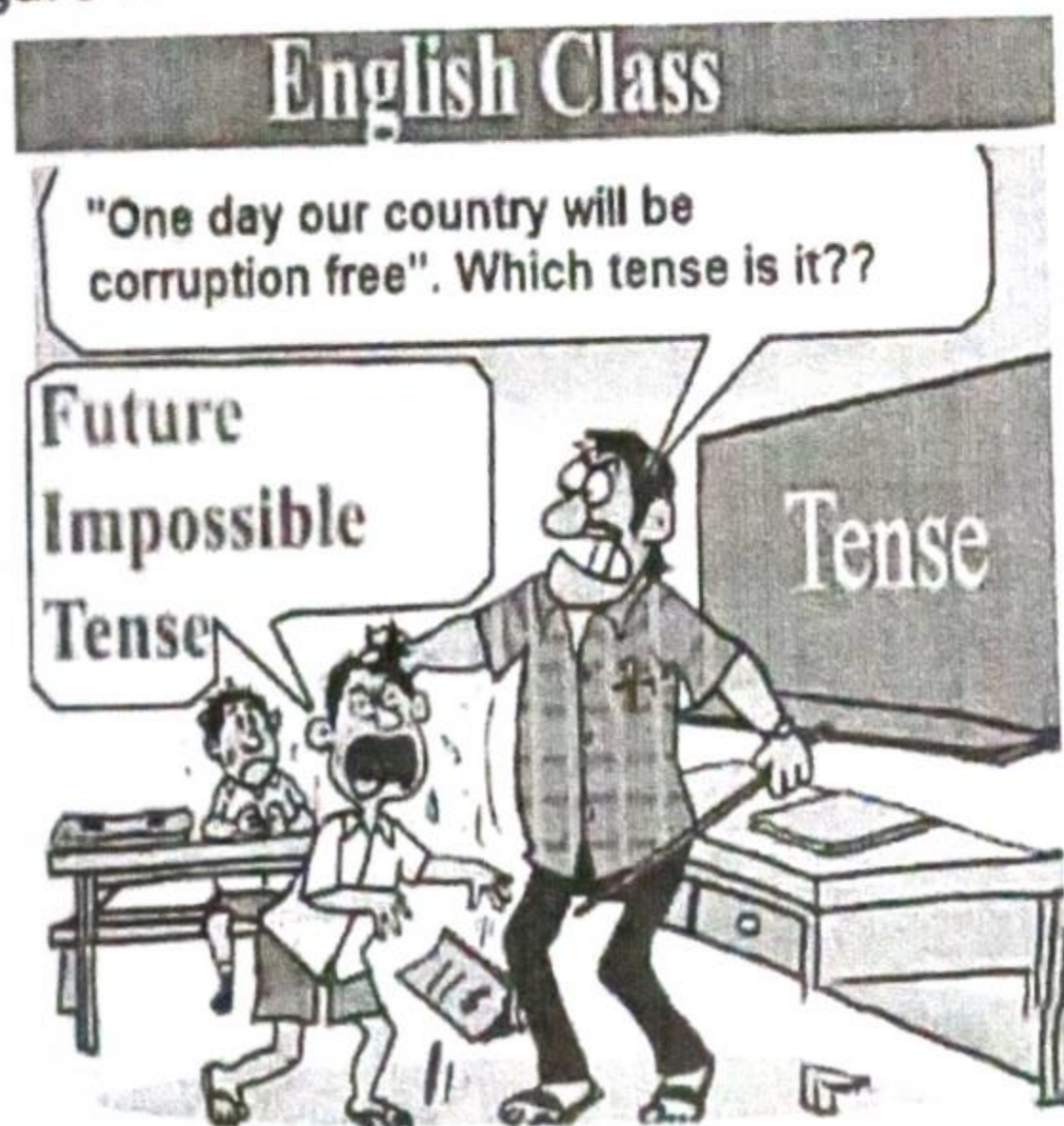


Figure 12

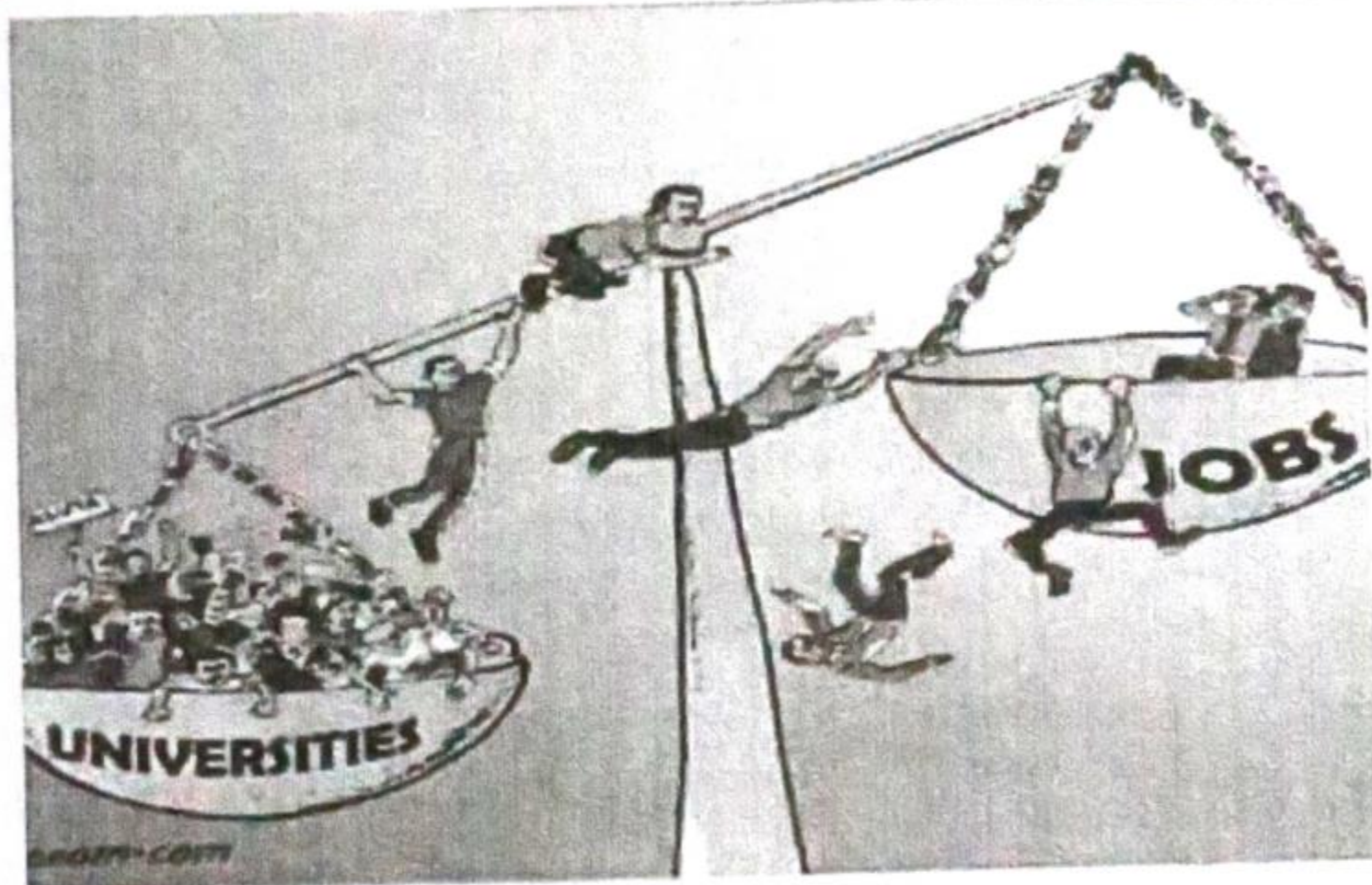


Figure 11 is an ostensible depiction of the realities of employment bedevilling Nigerian graduates. The visual image presents two pans of a balance. The word "Universities" being a written mode is inscribed on one of the pans containing a great number of graduates. The word "JOBS" is inscribed on the second pan of the balance. This contains the following objects: one person inside it, two persons struggling to enter and one person falling from it. The pole connecting the two pans of the scale of balance contains the object of two persons struggling to cross over from the universities pan to the job pan. The imbalance in the contents of the pans fulfils ideational function of identifying a phenomenon of imbalance between graduating students and available jobs. The portrayal of persons struggling on the pole fulfils ideational function of identifying the process of getting jobs. The object of a falling person fulfils ideational function of identifying the reality of dismissal, sack, and other horrible experience of people throwing out of jobs. Therefore, the various objects are signifiers of the Nigerian socio-economic reality of youth unemployment.

Figure 12 presents a classroom discourse where a teacher of English is asking his pupils to analyse a sentence in terms of tense. The expression: "'One day our country will be corruption free.' Which tense is it??" is a written mode representing the content of the teacher's instruction. The expression: "Future impossible tense" is a written mode representing the pupils' response. The text fulfils ideational function of identifying the phenomenon of how the country has been so deeply enmeshed in corruption that the hope of obviating the mess is uncertain. Thus, the text expresses the fears of many that it is impossible to rid Nigeria of corruption.

Pictographic Depiction of Man's Cruelty to Man and Animal

Figure 13

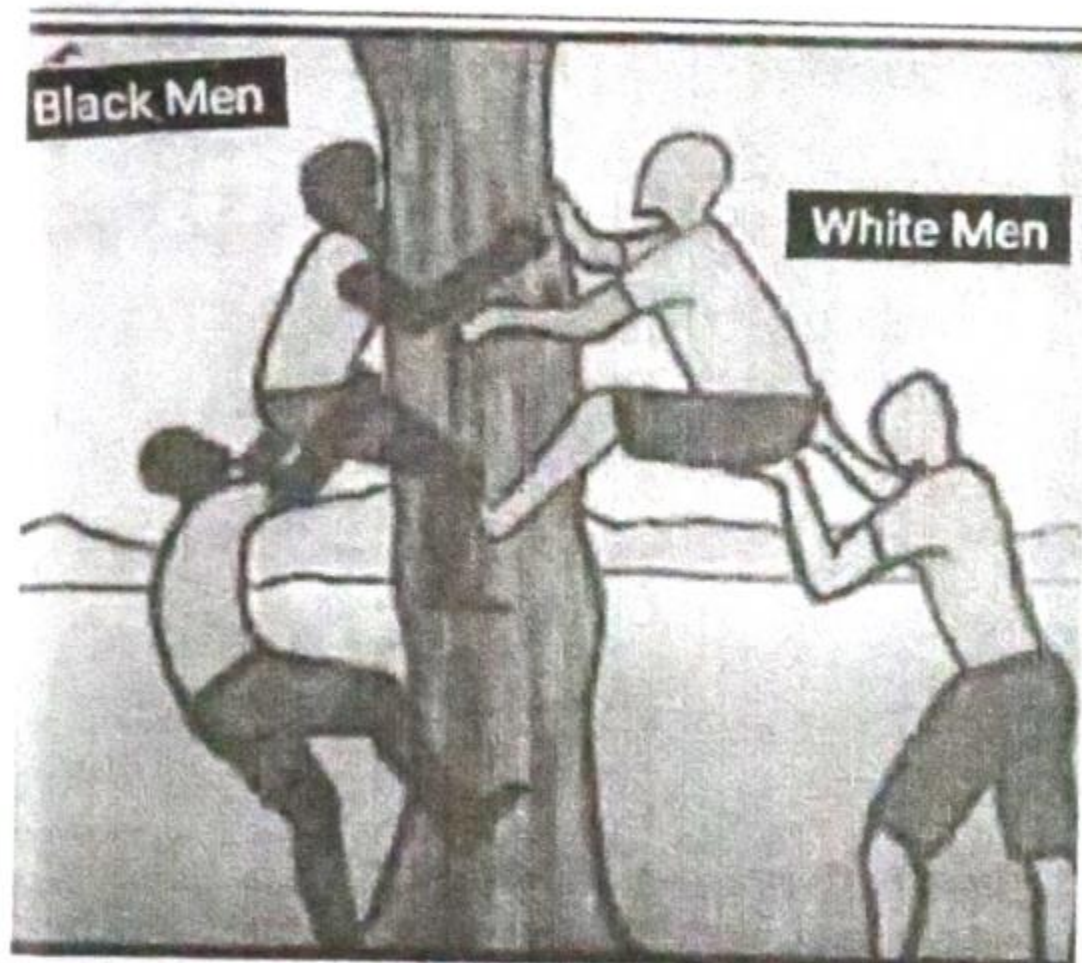


Figure 14



Figure 13 contains objects of four persons who are in pairs. The two members of the first pair are identified as black people through the written mode: "Black Men". The picture shows how a member in this group is pulling down his partner who is climbing a tree. The two members of the second pair are identified as white

people through the written mode: "White Men". The picture shows how a member in this group is pushing up his partner who is climbing the tree. In terms of modal functionality, the objects are signifiers fulfilling ideational function by representing a phenomenon that, white men are supportive, positive, encouraging, etc. to one another in their pursuit of lofty heights; while the black are unhelpful, negative, discouraging, etc. to one another.

The message in figure 14 is predominantly conveyed through a visual mode showing the object of an overloaded cart (carriage) pulling up a horse; thereby reversing the order of a horse pulling the cart. The objects of persons fulfil ideational function by identifying the participants in the event. The images of the horse and the cart are signifiers representing a phenomenon. They depict man's cruelty to animal in his exploitation of the animal's physical strength.

Pictographic Depiction of Social Malady of Indecent Dressing



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17

The modal resource in figure 15 is a visual image containing the object of an uncontrollable motorcycle rider who was hit by a lustful driver overwhelmed by the indecent dressing of a police woman. The visual image fulfils ideational function of identifying the participants. The written mode: "Who cause the accident. (sic) Is it the bike man, driver or the police woman?" fulfils interpersonal function by engaging the viewers to identify the causative agent of the accident. In figure 16 the written mode; "In Universities these days..." being an adverbial phrase (circumstantial element) fulfils ideational function of situating the event depicted to a spatio-temporal location. The semiotic resource contains three different objects of the same a lady in her first three sessions. Changes in her dressing fulfil ideational function by representing a phenomenon indicating a progression from innocence and modesty to the highest degree of immodesty and indecency.

The principal object of focus in figure 17 is the image of a lady which is vertically bisected into two parts showing different styles of dressing. The mode of dressing in the left view of the picture is that of modesty where she holds the Holy Bible in the presence of other worshippers in the church. The mode of dressing portrayed in the right view, where a young man leans on her back, is indecent. The various objects work together as multimodal ensembles to fulfil ideation function of identifying participants both

within and outside the church. Different modes of dressing of the lady are signifiers which enhance the mode of writing: "Where are you?". They represent hypocritical, two-faced and deceitful lifestyles.

Conclusion

This study is an application of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) to social media discourse, specifically the Facebook. The analysis has shown that posts on the Facebook embody various modes including language, image, colour, etc. In terms of functionality, the various modes work together as multimodal ensembles to identify participants, phenomena and circumstances in the social and political issues depicted. Visual images are used without language resource to convey messages in some selected data. On the basis of these findings, it is evident that linguistic resources (mode of writing) could not alone realise the overall message of a multimodal discourse because other semiotic resources also contribute to message conveyance. Therefore, exploration of fuller meaning, in multimodal texts, requires a consideration of both language and semiotic resources that contribute to message conveyance.

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