

SEMIOTIC FORMS AND MEANINGS IN SELECTED COVID-19 POSTERS OF THE NIGERIA CENTRE FOR DISEASE CONTROL

Esther Olajumoke ADEAGBO PhD

Ajayi Crowther University

Department of English

07035536376

&

Joachim Oyeniya OSHIN

Ajayi Crowther University

Department of English

08080084919

Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic is a new virus linked to the same family of viruses as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). Existing studies on COVID-19 discourse bothered on pragma-semiotic, stylistics and critical Discourse Analysis with insufficient scholarly attention on social semiotics. This study, however, paid attention to semiotic analysis of selected COVID-19 posters of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, examining the linguistic meaning signifiers and specific meanings of the visual signs behind the selected COVID-19 Posters. The COVID-19 poster of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) was subjected to a qualitative analysis using Kress and Leuween's (2006:14) semiotic approaches. Five COVID-19 posters were purposefully selected for their richness in the use of semiotic resources to communicate meaning. The descriptive research design was employed for this study as the most suitable for the attainment of the study objectives. Data were subjected to semiotic analysis. Results revealed that the linguistic meaning signifiers in the posters are words, phrases and sentences. Although most of the sentences are short, the messages are easily read and understood. The typographic features such as lowercase, uppercase, bold type were used to make emphasis in persuading the people to support the fight against COVID-19 pandemic. For the meaning of visual signs, the study revealed that the ideational (representational), interpersonal (interactive) and textual (compositional) resources are realized in selected NCDC's campaign posters on Covid-19 prevention as well as their communicative functions. This study concludes that both the verbal and the visual language of the Covid-19 posters are used to communicate a strong warning on how to prevent contracting the deadly virus by simply observing the safety protocols. Further studies can be carried out from a viewpoint of cognitive linguistics.

Keywords: COVID-19 Posters, Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, Semiotic analysis, Denotation and Connotation.

Introduction

Language is a communication tool for humans in their daily activities. It is a set of acceptable symbols and sounds written, signed or uttered to perform specific functions in the society. In whatever form it takes, language has greatly helped human beings to meet different needs at all times. Very often, language is used to educate, inform, entertain, correct, influence, persuade, rebuke or pass down social values from one generation to another. In essence, utterances can be manipulated or deployed either by the ordering of words which make up the sentence or by the mood and tonal markers used in different situations where utterances are made to perform different functions in the society. Language and situation are, therefore, inseparable because it is the situation at hand that determines the language that is appropriate at every instance¹.

In human interactions, people do not just say things without having a purpose or a referent in mind. Hence, languages are purposed to address certain persons, or call attention to some fundamental issues about healthy living in our society. However, the structuring of words, the way ideas are put forward and many other uses that the utterances may be directed at achieving will depend on the event at hand, the participants and the aim of the speaker. This means that the function and situation of language use provide a better means of interpreting it. The process of change is of great practical importance to persons engaged in occupations within such fields as advertising, education, and psychotherapy².

In public health initiatives, posters in the form of threatening health messages is commonly used as a strategy for health promotion, disease prevention and adoption of behaviour within a population³. These tactics involve using images or messages to elicit negative emotions such as anxiety, in the expectation that the target audience will be motivated to adopt the recommended health behaviours. These posters persuade people to feel that they are engaging in a risk if they do not adhere strictly to certain conditions or do not adopt the messages recommended. Thus, there is the need for the interpretation of selected COVID-19 posters of the Nigeria Centre for Disease and Control.

Statement of the Problem

Existing studies on COVID-19 discourse have focused on Pragma-semiotic, Stylistics and Critical Discourse Analyses. For instance, Hussain and Aljamili carried out a study in the field of social semiotics on COVID-19 humour in Jordanian social media using a socio-semiotic approach. The study focuses on how Jordanian social media is contributing in overcoming pandemic anxiety burdens and offering relief⁴. Alkhresheh examined the semiotics of two international newspapers on the subject of COVID-19 in the research titled ‘Semiological Discourse Analysis of the Editorial Cartoons of International Newspapers on COVID-19. Using a Pragma-Semiotic Analysis’⁵. Aliya carried out a research on Nigerians' Reactions towards COVID-19 Pandemic Health Precautions, in the four different Nigerian newspapers⁶. Onyema carried out a research on a pragmatic-stylistic study of selected Presidents' speeches at the outbreak of corona virus focusing on four speeches of selected African and non-African Presidents to examine the intended meaning, appropriateness and effectiveness of the speeches to the citizens of these various countries⁷.

However, insufficient scholarly attention has been paid to the analysis of COVID-19 posters, especially with the use of Kress and Leuween’s semiotic approach. This study, therefore, attempts to analyse the COVID-19 posters of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control using social semiotic theory of Van Leeuwen in visual communication which involves the description of semiotic resources, what can be said and done with graphics, images and pictorials, and how the things people write and do with images and pictorials can be interpreted. This is the gap this study intends fill.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate from a semiotic perspective, the forms of meaning signifiers behind some selected COVID-19 Posters of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), with a view to uncovering their semiotic and representational features.

In view of the above aim, the general objectives of the study are to:

- i. Identify and explain the linguistic meaning signifiers in the selected Covid-19 poster;
- ii. Discuss the meaning of visual signs on the posters.

Significance of the Study

This study is expected to contribute to knowledge by exploring posters’ discourse with a view of studying the impact of posters on the NCDC website.

This should reveal how effectively posters are made to be easily viewed, or at least, how successfully they educate Nigerians about the need to protect themselves from the virus and how to provide necessary treatment plans to those who have already caught it. By utilizing the semiotic theory of Kress, and Leuween to analyze Nigerian COVID-19 posters, the work contributes to linguistic study.

Literature Review

Health Communication

Communication occurs when a message is transmitted and received. The message in health education is something that is considered important for the people in the community to know or do. The source may be a local health worker or a national government, or members of the community who themselves may recognize a need for change. The message may be transmitted by person-to-person in private conversation, or in a group meeting or health talk, or indirectly by a radio broadcast or newspaper. Health communication is aimed at informing and influencing individuals with social information, attitudes and practices related to health, and health services. Health communication represents the interface between communication, and health⁸. The most important application of health communication has been in the fields of health promotion and disease prevention⁹. Health communication campaigns have made important contributions to the advancement of public health globally, and are often considered critical components of broad intervention efforts, such as in cancer, and tobacco control¹⁰. Health campaign posters are frequently used to stigmatize and discriminate against individuals who are infected with diseases like Ebola virus¹¹, HIV/AIDS, and other communicable illnesses¹². Health campaign posters meant that the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) mirrored anti-discrimination and stigma initiatives. According to Johnny & Mitchell, the posters' visual components reinforce and create new kinds of discrimination and stigma, which goes against their intended objectives. The visual and textual aspects of the poster's text contain messages to discredit the main characters' actions by urging the audience to fight their acts of ignorance and injustice.

Health communication is an area of study that examines how the use of different communication strategies can keep people informed about their health and influence their behaviour so they can live healthier lives. It draws from many theories and disciplines, including social cognitive and communication theories, marketing, and public relations¹³. Public health

experts recognize health communication as vital to public health programme that address disease prevention, health promotion, and quality of life. Health communication can describe healthy skills, such as performing monthly self-breast exams, as well as demonstrate the benefits of adopting new, healthier behaviours¹⁴. For example, the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention's campaign featuring real people's stories of living with smoking-related diseases prompted many people to quit smoking¹⁵.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, the researchers employed the theory of visual sign by Kress and Leeuwen¹⁷ to analyze the COVID-19 posters of Nigeria Centre for Disease Control.

Semiotic Theory of Kress and Leeuwen (2006)

The thrusts of Kress and van Leeuwen's framework in visual communication were derived from the seminal work of the linguist Michael Halliday. In his book, *Language as Social Semiotic*, Halliday proposed that language is a semiotic system that uses semiotic resources to create meaning. He described language as being structured in three configurations that operate simultaneously where each configuration represents a different function, or 'metafunction', in meaning-making. The Kress and Leeuwen's three meta functions include, representation meaning of image, interactive meaning of image and compositional meaning of image.

The representational meaning of an image means the represented participants' (the people or objects portrayed); how are they represented as types or as parts of a broader 'whole'; what are some of the actions that are performed by the participants, for example in relation to themselves or others, a certain product, or their environment? Specifically, in this theory, focus is on (a) the narrative structure of images, or the actions and processes that are visually represented by means of vectors, and (b) the conceptual structures of images (these can be classificatory, analytical, or symbolic), or the ways in which the 'essence' of participants is represented, for example in terms of their attributes or relations with other people and objects in the image.

The interactive meaning of an image or a set of images or how the images interact with the viewer is examined. For example, this is depicted through a portrayed person's gaze, a certain camera angle, and frame size. Specifically, here we focus on (a) point of view, or the angle at which the image is shot or presented; (b) contact, or gaze of the portrayed subject, which can be direct or indirect; and (c) distance, or whether the image is framed as

a long shot, a medium shot, or a close up, thus, representing participants as more or less close to the viewer.

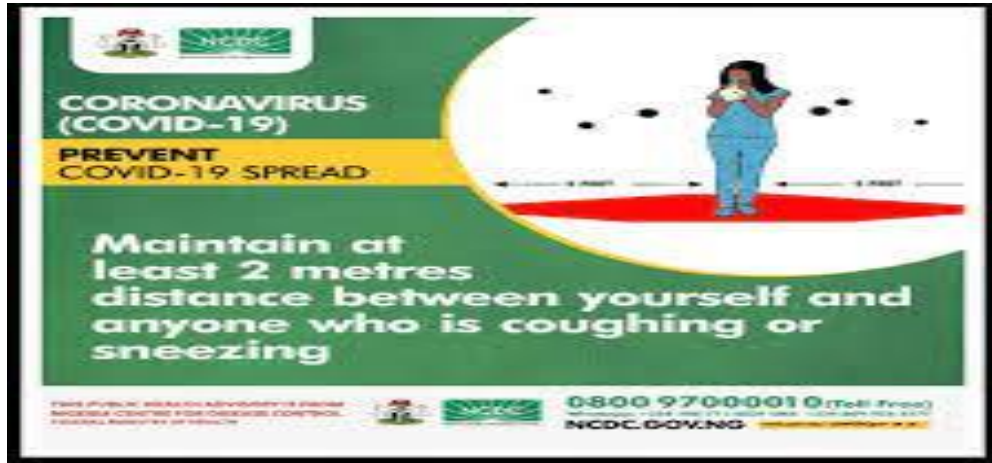
The compositional meaning of images is realized through three interrelated systems: information value (given or new, ideal or real, important or less), salience (achieved through size, color, tone, focus, perspective, overlap, repetition, etc.), and framing ²²

Research Methodology

The research method employed in this study is descriptive qualitative approach. The approach fed on the semiotic theory explicated by Kress and Leuween. This study is a descriptive survey design aimed at investigating the verbal and visual signs of COVID-19 posters of Nigerian Centre for Disease and Control. The sampling techniques used for this study is purposive sampling technique. In selecting the sample size, five (5) health campaign posters were purposively selected from the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control website (<https://covid19.ncdc.gov.ng/>) from March 2020 to December 2021 which covers the peak period of COVID-19. The posters were purposively selected for this study because of their accessibility and richness in semiotic resources to communicate sensitive meanings.

Data presentation and Analysis

Poster 1



Source:

https://covid19.ncdc.gov.ng/media/resources/NCDC_TakeResponsibility_WhatIsCovid-19_3.jpg

Linguistic meaning signifiers of the COVID-19 Poster 1

The main verbal text that runs from the left to the right side of the image “*Maintain at least 2 metres distance between yourself and anyone who is coughing or sneezing*” is thematic, and thus summarily projects the whole essence of the poster. It is an imperative sentence written in lowercase. The other verbal texts are “*CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)*”, a phrase and it is written in uppercase font size and “*PREVENT COVID-19 SPREAD*” which is an imperative sentence inscribed in uppercase font size and a warning to the audience to avoid occasions that could encourage the spread of COVID-19.

Meaning of visual signs on the COVID-19 poster 1

The image of the female participant is positioned on a horizontal axis where some elements are placed on the left and others on the right and a yellow circular frame line demarcates the left and the right axes into two unequal parts. The elements on the right section are new while the elements on the left are given. At the right section, there is the female represented participant seen coughing or sneezing as depicted in the cough- or sneeze-aerosols, represented by the small circles that surround her. Cough is one of the prominent symptoms of Covid-19; in as much as these aerosols can travel as far as 2meters or more, the distance vectors (the arrows) recommend that those close to her should maintain a distance of five feet. The redness that marks the ground upon which the woman stands indicates infection: she is infected and anyone who fails to maintain the required distance from her will also be infected. This represented participant in poster 1 also depicts an offer as she does not look straight at the viewers. Her visual angle is also less frontal as her gaze is slightly turned away from the viewers. Her partial frontal and indirect gaze are indications of the partial involvement of the producer and viewers with her. Therefore, the point of view signals unequal social relation between the interactive participants and the represented participant in order to communicate a sensitive health meaning.

Poster 2



Source:

https://covid19.ncdc.gov.ng/media/resources/NCDC_TakeResponsibility_WhatIsCovid-19_3.jpg

Linguistic meaning signifiers of the COVID-19 Poster 1

At the bottom (the real) is the verbal text: '*PLAY YOUR PART*', embedded in red, it is an imperative sentence written in uppercase and directly below the text is a sentence written in capitals in white colour but with a black background: '*WHEN OBI STAYS AT HOME & ADA STAYS AT HOME, COVID-19 WILL GO HOME TOO*'. The ideal projects the information value that the contest against Covid-19 is a collective effort. The inclusive '*we*' in the verbal text '*We will Beat ...*' saliently captioned in red serves as a verbal reinforcement of the joint effort that must be demonstrated by the citizenry in the battle against the pandemic.

Meaning of visual signs on the COVID-19 poster 2

Poster 2 is also a narrative representation as it depicts a vector formed by the eye line, the direction of the gaze of the female participant in mask. The female participant is the reactor, thereby making the narrative a reactional process. However, this reactional process is non-transactional as the phenomenon (the participant the reactor is gazing at) remains implicit in the visual. The viewer is left with the task of imagining or making sense of the phenomenon, the focus of attention of the reactor.

However, the female participant's direct gaze at the viewers and the distance choice of extreme close-up, that shows a part of her head and shoulders, seek to establish an imaginary interpersonal relation between her and her audience. The advert producer (NCDC) presents the woman as a model and demands that the viewers enter into an imitative social relation with her. The face mask used by the woman reinforces the modelling impact

of the visual as it presents the woman as a perfect example to be copied in the use of mask to contain the spread of coronavirus. By using an image act of demand with a frontal angle, the text producer directly addresses and thus includes the viewers in the narrative. The frontal angle indicates the involvement of the producer and the viewers in the narrative. Compositionally, a vertical structure (top-bottom). The top section (the ideal) has on its left side the half face of the woman putting on a face mask; at her forehead is the logo of the WHO, above it is the logo of the NCDC, and beside it is the Nigeria's coat of arms. The background of the top section is grey as against the lower section which is black. This grey colour used as a background for the top section, however, suggests neutrality and uncertainty about the message communicated in the poster. ‘

Poster 3



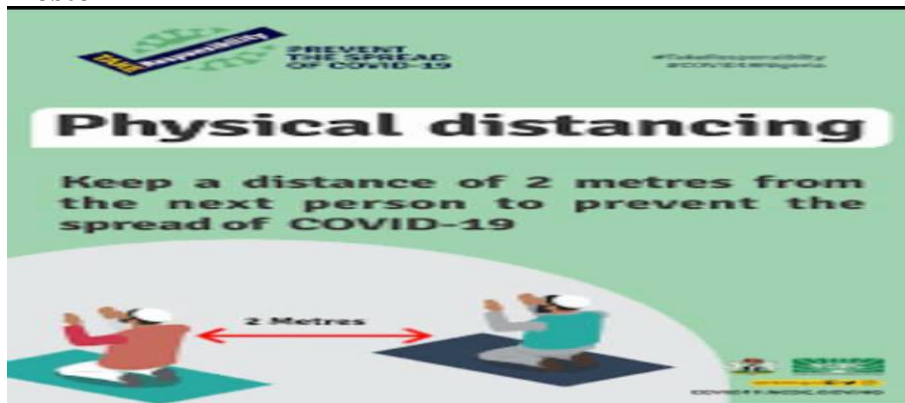
Linguistic meaning signifiers of the COVID-19 Poster 3

The verbal text '*Physical Distancing*' is a phrase written in lower case positioned at the center of the image is the most salient, the prominently displayed element that carries the thematic essence of the image. Therefore, there tends to be harmony in the information values of the upper-lower and left-right sections. The topmost section, which is mostly verbal, is the ideal as it contains a directive: *PREVENT THE SPREAD OF COVID-19* and other two main verbal elements, *Physical distancing* and *Keep a distance of 2 metres from the next person to prevent the spread of COVID-19* which situate the image in the Nigerian context to give direction; hence, this upper section is semiotically directive and locative. The lower section is more practical and dramatic.

Meaning of visual signs on the COVID-19 poster 3

This lower section has a left-right structure where the left axis contains the image of six men sitting down to relax. The spaces in between them, which serve as distance vector, demonstrate to viewers how to maintain social distancing even when relaxing. This left side, cuts off from the whole visual by a cylindrical grey frame space, is the given (Something already known) which operates as a visual reinforcement to the verbal text in the upper part. The right section is the new that contains some specific information about the NCDC. However, the given is far more salient, worthy of the viewers' attention than the new (something just introduced to the readers -unknown). Also, the cylindrical dividing grey space is a frame line that mildly disconnects the left from the right and also the top from the bottom. In spite of this demarcation, a sense of continuous flow of information from top to bottom and left to right still runs through the advert; hence, there is no thematic disconnectedness between the two sections.

Poster 4



Source:

https://covid19.ncdc.gov.ng/media/resources/NCDC_TakeResponsibility_WhatIsCovid-19_3.jpg

Linguistic meaning signifiers of the COVID-19 Poster 4

The verbal text 'Physical Distancing' positioned at the center of the image is the most salient, the prominently displayed element that carries the thematic essence of the image. Therefore, there tends to be harmony in the information values of the upper-lower and a left-right section which is the second verbal text in the poster (Keep a distance of 2 metres from the next person to prevent the spread of COVID-19).

Meaning of visual signs on the COVID-19 poster 4

This lower section has a left-right structure where the left axis contains the image of two men observing some religious rites typical of Muslims. The directional arrowheads, which serve as distance vector, demonstrate to viewers how to maintain social distancing even when observing religious rites. This left side, cut off from the whole visual by a cylindrical grey frame space, is the given which operates as a visual reinforcement to the verbal text in the upper part. The right section is the new that contains some specific information about the NCDC. However, the given is more salient, worthy of the viewers' attention than the new. Also, the cylindrical dividing grey space is a frame line that mildly disconnects the left from the right and also the top from the bottom. In spite of this demarcation, a sense of continuous flow of information from top to bottom and left to right still runs through the advert; hence, there is no thematic disconnectedness between the two sections. Additionally, the verbal text 'Physical Distancing' positioned at the center of the image is the most salient, the prominently displayed element that carries the thematic essence of the image. Therefore, there tends to be harmony in the information values of the upper-lower and left-right sections.

Poster 5



Source:

https://covid19.ncdc.gov.ng/media/resources/NCDC_TakeResponsibility_WhatIsCovid-19_3.jpg

Linguistic meaning signifiers of the COVID-19 Poster 5

The verbal text '*Prevent the spread of Covid-19*' positioned at the centre of the image is the most salient, the prominently displayed element that carries the thematic essence of the image reinforcing the need for face mask and physical distance of 2 metres or 6 feet from others in public places.

Meaning of visual signs on the COVID-19 poster 5

The interpersonal process depicts an offer image act in which all the represented participants do not look directly at the viewers in spite of the close-up portrait. Although the participants appear frontally, as if they are facing the viewers, their frontal positioning is from a long high angle distance which disconnects them from the viewers and also reduces the salience of their directionality and significance. They are presented indistinctly and impersonally via a medium long shot that indicates a far social distance; hence, they are mere objects of information for the viewers' contemplation. However, the frontal angle, which signals involvement, aligns the image producer and viewers with the actions (observance of physical distance and use of face masks) of the five represented participants.

Poster 5 is also a combination of the vertical and the central structural compositions. In the vertical composition, the top section displays the five represented participants trying to maintain social distancing, while the bottom part contains a verbal text reinforcing the need for face mask and physical distance. The five represented participants are the ideal which presents a display case to practically reinforce the information value of social distancing verbalized in the real. There is, however, no frame line demarcating the upper section from the lower one. By using this central composition, the image producer (NCDC) deploys distance vectors to practically demonstrate to Nigerians the need for physical distance when in public. The vertical and the central compositions are both directive and emphatic in function. Poster 5 is also a narrative as the yellow circular frame line forms a vector that connects the right section to the left.

Findings and Conclusion

The study revealed that there are different linguistic meaning signifiers in the COVID-19 posters such as, linguistic features of words, groups, sentences (Declarative, imperative and interrogative). This finding is in line with the views of O'Sullivan, that "text is a signifying structure made up of codes and signs which are important in communication²³". To effectively capture the meaning of the visual signs in the selected posters, Kress and Leeuwen's approach is deployed for the analysis. The study also revealed that the ideational (representational), interpersonal (interactive) and textual (compositional) resources are realized in selected NCDC's campaign posters on Covid-19 prevention as well as their communicative functions. This findings is similar to the view suggested by Bedi²⁴ in which the represented participants of the movie posters are presented in shapes, colour, background

and participants through which suggested equality between the viewers and the represented participants is realised. This study concludes that both the verbal and visual language of the Covid-19 posters are used to communicate a strong warning on how to prevent contracting the deadly virus by simply observing the safety protocols.

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