Hate speech and the Expression of Stereotypes as Products of Social Cognition in Nigeria

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Abstract

Culture varies and is ingrained in community members, resulting in the creation of group identity and possibly a sense of superiority. This can lead to inter-group clashes, hate speech and the expression of stereotypes with dire implications for nation-building. Data were excerpted from nine dialogic threads from four Facebook groups with a socio-political agenda from Nigeria's ethno-religious divides. The study is based on Kecskés' (2014) socio-cognitive theory which focuses on how information about a social issue is communicated from the speakers' perspective, and the common worldview of their group. An evaluation of lexico-pragmatic indications and the cultural factors behind their enactment, shows that hate speech and stereotypes are products of a culture's shared knowledge and beliefs, group ideals, and societal preferences which highlight the variation in worldviews that are used in creating ethnic identities and explain why group actions are influenced by different religious beliefs; why ethnocentric groups project what they consider as ideal; and why culture-driven values are attached to set-goals. An understanding of these cultural factors behind hate speech and stereotypes is crucial in understanding and preventing the use of hurtful language.

Key words: hate speech, stereotypes, culture, social cognition, Facebook, Nigeria

1. Introduction

There have been developments since Whorf to 'Rethink Linguistic Relativity', particularly in Critical Discourse Analysis, which clearly hold the 'two way street' concept (Keczkés, 2014) that language is constituted by as well as constitutive of the experienced world (i.e., essentially, that is the power of language). Experience and worldview are conceptualised as required by language with 'cultural expectations … [being] the main variables that motivate the use of available linguistic means' (Kecskés, 2014, p. 6). In hate speech and in stereotyping, the illocutionary effect relies on a culturally-contingent world-view construction that is constitutive of and reconstituted by language and culture (cf. Slobin, 1996). This realisation may help to unravel the basis for incessant use of hurtful language in cross-ethnic dialogic activities in Nigeria.

Culture, the socially transmitted repertoire of human action, is both universal and, arguably, group-specific. The ways universal non-material cultural elements, including language, are enacted vary by 'societal

expectations, preferences and realities' (Odebunmi, 2015, p. 1). Aspects of culture such as religion, greetings, naming, etc. are universal notwithstanding that the *modus* of practice may vary across cultural contexts. However, the existence of taboos and common expressions such as 'it is not in our culture …' or 'our people are known for …' are pointers to the existence of culture that may be specific to a group. For instance, cremation of dead bodies is alien to Nigeria and many African countries but popular in India and, increasingly, in Europe. Furthermore, cultural diversity can be a breeding ground for hatred and competitiveness (Blake, 1999). In such settings, groups tend to project their culture and worldview using the instrumentality of language and hate. In so doing, out-group members whose experiences and cultural affiliations are deemed to be at variance with a particular group may be discriminated, often 'resulting in a clash in expectations and, ultimately, misperceptions about the other group' (Boxer, 2002, p. 151). In this situation, language bias is designed for the creation of group identity and a sense of cultural superiority notwithstanding that such a stance infringes on the rights of out-group members.

Since hatred and inter-group clashes are a threat to the democratic system and nation-building, judging from the ascendancy in the globalisation of hate (Blake, 1999), it is worthwhile examining the socio-cultural peculiarities that are embodied in the expression of stereotypes and hate speech, particularly in the volatile and culturally diverse demography of Nigeria. The result of such examination may be incorporated into a re-modelled school curriculum on intercultural communication that will inculcate the principles of tolerance of diversity in the consciousness of learners.

2. A Socio-cognitive Approach to Nigerian Online Hate Speech

Hate speech is a broad and often contested concept, leading to a lack of consensus in its scope and definition. As summarised by Gagliardone et al. (2015, p. 10), hate speech 'lies in a complex nexus with freedom of expression'. It is however acknowledged across local and international levels that hate speech refers to 'expressions that advocate incitement to harm based upon the target[s] being identified with a certain social group' (Gagliardone et al., 2015, p. 8), serving degrading and dehumanising functions while uniting in-group members and creating a social 'us' and 'them' dichotomy. Hate speech 'is situated at the intersection of multiple tensions, [expressing] conflicts between different groups within societies' (Gagliardone et al., 2015, p. 7). Its prevalence in digital media exemplifies how technologies bring with them both opportunities and challenges, and underscores the argument in this paper that hate speech and the use of stereotypes are linked to culture and inter-group contestations. Efforts to combat hate speech involve the documentation of multilateral treaties including those of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which defines the contours of hate speech and the Rabat Plan of Action which was 'initiated to bring greater clarity and suggest mechanisms to identify hateful messages' (Gagliardone et al., 2015, p. 21). Unfortunately, these initiatives are yet to yield the desired result as hate speech is increasingly used as a 'generic term, mixing concrete

threats to individuals' and groups' security with cases in which people may be simply venting their anger against authority' (Gagliardone et al., 2015, p. 7).

Whereas stakeholders, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, make significant efforts to combat hate speech, the nexus between culture, on the one hand, and hate speech and expressions of stereotypes on the other, seems to have been overlooked. As a result, empirical evidence is as yet lacking in studies of perceived hate speech that focus on solutions to the problem, i.e., the neglect of the underlying cultural code which spurs the perpetration of hate. This approach obscures the underlying dynamics from which certain types of hate content emerge. However, studies combining discourse analysis and sociolinguistics with cognition show that there are ways to investigate these dynamics (e.g., Wodak & Schulz, 1986). Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) trigger the research in discourse and cognition in their consideration of the relevance of discourse to the study of language processing. They propose a cognitive model of discourse comprehension in individuals which subsequently develops into cognitive models to explain the construction of meaning at the level of the society. Subsequently, van Dijk (2005) evaluates the discursive (re)production of stereotypes and racism in Spain and Latin America, while Richardson (2004) highlights the '(mis)representation of Islam' and the expression of racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia in representing migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees in British newspapers.

Beukeboom and Burgers (2019) in turn propose that stereotypes are not personal traits but conventions since they are expressed via communication. Likewise, Osuolale-Ajayi (2020, p. 67), in a study of gender-based stereotypes, argues that stereotypes are 'individual and societal phenomena in individual's mental repository'. Ayansola and Aworoh (2020), in turn, delineate gender-based stereotypes in cross-gender 'by women against men, men against women, and reflexive stereotypes'. Whereas these studies aptly link stereotypes to 'societal problems and intergroup tensions' (Beukeboom & Burgers, 2019, p. 3), they do not evaluate the socio-cultural nuances behind the construction of stereotypes, nor is the manifestation of derogatory language in different contexts and among different groups linked to the diversity in individual and social worldviews.

Beyond the notion of stereotypes, the phenomenon of hate speech has been rigorously investigated and linked to politics and power contestations (e.g., Ezeibe, 2015; Okafor & Alabi, 2017; Rasaq et al., 2017). From a critical perspective, Rasaq et al. (2017) establish that hate speech in Nigeria is the instrument of political campaigning and expose the Nigerian press as allies of politicians when evoking hatred and violence among ethnic and political groups through their newspapers. However, in recommending that the 'media should always examine politicians' messages ... and judge carefully [their] intention ... to prevent being an accomplice in hate speech' (Rasaq et al., 2017, p. 242), they do not address the cultural nuances that *ab initio* fuel the ideology of hate. On the other hand, Ghanesh (2018, p. 35) particularly addresses the potential governance of hate culture and its emergence in online communication:

> through the appropriation of cultural practices from a range of groups ... who profess a eugenic view of interracial competition. [Hence] digital hate culture grew out of the swarm tactics of troll subcultures ... [with] dangerous discursive

and cultural practices ... employed on the Internet to radicalize the public sphere and build support for radical right populist parties.

Though the study links hate speech to culture, its emphasis is on the strategies that are employed by hate promoters rather than the language or the cultural factors behind the expression of hate.

Hate and stereotypes have a cause-and-effect relationship. As observed by Gagliardone et al. (2015, p. 7), 'hate crimes rarely occur without prior stigmatization and dehumanization of targets'. In an analysis of hateful comments on Slovenia's news websites, Erjavec and Kovacic (2012) attempt to expose the individuals behind hatred and their reasons for its expression. Interviews with some of the hate-speech users revealed that 'speakers [...] disseminate stereotypes and damage the reputation of their opponents' (Erjavec & Kovacic, 2012, p. 910) in order to draw attention to the prevailing social problem. Beukeboom and Burgers (2019, p. 3), like most scholars in cognitive linguistics, observe that stereotypes are rooted in both ego- and social cognition and that they 'play a fundamental role in many pressing societal problems relating to racism, sexism and intergroup tensions'.

As mentioned above, varieties in culture and worldview often influence individuals' approaches to life and, by extension, language use. Consequently, those whose culture and approach to life differ from those of others are susceptible to discrimination and assault. This being the case, cultural nuances and worldviews and the resultant bias in language use are bound to alter the current approach to the fight against hate speech and stereotypes. It is arguable that without the evaluation of the cultural nuances that fuel the use of hurtful language, efforts at tackling it will remain largely unproductive. Furthermore, from an educational point of view, an understanding of the cultural basis for hatred has pedagogical implications that call for the re-modelling of the curriculum on intercultural communication that inculcates tolerance of diversity into the consciousness of learners. Therefore, in examining the interaction between language bias and the divergence in users' experience and worldviews which reflect 'what generations of people have experienced prior to any conceptual notions' (Note et al., 2009, p. 2) in dialogic activities, this study aims to contribute to the literature on ethno-linguistics, peace studies and intercultural communication. It is a reminder to policy makers of the imperative of addressing the root-cause of the global negative trend in the use of language, particularly on the internet.

2.1 Cognition and Culture

The theoretical framework for the study of hate speech on several socio-cultural Facebook groups operating in Nigeria hinges on Kecskés' (2014) socio-cognitive approach (SCA). Cognition refers to the mental processes such as thinking, knowing, remembering, judging, and problem-solving that are involved in knowledge and comprehension. SCA expounds the principles of cognitive linguistics (CL) and of Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) premise that linguistic knowledge interacts with cognition and thought. The approach connects individual-cognitive activities involving prior experience, salience, egocentrism and intention with the socio-cultural aspects of situational experience, emergent intention, attention and situational relevance to form a complex of interactional and intercultural contexts (Kecskés, 2014, p. 7). It

builds on the idea that meanings reflect mental categories which are formed from real-life experiences and acted out (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Lakoff (1987, p. 9) posits that 'meaning is inherently encyclopedic' and, conventionally, a product of cultural aspects, aligning with Langacker's (1987, p. 3) point that 'human world experiences and complex conceptual structures [are] invoked in language and understanding'. It follows that linguistic knowledge and the cultural aspect of encyclopedic world knowledge are based on the same cognitive principle. This being the case, bias in language use, hate speech and the expression of stereotypes may be categorized as products of social cognition and mental patterns that are fundamental to a culture.

Culture is regarded as a summation of life-long experience which is ingrained in the consciousness of members of a community from the moment that language acquisition begins. In that way, hate speech and stereotyping can linguistically encode a group's experience, worldview and culture, which confirms Kecskés' (2014, p. 6) point that 'the individual and the social are intertwined in language use ... what people of a language community find important to be expressed in their life will definitely be expressed in that language'. In line with this, van Dijk (1998) brings to fore the notion of 'presupposition', holding that language use always presupposes the intervening mental models, goals and conventionalised social representations of knowledge, attitudes, ideologies, norms and values. Language biases are therefore products of memorised experiences, from which language users 'reach out to and engage with [their] social environment' and 'construct [and] interact with others' (Laurita & Spreng, 2017, p. 537).

Unlike Grice (1975), who sees cooperation as central to rationality in the construction of meaning, Kecskés' (2014, p. 42) viewpoint is that egocentrism is embedded in co-operation and speaker-hearer rationality and that individual worldview draws on the social context and vice versa. In other words, humans are just as egocentric (as individuals) as they are cooperative (as social beings) (Kecskés, 2014, p. 42). Egocentrism is nevertheless the guiding force in the expression of language bias, for example when an individual takes a particular perspective on a real-life experience or culture that is offensive to out-group members who are averse to that point of view or the culture it represents. Thus, egocentrism is not explicitly antagonistic but is 'attention-bias ... and the result of prior experience of individuals. It means that interlocutors ... bring up the most salient information to attentional level' (Kecskés, 2014, p. 42) in their culturally imbued construction and comprehension of meaning.

Social cognition focuses on how information about a social category is processed, stored, recalled and applied based on the speaker's own worldview and experience as well as those of the society to which s/he belongs. In the socio-cognitive paradigm, Kecskés (2014, p. 6) observes that 'human functioning is viewed as the product of a dynamic interplay of personal, behavioral, and environmental influences' because people often bring prior knowledge, beliefs, assumptions and other information to conversations (Clark, 1996, p. 129). Kecskés' SCA, however, advocates the inclusion of emergent situational knowledge within the ongoing interaction with *a priori* shared knowledge, or common ground, comprising 'a vast amount of shared information' on which collective actions are built (Clark & Brennan, 1991, p. 131). The framework of the socio-cognitive approach is, therefore, 'interactionally and socially constructed in the course of communication [and

relies] on relatively definable cultural models and norms that represent the speech communities to which the interlocutors belong' (Kecskés, 2014, p. 43). The socio-cognitive approach is used in this study because hate speech and stereotyping are products of socio-cognition which linguistically encode groups' experiences, worldviews and culture that may clash with out-group members with alternative worldviews. The comprehension of hate speech and stereotypes and efforts to prevent clashes, consequently, requires an understanding of cultural and environmental factors that give rise to them and that influence individual and group behaviour prior to and during dialogic engagements.

3. Nigeria's Ethno-linguistic, Religious and Cultural Make-up

There is no one-to-one correspondence between the 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria (Gandonu, 1978) and the number of its linguistic groups which are estimated at 400 (Hansford et al., 1976). These figures are being disputed (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005) with Otite (1990) and Okpanachi (2010) counting 374 while the Central Intelligence Agency (2016) listed more than 250 ethnicities, the same number as reported by Gandonu (1978). Each of these groups has its own traditions that define the country's cultural diversity while also providing the basis for ethnocentrism and bias in language use. The three dominant groups in Nigeria are Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Smaller groups are affiliated to the major ones owing to linguistic or ethnographic factors.

Ethnicity, language, and also religion, are the main elements in the construction of social identity among Nigerians. Osaghae and Suberu (2005, p. 9) consider 'ethno-religious formations … [as] the most persistent behavioural units in the country' while Canci and Odukoya (2016, [online]) allege that 'over 66% of Nigerians view themselves as members of an elemental ethnic or religious group'. Religious groups abound in Nigeria with citizens professing either the Islamic, Christian or African Traditional religious belief. Each group is defined by the traditions and doctrines of their respective religion. Whereas a few Nigerians adhere to traditional religions such as *Ogun, Igbe,* etc., with their respective cultural identities, a vast majority are Muslim or Christian and devotees of their affiliated sub-groups. In terms of religion, the country can roughly be divided into four regions. While Hausa-Fulani and other ethnic groups in Northern Nigeria are mainly Muslim, the Ibos and other groups in the South are predominantly Christian. In the Middle-Belt, Christians and Muslims co-exist while the Southwest is roughly half Muslim and half Christian. A tendency to stereotypically construct a Muslim North and Christian South often exacerbates ethnic fractioning, considering that Islamic identity plays a dominant role (Paden, 2007) and is responsible for the introduction of Sharia law in the North. The mixed distribution of Muslim-Christian adherents across the North and South is presented by Canci and Odukoya (2016). In addition, there is also a sizeable Muslim population in the Auchi Region which forms part of the larger Edo group in the mid-South with a predominant Christian population. Religion is culture's best predicator in Nigeria, and its proliferation has fuelled cultural clashes and worsened the use of hurtful language.

3.1 Socio-cultural Facebook Groups and Dialogic Activities

Nigerian Facebook groups allow like-minded people to 'come together around a common cause, issue or activity to organize, express objectives, discuss issues, post photos, and share related content' (Moreau, 2020, [online]), including ethnocentric and socio-cultural topics of interest, using English as a Second Language. Socio-cultural Facebook Groups (SCFGs) in Nigeria have an ethno-religious identity which reflects the pattern of economic and political patronage and the distribution of national wealth along dominant versus oppressed and inclusive versus exclusive patterns, depending on a group's perception. Membership of SCFGs may be closed and private, or open and public. Membership of the former is strictly by invitation while access to the dialogic activities and membership of public SCFGs is open. In both cases, members are screened in ensuring that only those who subscribe to the group's ethos are admitted to its dialogic activities.

Some Nigerian SCFGs aim to dialogically engage members in the promotion of their socio-cultural, economic and political interest. These include the Nigerian People's Parliament, the Arewa Intellectual Youths Forum, the Nigerian Global Awakening Group, the Middle Belt Forum, and the Ndigbo and the Middle Belt Interactive Forum. The agenda and conditions for membership typify the philosophy of some SCFGs.

Administrators of SCFGs often censor new members to filter out individuals whose worldviews are at variance with the SCFGs'. Nevertheless, individuals with ulterior motives can infiltrate the groups by pretending to subscribe to their agenda. Hence, two categories of participants may be found on social media platforms: those with genuine motives who are unpretentiously in-group members and participants who pretend and join in bad faith and are in actual sense out-group members. Membership of SCFGs, essentially, cuts across socio-cultural and ideological divides which often accounts for incessant online hate speech and the expression of stereotypes. This is a general problem, and the case is made to restrict hate speech on social media (Guiora & Park, 2017) with Gagliardoni et al. (2015, p. 15) warning against 'unintended consequences' of different groups meeting on Facebook and the fact that it is a 'low-cost, high-speed dissemination mechanism [that] facilitates the spreading of hate speech including violent and virtual threats' (Guiora & Park, 2017, p. 957). Farkas et al. (2018, p. 1) show how fake identities on Facebook incite hate speech by allowing anonymous content producers to engage in 'discursive practices that produce new modes of antagonistic relations on social media platforms'.

4. Methodology

Considering that dialogic aggression is the norm rather than the exception on Facebook (Farkas et al., 2018; Guiora & Park, 2017), the current article (1) evaluates cultural factors which may account for hate speech and the expression of stereotypes in Nigeria; and (2) accounts for lexico-pragmatic indications of culture-mediated hate speech and stereotypes. A total of nine dialogic threads on Facebook which espoused themes of hate speech and stereotypes, as categorised by Gagliardone et al. (2015), were excerpted from the dialogic activities of four selected SCFGs representing Nigeria's major

ethnic groups (Ibo, Hausa and Yoruba). A minimum of two threads were selected from each SCFG. The corpus comprises 9 updates, accounting for 66 threads with a total number of 1,462 words, from four SCFGs posted in 2018 and 2019. The SCFGs have a clearly defined ethno-political agenda and represent other socio-cultural groups in Nigeria. They represent the following groups: The Nigerian People's Parliament (NPP); Arewa Intellectual Youths Forum (AIYF); Nigerian Global Awakening Group (NGAG); Ndigbo and Middle Belt Interactive Forum (NMIF)

Their combined membership of 2.5 million participants cuts across Nigeria's ethno-religious and socio-political divides (for the reasons already discussed in Section 3). The posts were analysed with a view to identifying the underlying socio-cultural factors that were pragmatically encoded as inter-group conflict and stereotypes so that policy formulation against the use of hurtful language can be all-encompassing. Based on Kecskés' (2014) SCA and the notion of common ground, the analysis of data reveals lexico-pragmatical choices that convey hate and stereotypes against out-group members, thereby underscoring bias in language use which is motivated by different cultural characteristics from Nigeria's ethno-religious and economic-political divides.

5. Hate Speech and Stereotypes as Cultural Expressions

Membership of SCFGs is drawn from sub-national ethnic groups in Nigeria, including the Ibos, Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and other ethnic affiliates. Their linguistic activities are often coloured by different cultural practices which are conceptually held to be superior to those of out-group members and have a tendency towards inter-religious verbal clashes. Consequently, hate and the lexico-pragmatic presentation of stereotypes on SCFG platforms are produced from a specific culture's: (1) knowledge and beliefs; (2) group ideals; and (3) societal preferences. Cultural variation is, therefore, the basis for the creation of ethnic identity and inter-group hostility and the reason for the enactment of hate speech and stereotypes.

5.1 Lexico-pragmatic Expression of Knowledge and Beliefs

The existence of and belief in a supreme power (or god) is ingrained in the consciousness of language users by the society to which they belong. Whereas most of the Nigerian ethnic groups believe in the existence of a god, knowledge and practice of worshipping vary greatly. As already mentioned, a group's linguistic actions are often influenced by different cultures, one of which is religious and doctrinal belief which is projected to be superior to those of out-group members. This has a tendency to evoke inter-religious verbal clashes, as illustrated in the following threads. Hate and stereotypes in language use in Update 1 (NPP) are hinged on a group-held perception that one religion is superior to the other. Name calling and abusive words (1B) like *wawa* 'stupid'*, fool,* and *onyara* 'mad man/woman' are lexical indications of speakers' religious inclinations. In the same manner that *all Muslims* (1C) (determiner + [plural] noun) effectively stereotyped the generality of a particular faith, labelling them as *terrorists* and *blood suckers* (1A) whom D, using assertive speech acts, alleged to have been *baptize*[d] *with terrorist water.* Speaker A projects conceptual superiority of religion by asserting that

the Middle-Belters are wise in choosing Christianity, thereby pre-supposing that the Muslims are foolish. Update (2) (NGAG) follows the same pattern.

Update 1 (NPP, 13th September, 2018):
A: Yes. You are right, because the Middle Belters are wise people. They refused to be colonized by these blood sucker-Fulanis. The spirit of Christianity is in you, my brother.
B: See this wawa, fool! Who told you the Middle Belt is Christian-dominated? Go and check the statistics and, by the way, where is Middle Belt in Nigeria?
C: Onyara! Which statistics are you talking about, the son of a terrorist?
D: He is a terrorist himself. You know they baptize them with terrorist water after birth. That is why they are always thirsty for Blood.
C: Yes, and Boko Haram are terrorists. In fact, all Muslims are terrorists.

Update 2 (NGAG, 13th June, 2019):
A: All these Yoruba Muslims, Igbira Muslims, Auchi Muslims, etc. don't know that Northern Islamic rulers and Jihadists don't recognize you as original Muslims? Keep suffering yourselves in a religion that does not recognize you. It claims peace but is a religion of violence and extremism.
B: Islam is a personal commitment. Its brotherhood is not determined by racial or ethnic relationship. It has laid down principles.
C: My brother you hit it. During one of the crises in the North, Hausa Fulani were killing Yoruba and Middle-Belt Muslims, claiming they are fake Muslims.
A: I tell you, the so-called Hausa Fulani Muslims are full of sentiments.
D: Ibrahim XX are you an Israelite? Do you know that Israelites don't recognize you or your Christianity and you are here fooling yourselves, fighting for them?
E: Until you preach to your fellow African Christians to stop being Western slaves but maximize Christianity in African way, your head will never be correct.
F: You are an animal, XX or whatever you call yourself. If you need the Jewish Christians to confirm your Christianity, then you will die a slave and an atheist. Fool!

In (2), Muslims and Christians stand in defence of their respective religion. In so doing, a group is stereotyped as Jihadist while Islam is portrayed as factionalised along the North and South divide, pitching the Fulani-Hausa Muslims against others (2A). In this way, non-Fulani Muslims are blackmailed using the alleged discriminatory lens of their Northern counterparts in describing them as non-Muslims. Certain constructions which portray the Hausa-Fulani ethnic-group in bad light were further used: *killing Yoruba and Middle-Belt Muslims claiming they are fake Muslims* (2A and C), implying that the Fulani-Muslims are intolerant and murderous. Underlying these utterances is a subtle expression of solidarity (which smacks of a divide-and-rule strategy against the opposition) for non-Fulani Muslims in the South and Middle-Belt. B's attempt at neutralising the opposition's dissociation strategies against Muslims, and B's presentation of Islam as a personal commitment that transcends racial or ethnic boundaries, does not deter 2C from joining A's stereotypic stance against Islam. 2B, however, has an ally in 2D, who takes a retaliatory stance against Christianity, calling it an Israeli religion. 2B and 2D are joined by 2E and 2F, to rally support for Islam against perceived aggression by Christians, thereby resorting to name-calling and dissociation. 2E calls African Christians *slaves* to their Western counterparts

and accuses them of suffering from mental illness. 2F equates a particular Christian to an *animal, fool, slave* and *atheist*. Inter-group clash and mistrust continue in Update 3 (AIYF).

> **Update 3 (AIYF, 13th September, 2018):**
> **A:** Buhari is a religious bigot. His Islamisation policy is gradually taking shape. Look at all his appointments; President, North; Senate President, North, all service chiefs, North – no single Igbo person in all these positions. Why?
> **B:** It is because Igbos are fools. They don't know how to play their political card. Their politics is always about money.
> **C:** Leave them, they are Biafran dogs.
> **D:** It is your father, Buhari that is a dog. He is a jihadist that sucks people's blood in the name of Islam, a religion of violence.
> **E:** Buhari the sponsor of Boko Haram and Fulani Herdsmen, you mean?
> **C:** And who told you that all Fulani are herdsmen?
> **E:** Shut up my friend! No matter how you want to dress it, all Fulani are herdsmen.

In Update 3, Kecskés' (2014) SCA and concept of common ground account for why Buhari is called a *religious bigot* and a promoter of *Islamisation policy* in Nigeria. This perception underlies the use of hurtful language across pro-Buhari and anti-Buhari groups. Key military appointments which allegedly favoured the Muslims against the Ibos are being contested by 3A, who meets his match in 3B, with the insinuation that *Igbos are fools* and are lacking in political tact other than money; hence, Ibos are seen as undeserving of such appointments (3B). 3C was also unhappy that his group's privileges are being challenged, hence he joined B in calling the Ibos *Biafran dogs*. Groups' affiliation to their respective religion leads 3D to call Nigeria's president, Buhari, a *dog* and *a jihadist that sucks people's blood*. He stigmatises Islam as *a religion of violence*. 3E does not only stereotype Fulanis as herdsmen, bearing in mind its connotations, but also accuses Buhari who is the patron of herdsmen and Boko Haram. Here, group attitude and language use are motivated by the pattern of thinking and how users' social cognition has been programmed culturally (Hofstede et al., 2010).

5.2 Lexico-pragmatic Expression of Group Ideals

Ideals are societal norms which define what is customary, right, expected or proper in a given situation. Following this definition of ideals, updates 4, 5 and 6 linguistically highlight elements of what speakers have grown to regard as the ideal socio-conducts through social interaction in their respective groups. Consequently, ethnocentric groups often project their ideal and reward group-defined good behaviour. This is the case with Buhari, Nigeria's former military head of state and two-term civilian president, who is believed to exemplify integrity by certain individuals, particularly from the North and among his Fulani ethnic-group. However, there are groups opposing Buhari's administration, particularly in the South. Altercations among pro- and anti-Buhari groups often inform the use of offensive language, as is the case in Update 4 (NMIF).

Update 4 (NMIF, 30th April, 2018):
A: We that support President Buhari unconditionally are a movement. And for that matter no lies, propaganda, or negative politicking can ever change our perception of his personality and vision. For a very long time, Nigeria has been blessed with a leader who is not corrupt, and yet some of you sponsored liars want to come and spoil his image. You can try, but for me, it will be a waste of time. You can't beat a man who has integrity. It can't happen. So, the earlier you switch to the truth or remain silent with your god forbidden false views and impression about such a man. Long live Nigeria. Long live our dear beloved President Buhari.
B: What have you benefited from his regime?
C: I am speechless. You have spoken so well but your brain remains the same #almajiri.
D: This is what I expect from those cows in the North, am not surprised at all.

Here, 4A uses constructions which profile Buhari as the icon of the Fulani group. As exemplified below, Buhari is the subject of complements that link him to positive attributes. When paraphrased, 4A's assertion that *for a very long time, Nigeria* [is] *blessed with a leader who is not corrupt,* reads: 'Buhari is not corrupt'. Other examples are: Buhari has *personality and vision*; Buhari is a lover of *the truth*; Buhari is *a man who has integrity*.

Conversely, the same strategy is used to stereotype the "anti-Buhari" out-group agitators: they are lovers of *lies*; they engage in *propaganda* [and] *negative politicking*; they present *false views and impression*[s].

In response to the idealisation of Buhari's attributes, the anti-Buhari agitators (4B, 4C and 4D) insinuate through lexical choices and name-calling that Buhari is a non-achiever. Hence, 4C and 4D respectively describe 4A as *almajiri* 'uneducated Muslim urchins', and metaphorically label the pro-Buhari group as *cows*. The effectiveness in the communication of hate and stereotypes hinges on the interlocutors' common ground, i.e., their cultural knowledge and beliefs that form the ground for ideals and preferences, as is further illustrated in Update 5 (NGAG).

Update 5 (NGAG, 30th May, 2019):
A: No Hausa man ever did what Nnamdi Kanu did in the zoo called Nigeria.
B: Only a fool will do what he did. Where is the fool now?
C: Sheep mentality.
D: He is hyena.
E: From now to the end of the world, we pray not to have terrorist like Kanu, because there is nothing to celebrate in terrorism.
F: A Hero or zero, where is he now?
G: Buhari is the true hero
H: A comedian and a coward can never be a hero.
I: Can someone tell us where so call hero is right now (even the Biafrans cannot tell).
J: U deceived the man that you can stand for him and now that he is nowhere to be found you decided again to immortalize him even as he lives in exile. Shame on you Igbos.
K: Hahaha! coward Kanu is really a Biafran zero that's why he ran away when the war was brought to his doorstep, after dumping his stupid and clueless followers. Bunch of shameless, idiotic, moronic imbeciles.
L: Scam.

> **M:** Hausa people are morally trained; we respect elders, unlike Igbo who disrespect their elders and consider them as trash. How can a runaway coward be a hero?
>
> **N:** All Hausa Fulani are educated that's why they can't do noses and illiteracy like what this noses man did.

In (5), the ethnocentric verbal hostilities involving the Hausa-Fulani and the Ibos continue in line with what Kecskés (2014, p. 7) considers as group 'egocentrism' and a product of individual-cognitive activities. The engagement centres on Buhari and Kanu, who are showcased as epitomising the virtues of their respective socio-cultural group. Kanu is the leader of the Independent Peoples of Biafra and the spearhead of the Ibos secessionist agenda in Nigeria, which the group often derogatively refers to as the *zoo*. The participants line up behind either of these icons to hurt one another using the strategy of association/dissociation.

Kanu is presented as a hero who is incomparable with anyone from the opposing camp. The other group dissociates from the stance of pro-Kanu by describing them as fools: *only a fool will do what he* [Kanu] *did* (5B). They backed the de-marketing of Kanu with hurtful words like *sheep, scammer, comedian, hyena,* and *terrorist*. Using the rhetoric, *A Hero or zero, where is he now?* 5F employs rhyme and contrast to further anger the pro-Kanu group. The group accuses Kanu of flying into exile at the slightest provocation and thus far from being a hero. The pro-Buhari camp therefore portrays Kanu's supporters as *clueless followers*, calling them a *bunch of shameless, idiotic, moronic imbeciles* (5J-K).

In contrast, the anti-Kanu/Igbo posters project their tribal man, Buhari, as the true hero by boasting that Buhari's Hausa-Fulani tribe *are morally trained* unlike the *Igbo who disrespect their elders and consider them as trash*. They claim to be educated while their opponents are considered illiterate (5N). The trend of using language to parade iconic characters that are perceived as embodying group ideals continues in Update 6 (NPP).

> **Update 6 (NPP, 14th May, 2019):**
> **A:** You should sheath your swords. This hatred against each other will not fetch us anything in Nigeria.
> **B:** See who is talking. So you can also open your stinky mouth and talk? You this boot licker.
> **C:** Why won't he talk, since Buhari has bought their conscience? He gave them Vice President and other big appointments. He is constructing beautiful roads in Yoruba lands. Fools!
> **D:** Hahaha! You are crying because you have lost your foolish calculation again. You will never smell the presidency. Even your grandfather Ojukwu lost it talkless of you these rats...hahaha!
> **B:** It is your grandfather Ahmadu Bello that lost it. He is the first religious fanatic in Nigeria. That is why all Northerners have no brains.

In (6), Nigeria's vice-president, Yemi Osinbajo, represents the ideal Yoruba personality while Ojukwu symbolises the Igbo virtues. Like Ahmadu Bello before him, Buhari is the Hausa-Fulani tribal champion. Owing to inter-group contestation for Nigeria's political space, out-group members are hardly considered suitable for political leadership. 6B calls 6A, a Yoruba respondent, a *boot licker* with a *stinking mouth* for his advocacy for peace among the posters from different groups. 6B finds support from 6C, who is similarly

piqued by the vice-presidential slots and other political appointments which the Yorubas enjoy allegedly as bribes from Buhari. The strategy is to co-opt the Yorubas into the opposition while accusing Osinbajo and the Yorubas of lacking in conscience (6A) with the Fulani collaborators.

In rallying support for 6A, 6D, who is also from Buhari's Fulani group, insinuates that the Ibos, whom he calls *rats*, are criers and losers who, like Ojukwu, *will never smell ... [Nigeria's] presidency*. 6B retaliates in equal measure by calling Ahmadu Bello a loser and Nigeria's *first religious fanatic*, and claiming that *all northerners have no brains*. The implicature of the reference to Ojukwu and Ahmadu Bello (6D and 6B) as the grandfather of Ibos and Hausa-Fulani, respectively, is the creation of ethnic identity as well as cultural value and superiority.

5.3 Lexico-pragmatic Expression of Group Cultural Preferences

Societal and individual preferences are culture-driven and vary from one group to the other in the attachment of values and assignment of priority to set-goals. Occupation, education, position, wealth, etc. may be courted by a particular group while the list may be re-ordered by another group depending on societal expectations. Language, as a product of social cognition, in encoding group preferences may be used to discriminate against out-group members who may have a propensity for alternative preferences and interests (Kecskés, 2014) as is the case in Updates 7 (NMIF), 8 (NPP) and 9 (AIYF).

Update 7 (NMIF) exemplifies groups' salient preference for political power. While *Boko Haram* represents a terrorist organisation aiming to establish an Islamic state in Nigeria, herdsmen are mostly Fulanis whose traditional occupation is cattle-rearing. Fulani herdsmen, in contemporary Nigeria, are a euphemism for an armed group with the agenda of usurping farmland for cattle-grazing. Unlike the armed nomadic Fulanis, their urban counterparts are perceived to have a preference for political power. It is against this background that 7A's counsel, i.e. that Fulani's Buhari should not be elected, is seen as a challenge to the Fulani in-group members whose response comes in the form of insults, threats, and use of violent language in (7). Firstly, supporters of Buhari for the election are compared to the Boko Haram terrorists (7A) as 7C and 7D echoed anti-Buhari sentiments with both speakers vehemently opposed to Buhari's re-election as president. Sensing that the challenge was coming from the Yoruba ethnic group and that the group is pushing for the election of Buhari's Yoruba deputy, Yemi Osinbajo, ahead of their kinsman, the Fulani representative (7E) calls the Yorubas *idiot*s while reiterating his support for Buhari.

In order to counter the alleged support for a *tyrant* like Buhari, 7F concludes that 7E and his lineage are a *disgrace*. He mocks Muslim burial customs whereby the dead lie *facing downward in their graves*. Then, 7G claims he knows that 7F is Ibo.

Consequently, the Ibos are not spared from the verbal tirade, apparently because the Yoruba's stance against Fulanis' political interest is being echoed by the Ibos. Hence, Ibos become victims of hate, name-calling and innuendo. Angered by their perceived preference for ill-gotten wealth and greed in supporting Atiku Abubakar, 7H calls the Ibos *slaves*, *animals*, and *idiots* who engage in *criminal activities* and coming from a *useless generation* and a *tribe without origination*. Atiku's feature in 7H's reaction exemplifies the

tendency by a group to isolate an erring member who may not align with group preferences as epitomised by Buhari. Atiku, a Fulani politician, worked against Buhari's re-election bid by representing the opposition People's Democratic Party, which is largely populated by Southern Christians including the Ibos and their affiliated groups. Atiku is dissociated as a corrupt politician, with his Ibo supporters discredited as sellers of *birth right*. Group preferences are further advanced in Update 8.

Update 7 (NMIF, 3rd February, 2018):
A: If after watching this clip you still go ahead to vote Buhari then you are not better than Boko Haram and the Fulani herdsmen.
B: I will still vote Osibanjo
C: God forbid for me to vote for him.
D: Say no to Buhari
E: Some idiots in Yoruba land with their useless posting. They did more than this in 2015 election yet Buhari won. … Buhari all the way.
F: You're a disgrace to your lineage, your late grandparents are facing downward in their graves because of your support for a tyrant who doesn't want the progress of Nigerians, you still have time to make them proud by renouncing Buhari.
G: Am not surprised by your comment, I know the tribe you came from so I don't need to stress myself.
H: Igbo people will never support good things in this country in as much as all their criminal activities have stopped. I can feel your pains and sorrow you and your family want Atiku who has looted Nigeria to be president by fire, by force. But that will never be our portion, I can see you and your useless generation have sold their birthright to atikudollars, You this slave tribe. Animal like you idiot.

Update 8 (NPP, 14th July, 2019):
A: Those useless Igbos that dominate Super Eagles make Nigeria to lose their game. Igbo's are a curse to Nigeria.
B: As you ugly and fat, why not try and have small ability to communicate in kind words?
A: God punish your big mouth
C: It's because all your imbecile brothers cannot perform well that's why Igbos come to rescue you. At least, they pushed Nigeria to top 4 in the whole of Africa.

Whereas in (8) the urban part of the Fulani tribe is perceived as having a preference for political leadership, the Ibos have their priorities in sports and may blackmail any opposing group that poses a challenge to their choice. In 8A, there is an attempt to challenge Ibos' collective interest and domination of the Super Eagles, Nigeria's National Football Team (NNFT), by attributing the team's failure at that time to the dominance of Ibo players. 8A's confrontational stance triggers retaliatory insults which are lexically indexed as *ugly* and *fat* (8B). In 8C's reaction, 8A and other contenders to the NNFT are *imbecile*[s] *… who cannot perform well*. Love of football is the underlying pragmatic force behind the performance of hate speech in (8). The Fulani's vocational preference for cattle-rearing is advanced in Update 9 (AIYF).

Update 9 (AIYF, 14th April, 2018):
A: You say you don't want them to roam around with their flocks and now you are saying there shouldn't be cattle colonies.

B: Must every state have a colony? See, the government should be wise, there is already bad blood in respect of herdsmen crisis, no one wants to have anything to do with herdsmen especially in states that are not core north. You don't go to a Yoruba state and use the word colony for cattle, no one will agree because the word colony has a meaning!... An average person sees a Fulani herder as a killer.

C: I just hate politicians and religious clerics in Abuja... they only care about their tables.

D: These niggas don't give a 'f' about us, that's why they need to be kept aside if we need a better future. Besides nobody said he doesn't want Fulani herdsmen but we don't want their way of destruction on farmers' crops.

Cattle-rearing is a traditional Fulani occupation and has subjected the group to ridicule by other tribes, particularly the Middle-Belt and the South, as is presented in (9). Varying inter-group preferences result in 9A's demand that cattle-rearers be allowed to establish cattle-colonies, a contentious pro-Fulani project, in the South and Middle-Belt, which is proposed as a panacea to the unending herders-farmers' armed conflicts arising from open cattle grazing. Neither cattle-rearing nor cattle-colonies and ranching are the priority of other tribes outside the Fulani group. Differences in their list of preference inform 9B's dissociation and stereotypic construction of 9A's Fulani herdsmen as *killer*[s]. The aversion for Fulanis and cattle-rearing is extended to other vocations including politicians and clerics who fall victim to hate and insults for being allegedly egocentric and complicit in the herdsmen's expansionist activities (9C). The Fulani herdsmen who are the favourites of politicians and clerics are named destroyers of *farmers' crops*.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of hate speech and expressions of stereotypes on Nigerian Facebook dialogic activities shows that culture is a summation of life-long experience which is ingrained into the consciousness of members of a particular community. The analysis shows that it varies from one group to another, resulting in the creation of group identity and perceived cultural superiority. The tendency for inter-group projection of culture and worldview in Nigeria's cultural and political plurality often results in clashes and the enactment of hate speech and stereotypes with dire political implications for democracy and nation-building. In this situation, hurtful language is used to boost group identity at the expense of the out-group members. Following Kecskés' (2014) socio-cognitive framework, the study highlights the cultural factors which often account for hate speech and their lexico-pragmatic indexations in selected Facebook updates. The analysis further shows that lexico-pragmatic presentations of hate speech and stereotypes are constructed by specific cultural components in 'the dynamic play of personal, behavioral and environmental influences' (Kecskés, 2014, p. 6), namely: (1) knowledge and beliefs; (2) group ideals; and (3) societal preferences. These categories, respectively, demonstrate how (1) group attitudes that are influenced by religious beliefs and doctrines are conceptually constructed as superior to those of out-group members; (2) ethnocentric groups project what they consider as ideal in-group good behaviour and (3) societal preferences are culture-driven and vary from one group to the other in their attachment of

values and assignment of priority in goal-setting. Hence, the evaluation of hate speech and stereotypes, and efforts at undermining their effect, may be achieved by raising awareness of their cultural origin, which *ab initio,* gives rise to hate speech and its effects.

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