

INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL PARTY AFFILIATION AND LEVEL OF EDUCATION ON PERCEPTION OF HATE SPEECH IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *This paper investigated the influence of political party affiliation and level of education on perception of hate speech in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Nigeria. Using the quantitative design and the Speech Act theoretical framework, eighty (80) respondents for political party affiliation and one hundred and seventy two (172) respondents for levels of education were examined with a hypothetical statement: “I charge you to continue to challenge corruption and its vices, and stop government who institutionalized them from coming back to power”. Their responses showed distinctions in their perception and knowledge of hate speech acceding that party affiliation and academic exposure influence the assertion of what is and what is not a hate speech. The research therefore concludes that hate speech, which is any spoken words that are offensive, insulting, and/or threatening to an individual or group based on a particular attribute of that person or persons being targeted, is a social problem which is interpreter-specific and lacks a definite or precise definition. The paper recommends enthronement of peace strategies in Nigeria such as equity in distribution of infrastructure, appointments into political and public offices, among others.*

KEYWORDS: hate speech, party, graduates, affiliation, non-graduates; Port Harcourt.

INTRODUCTION

Every society has one form of problem or the other at every given period. Not every problem is a social one; a problem takes a social dimension when people begin to feel its impact. Social problems refer to series of conditions and abnormal behaviours which are seen as manifestations of social disorganization (Scott & Marshall, 2005). This article leaves no one in doubt that hate speech is one social problem that has impacted on the psyche of the nationhood of Nigeria, threatening the fabrics that unite her diverse ethnic structure. Nigerians have become apprehensive of the consequences of hate speech

hence; it has become the overriding thrust of national dialogues and fora since the dawn of the Buhari-led government.

Since the creation of man, hate speech, a linguistic device, has been a destructive tool; it destroys a people hence the adage in the *Echie* language (an Igbo dialect, spoken in Rivers State of Nigeria): “*Onu kuruzo je ugu, ukwu je ya, o ma lo*”, meaning “if the mouth (speech) goes to a war first, and the legs (people) go afterwards, they would not come back alive”. Ojiako (1981) and Achebe (2012) in different but related contexts alluded to the fact that hate speech is as one of the causes of inter-tribal conflicts in Nigeria. Ojiako, quoting *The Daily Times*, wrote: “what began as a lively controversy over the national census has rapidly degenerated into an alarming inter-tribal, inter-regional war of reprisals, waged verbally and bitterly, the Nigerian nation is walking on a tight rope” (p.179). It means that hate speech is more dangerous than corruption and recession; it is dangerous and destructive and has more bitter memories.

In order to stem the tide of hate speech, the Nigerian Television Authority puts advertisements against the trend. These advertisements complement the bill which Senator Aliyu Sabi Abdullahi (APC, Niger) sponsored, stipulating that any person found guilty of any form of hate speech that results in the death of another person shall die by hanging upon conviction. The bill defines hate speech as making available “any material, written and/or visual, which is threatening, abusive or insulting” with the intent to “stir up ethnic hatred”. This bill did not come as a surprise to Nigerians as the Vice President, Yemi Osibanjo had stated, on 17th August, 2017 while addressing the National Economic Council in Abuja, that Federal Government had “drawn a line against hate; it will not be tolerated; it will be taken as an act of terrorism and all the consequences will follow it”.

Hate speech is any utterance that depicts intense dislike or strong aversion towards a person or group or policy which is capable of stirring up violence or any form of disorder in society. Hate speech is spoken words that are offensive, insulting, and/or threatening to an individual or group based on a particular attribute of that person or persons being targeted. Targeted attributes include such traits as ethnic background, sexual orientation, race, or disability, though there are other target attributes. In the US, another term for hate speech is “fighting words,” as such talk is likely to provoke an otherwise reasonable person into acting rashly against speaker doing the provoking. In the Nigerian context, hate speech of late has basically taken two dimensions: biological and social-political. Biologically, though outside the scope of this article, hate speech is one that generally attacks the female sex. It is not out of place to hear different forms of utterances with strong aversion against the female sex. This, to some extent has cultural backing, a situation where the culture denigrates the female sex and sees their male counterpart as superior to them.

In the social-political context, precisely, among politicians, the type of hate speech in existence in Nigeria is extremely damaging and destructive. The term hate speech can be said to be lighter; the American words: fighting words are not even better description.

The speeches are very offensive, insulting, damaging and threatening to the face of the individual or the targeted group. It is so prevalent that one will hardly differentiate between hate speech and political propaganda or campaigns. It is assumed to be the easiest and a commonest means of campaigning against political rivals and winning the support of the electorates.

Another issue very germane in this introduction is the misconception between hate speech and free speech. One of the most important rights of every person is the right to free speech or freedom of speech. The constitution of every country allows her citizens the right to free expression; it therefore becomes difficult to draw the lines of demarcation between hate speech and the right to freedom of speech or expression. Nations that enact laws to regulate speeches (like Nigeria is clamouring for now) are very often criticized. Bad leaders hide in that pretense to gag the press and find excuses to silence their opponents.

This article observes both the misconception and plethora of definition of the subject-matter, and therefore designed these objectives and questions to delimit the research.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the extent to which political party affiliation influences perception of hate speech among residents of Port Harcourt Metropolis in Nigeria.
2. To find out the extent to which educational level influences perception of hate speech among residents of Port Harcourt metropolis in Nigeria.

Research Questions

1. To what extent does political party affiliation influence perception of hate speech among residents of Port Harcourt Metropolis in Nigeria?
2. To what extent does educational level influence perception of hate speech among residents of Port Harcourt Metropolis in Nigeria?

LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of scholars have written on hate speech or abusive language as one used to attack the personality of another individual either because of gender or race. For instance Adelakun (2017) sees any speech which is used to degrade persons based on race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and making such persons vulnerable to acts of violence. He worries about what actually constitutes a hate speech in the eye of government and queries the rationale behind labeling every uncomplimentary remark against government or persons as hate speech. He is not however averse to the enactment of laws on defamation. Adelakun's contention here is government should not be given a "blank cheque" to easily categorize any expression as hate speech considering its fluid nature. According to Alumuku (2018, p.6), hate speech is "communication designed to incite hate, cause violence, and/or prejudicial action". He states that the Centre for Information Technology and Development (CITAD) in Kano which tracks hate speech in Nigeria recorded 6,258 of hate speech between June – December, 2016. The statistics shows a monthly average

of 1,043 incidents with religion-based hate speech accounting for 2,603 (41.59%) and ethnic or tribal sentiments accounting for 39.13%. The implication of this revelation is that hate speech in Nigeria is leveraged by ethnicity and religion.

Writing on the role of the social media with regard to hate speech or abusive language, Onwubiko (2015), notes that it is very regrettable that the popular social media platforms like Facebook, Twitters, Instagram among others have become potent weapons for near diabolical attacks on people. He notes that:

I am sure if expects should collate analysis of content of the social media this year, Nigeria will rank tops because arguably, more than 40 million young Nigerians who have since graduated and have no means of livelihood have found solace in the various social platforms and are busy churning out divergent messages (n.p.).

The content of most of these messages is hate speech. The social media platforms are now avenues explored by the teeming population of the users to express hatred, anger prejudice, biases and grievance with abusive language. He also notes that abusive language on the media is usually ignored despite laws and restrictions on the use of such. He further notes:

Hate speech is a very distinguished feature amongst many of these fora. Anyone can create a group that opens up hate against certain religions, sexual preferences disabilities and racial/ethnic groups. The standards set by these sites and their responses to hate speech make for some interesting observations. Content regulation standards are often vague and vary. Twitter, self-described as the “free speech wing of the free speech party” has largely resisted any restrictions on content by either governments or citizen groups (n.p).

Noting the need to guide against the use of the social media to propagate hate speech, the Human Rights Writers Association of Nigeria (HURIWA) asserts:

it is much more edifying to legislate against use of hate speeches on social media than waste valuable time debating on whether Nigeria should outlaw websites that promote pornographies. We agree with these administrators of wwwdawn.com that the law should have specific definitions in place for social media, such as regulating abusive and threatening language or if that language is used to stir hatred against a specific group of people (n.p).

Mbamalu (2015) presents a radio discourse on hate speech. In the discourse, he notes that some stakeholders and advocacy centres who were discussants on live radio and television programme spoke against hate speech/abusive language. The discussants according to him spoke on electoral reforms and 2015 elections, describing hate speech as injurious and provoking. They defined abusive language in line with the provisions of the Electoral Act (as amended). Citing section 95, subsections (1 and 2), the combined effects of the subsections

Prohibit any political campaign or slogan that is tainted with abusive language and directly or indirectly likely to injure religious, ethnic, tribal or sectional feelings or any abusive, intemperate, slanderous or base language or insinuations or innuendoes designed or likely to provoke violent reaction or emotions.

One of the discussants, Abdul Salam Lauratu, the media manager of Nigerian Stability and Reconciliation Program (NSRP), notes that the above provision does not limit abusive language to politics / political campaigns but that in human relationship, people generally use abusive languages which very often provoke feelings and incite violence. On combating the spread of hate speech, the discussants, according to Mbamalu (2015), note that national as well as international law does not only frown but prohibits hate speech. However, there is absolutely no due prosecution and punishment for the offenders as has ever been prosecuted in this regard. This has adversely made the use of abusive language a common practice. The practice is no longer peculiar to politicians alone. Political party faithful, religious leaders and supporters of candidates also indulge in this practice.

Similarly Yiaga (2014) notes that the task of regulating and monitoring dangerous speeches should not be on institutions like the NSRP and the NHRC alone, but that the public must be actively involved in fishing out those who use abusive languages. He also notes that the media has also a role to play in fighting the use and spread of hate and abusive language since it is the commonest means of information dissemination.

Writing on the topic **Do offensive words harm people?** Jay (2009) notes that harm from an offensive speech is determined contextually. According to him, it is a misguided notion to restrict verbal abuse, hate speech or obscene telephone call (OTC) on a universal basis. He observes that legal scholars have advocated the notion/opinion that offensive utterances harm people the same way that physical blows do.

In contrast however, civil libertarians have argued that abusive words/languages are not harmful. The rationale behind their position is that speech is symbolic or abstract unlike physical blows. In corroboration, scholars have asserted that one must consider some contextual variables such as the context of the conversation, the relationship between the speaker and the addressee, and the language in use before labeling a language offensive or abusive.

Onwubiko (2015) reports that the Kenya's post-election violence of 2007/2008 and the Rwandan genocide were consequences of the spread of hate speech on the social media. The spread of abusive language and hate speech on the social media during elections in these countries (Rwanda and Kenya) generated political violence. This is similar to the experience in Nigeria after the 2011 elections. Yiaga (2014) notes that the use of abusive language as well as hate speech on social media was one of the causes of the violence. The

foregoing discuss shows that hate speech or abusive language among many nations is a common thing before, during and after elections, and this is quite possible with the use of the social media. The concept of hate speech has taken a completely new dimension. Apart from the fact that it is one that connotes the use of abusive and destructive words on somebody in such a way that the person's integrity and face is threatened, the interpretation of hate speech recently has put language and discourse in a strong communicative quagmire, undermining the principle of freedom of speech. The concept is so misunderstood and misinterpreted that any speech which the addressee is not comfortable with is described as hate speech.

The boundary between freedom of speech which is one's legal right and hate speech is narrowing day-by-day. Political parties now describe any speech or opinion of their opponents that runs counter or that questions their policies as a type of hate speech. Some nations have also gone ahead to enact laws that gag the press and are inimical to the United Nation's approved right to freedom of speech, all in the name of hate speech. Freedom of speech which gives one the right to express oneself in all national discourse and in every speech related situation must not be trampled upon, but it should also not be a cover for the denigration and assassination of the character, sex, race and gender of another person.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Speech Act Theory

Speech Act Theory was introduced in 1962 by Oxford philosopher, J. L. Austin in his great work: *how to do things with words*. As a theory, it holds that language is used to perform different type of function, it could be to state a fact, an opinion, confirm a fact, make a request, a prediction, a promise, a command, an offer; an advice or an instruction. Language can also be used to abuse, discriminate, destroy ones reputation, slander, insult and even deny a proposition.

The theory as noted by Saeed (1997) describes certain things about language use.

- a. That the basic sentence type in language is declarative (i.e. a statement or assertion).
- b. That the principal use of language is to describe states of affairs (by using statements).
- c. That the meaning of utterances can be described in terms of their truth or falsity.

In language use as captured in the assumptions above, people use language principally to either perform some act or to construct or describe events and situations.

Mey (1993) sees speech act as what describes verbal actions happening in the word. According to her, uttering a speech act is doing something with words. There three different basic functions word are used to perform. They are stated below.

- a. Locutionary function – which describes the activity we engage in when we say something.

- b. Illocutionary function or force – which describes the form the utterance have: stating, wishing, promising, commanding, appealing, apologizing etc.
- c. Perlocutionary Function or effect – which describes the effect and reaction to the utterance.

In hate speech, we see the three speech distinctions of language; a situation where a speech is proportionally and logically interpreted; the form of the speech as may be interpreted by the addressee and the consequent reaction of the addressee. Language in hate speech is used to discriminate, abuse, slander and destroy the integrity and reputation of people. It is a situation where the speaker manifests hatred and subjectivism; it occurs when a speaker leaves the subject-matter and attacks the character of another person or group.

We chose this theory (speech act) in this paper because it is one that actually captures in concrete terms, the roles language play in hate speech. It correctly explains the functions of the verbs (performative and constative verbs) in abuse and attack of the personality of persons.

METHODOLOGY

The paper adopted the quantitative design. The data for the paper were got through the use of questionnaire issued to the members of the two major political parties, and also non-political party members who were randomly selected at different locations in Port Harcourt Metropolis between October and November, 2019. Their responses were directed by item statements arranged in the Likert format of “Strongly Agree”, “Agree”, “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree” with the values of “4”, “3”, “2”, and “1” respectively. Thereafter, the responses were tabulated in tables and statistically analyzed.

FINDINGS

Research Question 1: To what extent does political party affiliation influence perception of hate speech among residents of Port Harcourt Metropolis in Nigeria?

Data collected in respect of this research question are presented and analysed in table 1.

Table 1: Mean scores on influence of party affiliation on perception of hate speech among residents of Port Harcourt Metropolis in Nigeria

S/N	STATEMENT: "I charge you to continue to challenge corruption and its vices, and stop government who institutionalized them from coming back to power"	POLITICAL PARTY MEMBERS	
		APC (n = 40)	PDP (n = 40)
1	It expresses ill-feelings towards a particular party	2.87	2.80
2	It is capable of inciting violence	2.62	2.86
3	It was aimed at provoking ethnic sentiments.	2.35	2.52
4	It was aimed at degrading a government.	2.52	2.69
5	It is capable of inciting hatred towards a government.	2.65	2.89
6	The above expression was aimed at making a government uneasy.	2.45	2.59
7	Government should deal decisively with the person who holds the above expression.	2.30	2.18
8	It was aimed at provoking religious sentiments.	2.17	2.17
9	It was aimed at inciting hatred towards an individual.	2.23	2.33
10	The expression was aimed at stirring disaffection among Nigerians.	2.60	2.48
11	The expression was aimed at stirring disaffection among political parties.	2.52	2.64
	Overall Mean	2.48	2.55

Research Question 2: To what extent does educational level influence perception of hate speech among residents of Port Harcourt Metropolis in Nigeria?

Data collected in respect of this research question are presented and analysed in table 2.

Table 2: Mean scores on influence of educational level on perception of hate speech among residents of Port Harcourt Metropolis in Nigeria.

N	STATEMENT: "I charge you to continue to challenge corruption and its vices, and stop government who institutionalized them from coming back to power"	Graduates (n = 147)	Non-Graduates (n = 125)
1	It expresses ill-feelings towards a particular party	2.69	2.86
2	It is capable of inciting violence	2.54	2.76
3	It was aimed at provoking ethnic sentiments.	2.23	2.47
4	It was aimed at degrading a government.	2.42	2.68
5	It is capable of inciting hatred towards a government.	2.51	2.90
6	The above expression was aimed at making a government uneasy.	2.43	2.54
7	Government should deal decisively with the person who holds the above expression.	2.06	2.34
8	It was aimed at provoking religious sentiments.	1.99	2.07
9	It was aimed at inciting hatred towards an individual.	2.24	2.35
10	The expression was aimed at stirring disaffection among Nigerians.	2.38	2.42
11	The expression was aimed at stirring disaffection among political parties.	2.39	2.72
	Overall Mean	2.35	2.55

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The distribution of the responses of the respondents classed into two groups: party affiliation and graduates and non-graduates summarily show sentiments of party affiliation on one hand, and differences in educational exposure and awareness on the other hand.

The first table shows an emerging trend of parochialism of party affiliations in Nigeria; a situation where whatever one's political party says is either judged good or bad. In this situation, a speech is considered a hate speech if it is made by a political opponent no matter how plain, objective and factual it is, but a reverse is the case for an obvious hate speech which ridicules, impinges or tarnishes the integrity of an opponent.

The hypothetical statement "I charge you to continue to challenge corruption and its vices, and stop government who institutionalized them from coming back to power" is one that understandably tells the people, to always see PDP or APC as a corrupt political party and therefore should not be allowed to come back to power. This statement does not say what either PDP or APC as a political party has for the electorates, their ideology or manifesto; rather it presents the other party as a black ship, a leper, whose ideology is corruption. For us, this is not a hate speech in the sense of what a hate speech is. The responses of either of the political parties do not significantly see it as such because of their affiliations with the parties. The generated statements to test the hypothetical statement: it expresses ill-feelings towards a particular party; it is capable of inciting violence, it was aimed at degrading a government, it is capable of inciting hatred towards a government etc. which ordinarily should have led the respondents to objectively confirm the working statement instead denied to the affirmation of the statement because of party affiliation.

The average mean scores of 2.87 for APC and 2.80 for PDP; 2.62 for APC and 2.86 for PDP; 2.52 for APC and 2.69 for PDP and 2.65 for APC and 2.89 for PDP as contained in the table do not show much significant differences in the response of the members of the two political parties. But the cumulative mean score generated from the responses of the tested population as shown by the mean scores of 2.48 for APC and 2.55 for PDP is enough for the research to uphold the fact that political party affiliation influences the description of any statement as a hate speech or not. Looking at the average score of the respondents of both parties in the eighth statement, which showed a very insignificant parity of 2.17, it becomes obvious that the speech was far in inciting any form of religious crisis or upheaval in the Nigeria. The speech has no form of religious implication or colouration, or/and does not show any form of geo-political or ethnic sentiment as upheld by the respondents. This simply confirms that hate speech in Nigeria is considerably premised on perception of how governance affects the populace.

Relying on common sense, it is right to say that the speech: “I charge you to continue to challenge corruption and its vices, and stop government who institutionalized them from coming back to power” was made by an APC government or member, hence the members’ party did not deem the statement as a kind of hate speech. Secondly, APC as a political party won election in 2015 with the mantra of change; one that seeks to change PDP led government, which they considered to be corrupt. Hence, the Nigerian populace were simply called upon not to vote for PDP. However, PDP sees the speech as an example of a hate speech, one that is aimed at damaging and ridiculing the profile and status of the political party. Even if we are unbiased umpires here, we dare say that the reverse would have been the case if PDP political party were at the receiving end.

The second table also queried the opinion of two segments or group of Nigerians, who this time are neutral or without political affiliation: graduates and non-graduates. The responses of this class of respondents like those of the first group discussed earlier speak volume of the perception of hate speech by Nigerians. The research question sought to know the perception of Nigerian graduates and non-graduates on hate speech using Port Harcourt Metropolis with this statement: To what extent does educational level influence perception of hate speech among residents of Port Harcourt Metropolis in Nigeria?

The questions from our research working question two, showed how the educational level of the Nigerian populace influences their acknowledgement of what constitutes a hate speech. For the graduates as typified in their responses to the statements: it expresses ill-feelings towards a particular party; it is capable of inciting violence, it was aimed at degrading a government, it is capable of inciting hatred towards a government etc. used to test the null hypothesis of the statement: “I charge you to continue to challenge corruption and its vices, and stop government who institutionalized them from coming back to power”, showed that they do not consider the statement as a clear form of hate speech. As presented on the table, we have 2.69, 2.54, 2.23, 2.42, 2.43 average scores respectively as their responses to the statements above as opposed to the average score of 2.86, 2.76, 2.47, 2.68 and 2.90 respectively got from the responses of the non-graduates.

One thinks that graduates who supposedly are exposed, literate, unbiased and are abreast with the happenings in Nigeria dispassionately gave their response and assessments to the hypothetical statement. But for the non-graduate as shown by their responses, one thinks that either because of their party affiliation, lack of adequate information on what should constitute a hate speech; or lack of the required empirical knowledge to juxtapose or compare the present with the past led to their conclusion that the hypothetical statement is a type of hate speech. As it were and because of this position, the non-graduates would wish the government deal decisively with those or any person who will make the statement: I charge you to continue to challenge corruption and its vices, and stop government who institutionalized them from coming back to power”. This is glaringly supported by the significant difference of the average score of 2.06 for the graduates and 2.34 for non-graduates respectively.

The other responses of the two groups save that of number 8, which sought to find out if the statement was aimed at provoking religious sentiments, acceded to the position of the two groups that the speech is not a case of hate speech for the graduates and that it is a type of hate speech for the non-graduates. The differences in the average score of 1.99 against 2.07 for the statement and the overall mean score of **2.35** for graduates and **2.55** for non-graduates clearly show the position of both groups under investigation.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have been able to examine what seems to be an emerging trend of hate speech in Nigeria abstracting from the different perceptions of people influenced by their political affiliation and education. The findings of the study show that politicians in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Nigerian are divided in their speech habit and perception or description of how people use language. There is a deep seated sentiment in language use among the people; a situation where what people do with language as canvassed by Austin (1962) is given different semantic and pragmatic interpretation.

The second observation this paper made brought to the fore the fact that one's academic exposure and qualification influence one's judgment and perception of the role, use and function of language. The respondents who are graduates in one voice pragmatically acceded and described the hypothetical statement as a typical example of hate speech, while the non-graduates held different view. For them, the statement is denotative and ordinary, with a normal semantic interpretation. Even though the different positions of the graduates and non-graduates show different class of people with different critical thinking and judgment, it also points to the known fact that semantic meaning is usually different from pragmatic meaning (Nwala, 2015).

We thus make bold to say that the concept of hate speech is a controversial one: it is because as one moves from one person to another, one notes different perceptions and descriptions of speeches. This is one of the social problems, we made reference to at the beginning of this paper, when we noted that whatever the context is, people should address the issues at stake rather than the character of the people and their relationship with the people involved. Again that any utterance that depicts intense dislikes or strong aversion towards a person or group or policy which is capable of stirring up violence or any form of disorder in society is a hate speech. Such dislikes or aversions are evidences of agitations against perceived injustices or unmet needs of the people. Literally, hate is the opposite of love which includes peace. Therefore, discouraging speeches which may lead to violence and anarchy is key to sustainable development in Nigeria. What is needed to assuage the tendency for hate speech is to address the factors responsible for agitations in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Governments at all levels in Nigeria should evolve strategies that would bring about peaceful co-existence and mutual respect for another. In practical terms, the following actions should be taken by all tiers of government and individuals.

1. Governments at all levels should ensure that there is equity in distribution of infrastructure, appointments into political and public offices.
2. They should make effort to stimulate the economy for employment opportunities for the teeming unemployed youths.
3. The National Assembly should restructure key areas of governance such as security, resource control, works and seaports among others in a manner that the states can be accountable for lapses.

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